

Enlightenment: Myth *and* Reality

- an imagined dialog in four parts -

by

Paul Breer

Part Four

Following Monday morning

PB: Hello again. Glad to see that both of you could make it.

Brian: Glad to be here, Paul. We had a little argument in the car coming down. Steph says you can't get to the final stage of enlightenment what you call the Undifferentiated without years of meditation.

Stephanie: (*quickly*) like the Buddha himself.

Brian: But I recall reading somewhere that enlightenment can hit you like a bolt out of the blue without any meditation at all. I don't remember who the article was talking about but it sounded like it has happened to quite a number of people.

PB: You're memory serves you well, Brian. One of the best known figures is the Canadian doctor, Dr. Edmund Bucke, who gave a full description of his enlightenment experience in a book entitled Cosmic Consciousness. Prior to this life-altering event, he had never meditated; in fact, he had never even heard about enlightenment. It took years of reading both Western and Eastern literature before he figured out what had happened to him. There are others as well although they are probably the exception. Most genuinely enlightened individuals in this world have come to their awakening only after years of intensive practice.

Stephanie: What about you? You said that you had experiences beyond the one you told us about last week experiences that took you deeper into Mu. But you had stopped going to sesshin at the Zen Center. Were you still meditating?

PB: Only occasionally. I hadn't done any serious meditating for years. And thus I was surprised at the depth of what happened .

Stephanie: You saw the Undifferentiated?

PB: Very briefly.

Stephanie: Where were you when it happened?

PB: I was renting a basement apartment in Concord, Massachusetts at the time. It was a cold March evening. After dinner I spent a few hours reading a book, the name of which eludes me now..... and then climbed into bed. As I lay there, still fully awake, I saw an image of the Maine coast rocks and water ... an occasional bush along the shore. The image then shifted out to sea where I could see the waves very clearly. As I stared at the waves, I suddenly became aware of an unnamable presence behind the waves or perhaps within the waves. And then it happened. The waves disappeared leaving an absolutely clear, empty, unbounded NOTHINGNESS. IT was fathomless, infinite. IT had no color, no lines, no borders; nothing that could be used to describe it. IT was truly empty yet vividly so.

Brian: How the heck can something be vividly empty? Jeez Paul. I don't get it.

Stephanie: (*impatiently*) Go on.... please.

PB: I remember gasping at what I "saw"heard myself crying out, "Oh God." And then the scene shifted from the sea to the sky. Now the same thing happened all over again. The clouds suddenly gave way to a "presence" deep within. The empty, unbounded space I had seen before revealed itself once more. It was as if this "Space" had been hidden inside the clouds all along.

Stephanie: And what did you feel as this was happening?

PB: I was ecstatic, turned inside out truly beside myself. The gasping and crying out did not come out of fearI just felt overwhelmed, carried away by the vision of WHAT IS. I "saw" THAT which lies embedded in the waves, in the clouds, presumably in every thing that exists.

Stephanie: Did you see it embedded in you too?

PB: No. I was not aware of my self either as subject or object while it was happening. After the fact, I can say, yesthat same IT that emerged out of the waves and clouds must be "embedded" in me as well. But I wasn't aware of that at the time.

Stephanie: But wouldn't you say that you saw your True Self or the Big Self as some traditions call it?

PB: I find the terms misleading. There was no self involved big or small.

Stephanie: But isn't this "presence," as you call it, the Reality that underlies all things? Wouldn't it be fair to say that you saw into the Buddha-nature that is the essence of all objects?

PB: Right after the experience, I *was* inclined to interpret it that way..... eagerly inclined. But with time I have come to see it in another light. I now see it as a natural rather than a supernatural event. In retrospect it makes more sense to me to think that my brain was in a rare state an ecstatic one for sure a state triggered by the temporary suspension of the neurological mechanisms by which I usually orient myself to the world. What happened, apparently, was the simultaneous suspension of orienting layers one and two the sensation and perception layers all cognitive orienting having been turned off when I first lay down. With all orienting suspended, the Undifferentiated revealed itself.

Brian: Let me get this straight. The experience you shared with us last week had to do with undoing layer three, the cognitive layer, the outer layer. That's the layer where we name objects and then compare them, analyze them, and so on. What happened to you with the jhhrrrrt! did I say that right was that you stopped orienting at least cognitively. You stopped thinking and naming which allowed you to see and hear things directly, more vividly.

Stephanie: and to grasp Mu.

PB: Yes, but the things were still there.... including the fart, the other meditator, the bench, and myself. I was still orienting perceptually. I was still constructing a tableau using the stream of sensations entering consciousness via my eyes, ears, nose and so on. I was still in what the Roshi called the phenomenological world. The Undifferentiated was still a long way off.

Brian: So, when you peel off the second orienting layerthe perceptual layer, you do whatyou

PB: You stop organizing sensations into perceptions into separable, recognizable objects that are located in both time and space.

Brian: And what do you see after that step?

PB: I can't say from personal experience. In the episode I just told you about, layers two and three were turned off simultaneously. But William James, the American psychologist, seems to have experienced the state you are asking about the state where sensations are arising but are not yet formed into recognizable objects. He referred to the experience as a "swarm" of images, sounds, smells and so onan unorganized stream of sensations one after the other first a line or curve perhaps, now a color, followed by a sound, then a pungent odor..... a string of sensations not yet formed into objectsnot yet organized into a recognizable perceptual field.

Brian: (*chuckling*) Sounds exotic. I wonder what he was smoking. Seriously though, how does this “swarm” of sensations get organized into a field of objects?

PB: I think we are just learning how humans, like all animals, manage to construct an orderly array of objects from a “swarm” of unorganized sensations. The Gestalt psychologists seem to have discovered a number of principles that we use in forming objects. For one thing, we construct “Gestalten” by bringing together images of a similar color; we also combine or integrate those images which are in close proximity to each other. Another principle involves grouping those images that are moving at the same rate. We also have the capacity to compensate for the effect of distance on image size. For example, when we see a person 300 yards away, we are hard-wired to expand the tiny image on our retina to allow us to “see” a five to six foot individual. Using principles such as these, we construct a field of objects and then relate these objects to each other both temporally and spatially.

Brian: And all this “constructing” takes place without our knowing it?

PB: I think it’s all built into the organismsome version of it in every creature that exists. Without this capacity to turn a swarm of sensations into recognizable objects, organisms would have no chance to find food, to escape, to survive.

Brian: And you say you can suspend this kind of orienting..... which leaves you with a “swarm” of images, sounds and so forth that don’t add up to anything. Now how do you get..... assuming you’re on the path to enlightenment how do you get from this swarm down to the Undifferentiated?

PB: I think you have to look at it the other way around and ask how our sensations are formed in the first place. We need to catch the construction process at that point where the initial differentiation takes place.

Brian: Hmmm. I think I know how we do the cognition thinglabeling, evaluating, and so forth. And I’m getting a feeling for how we go about forming perceptions. But how in the world does one go about *constructing* a sensation? The whole idea sounds a little silly, doesn’t it Steph?

Stephanie: Maybe. Let’s hear what Paul has to say.

PB: I think the whole construction process starts at a much more fundamental level than most of us realize. As Trungpa suggests in Glimpses of Abhidharma, our *initial* experience in any stimulus-response situation is that of the Undifferentiated. A gun goes off nearby; sound waves strike the ear. The first thing we experience is ITthe formless, empty, unbounded state I described earlier. It may last less than a millisecond too briefly to register in consciousness but it is there. At that moment, there is no sound..... nothing the mind can take hold of just IT. In the next millisecond the brain makes its initial differentiation it identifies the

experience as sound. Along with other sensations, that sound is then integrated into a Gestalt a picture of the whole situation.....with the shot coming from the left, a tree on the right, and you in the middle. A quick cognitive assessment suggests that a hunter has just shot a deer. These are the three orienting steps.....all taking place in an instant. An emotional response may followperhaps fear then a behavioral response perhaps moving away from the sound. Our concern here, however, is with the orienting process. Each of the three steps in that process, starting with the sensation of sound itself, has to be constructed. And because that initial step is constructed, it can be suspended. Through intensive meditation or drugs in some casesit is possible to turn off the mechanisms in the brain that make each orienting layer possible. And that includes the initial *differentiation*. Just as we can suspend all labeling and judging (cognition) and the organizing of sensations into objects (perception), we can halt the construction of sensations by turning off that part of the brain that identifies incoming signals as sounds versus images or smells and so on. And when we suspend that most basic form of orienting, we are left with the Undifferentiated state. This is the enlightenment experience.

Stephanie: I'm following you..... trying to translate your ideas into Zen concepts as I go. But certain basics seem to be missing. Take something as fundamental as the phrase in the Heart Sutra a phrase repeated every morning by Buddhists worldwide: "Form is emptiness; emptiness form. Form is no other than emptiness; emptiness no other than form." How would you explain that in terms of your orienting theory?

PB: Emptiness is the Undifferentiated. This is what you experience when all orienting mechanisms have been turned off. There are no objects to be seen in this stateit is empty of all form. Now when you turn the orienting mechanisms back on, the forms reappear. You see the trees, you hear the gunshot, you are aware of yourself. The world hasn't changed. The only thing that has changed is the way you are looking at it.

Brian: You mean if you stood in one spot and turned the orienting mechanisms on and off you would first see forms, then emptiness, then forms again, and so on?

PB: Yes. Form and emptiness are simply two alternative ways of experiencing the world. What you "see" depends on what is happening in your brain.

Stephanie: But the Heart Sutra says that form *is* emptiness. It equates the two. You're saying something else, aren't you?

PB: Not really. I'm saying that emptiness is "embedded" within form just as the fathomless "space" I saw lying in bed appeared to be embedded in the waves and clouds. When your mind is absolutely still, all it takes is a slight shift in brain state to move from seeing form (the waves and clouds) to seeing emptiness (the fathomless space). They are the same, as the Heart Sutra tells us, in that one "resides" within the other.

Stephanie: I don't know whether to say, Wow! because the theory is so far out or, Yuck! because it is so reductionistic. You seem to end up in the same place as Zen..... but through a very different path a scientific rather than a spiritual path.

Brian: Does it really matter, Steph? I mean

Stephanie: Certainly it matters. If you believe in Zen the way I do, the Undifferentiated is a lot more than a special brain state brought on by a shift in neurological functioning. It is the Truth of life; it is the Reality which underlies the superficial world of things. It is the One out of which we are born and into which we ultimately return.

PB: I agree, Steph. It really does matter. If you see it my way, you've got to give up the view of enlightenment as the holiest of all Grails. There is nothing holy about it. It is completely natural. Wondrous as it must appear to anyone fortunate enough to experience it, it is at heart a physiological event, not a spiritual one. It tells us nothing about Reality or the True Self. Nor does it represent a window that looks out upon a world that transcends our physical one.

Stephanie: I can't agree with that. For all its consistency, your theory says nothing about the *content* of enlightenment. You're telling us what goes on at the time of awakeningnamely neurological stuffbut what do you think we actually "see" in the Undifferentiated state? You say that our orienting apparatus is shut off but what do we actually experience when we're not orienting? Buddhism says that at the moment of enlightenment we see into the Essence of thingswe penetrate the physical surface of objects and grasp their underlying Being, the same Being or Oneness that underlies all things throughout the universe.

PB: Perhaps..... but I don't see any evidence for that kind of interpretation.

Stephanie: Of course not. The Essence of something cannot be measured with a PET scan the way neurons can.

Brian: Then how do you know it exists, Steph?

Stephanie: Because people a lot smarter than me or you have said so. I trust what someone like the Buddha tells us.

Brian: What about your interpretation, Paul? Any evidence on your side?

PB: A little. I remember reading a study in which the investigators got together a group of advanced meditatorsput them in a quiet room and asked them to start meditating. All subjects were wired to measure certain basic neurological processes, including activity in the primary orienting center of the brain. Participants were instructed to indicate with a movement of their hands when they reached a state of

samadhi, which all were capable of doing. Results showed that for each individual, all orienting activity shut down at approximately the same time that a samadhi state had been reached..

Brian: Well, that's pretty impressive evidence. I guess it proves your point, Paul.

Stephanie: Not so fast. You're assuming that the samadhi state was nothing more than a neurological event. Couldn't we just as easily say that the samadhi was a spiritual event with physical correlates or consequences? For example, isn't it possible that the suspension of all orienting in the brain is a by-product of entering the Undifferentiated state?

PB: It could be. To know for sure you would have to conduct an experiment in which you manipulated subjects' orienting centers directly ... and then waited to see if they reported an enlightenment-type experience. Research into this area has just begun. My guess is that further experiments will show that samadhi is an effect rather than a cause of activity in the orienting center. It will also reveal that there are several orienting centers involved and that each is related to one of the three layers I have described.

Brian: You mean sensation, perception, and cognition.

PB: (*smiling*) And I thought you were sleeping.

Stephanie: (*agitated*) But wait a minute. You're making all of this sound so neurological that the enlightenment experience is getting stripped of all its wonder and beauty.

PB: Not so. It's still as mind-shattering as ever. It just doesn't *mean* what the Buddhists would have us believe. I'm not questioning the *reality* of the enlightenment experience. I *am* questioning the mythical way in which Eastern traditions have interpreted it.

Stephanie: O.K.you say that it tells us nothing about a realm beyond this material one. Even if that's true even if you don't accept the Buddhist belief in a spiritual domain, doesn't seeing into the Undifferentiated at least give us a better idea of what this physical world is really like? Even if you define it in strictly neurological terms, Paul, doesn't the enlightenment experience tell us that there are no objects in the world until someone somewhere turns on her orienting mechanisms. You go even further. You're saying that there aren't even any sounds, images, smells or tastes in the world no sensations of any kind until some organism with a brain and nervous system switches into orienting mode. Doesn't it follow from this that the physical world the one we live in every day is fundamentally empty? Doesn't it follow that our most treasured sensations and objects are little more than phantoms fragile chimera spun out of hope and desire?

Brian: (*smirking*) Chimera? Where'd you learn that one?

Stephanie: (*sharply*) I read. Try it sometime. It can't hurt you.

PB: Well yes, I agree that there are no sensations or objects until some organism, human or otherwise, constructs them. But just because there is nothing to see or hear in the Undifferentiated state, it doesn't follow that there nothing really exists in the physical universe. I'm willing to assume that light and sound waves, for example, exist whether we sense them or not. We may not see or hear anything in the enlightened state because all orienting has been suspended, but the waves are still there in the environment. With the help of our brains, we can turn those waves into the sensations of light and sound and then convert those sensations into perceivable objects and verbalized concepts. But the "raw materials" for the whole process exist whether we are around to do our constructing or not.

Brian: I think I can buy that..... for now anyway (*turning to Paul*) I guess what I really want to know is whether the experience you described changed your life very much? Do you look at the world differently now or feel differently about things?

PB: Not really. The biggest difference is that it has allowed me to understand more clearly what Zen literature is all about. There is so much mystery in Zen so much paradox some of it almost sounds like teasing. You've heard it, Steph. "The sound that is not a sound," "the voiceless voice," "the taste that cannot be tasted," and so on. These statements make much more sense to me now that I have "seen" how form arises out of emptiness or how emptiness is "embedded" in form. But let's remember, all I got was a glimpse. I doubt that it lasted more than a few seconds a minute at the most.

Stephanie: But didn't it make you hungry for more? Didn't it make you want to become permanently enlightened?

PB: That experience took place about ten years ago. And at first, yes, I did harbor the hope that it would be repeated over and over until it became an everyday occurrence. But certain things happened in the following years that changed my mind. I gradually began to doubt that I even wanted to become enlightened.

Stephanie: Paul, that's hard to believe. For someone who got a glimpse of the Absolute to turn his back on it and say, "No thanks, I don't want any more," doesn't make any sense unless you just got tired of trying.....

Brian: hmmm and eased the pain of defeat by convincing yourself that you really didn't want it. You know, sour grapes that sort of thing.

PB: Very possible. Maybe even likely.

Stephanie: But could we hear what happened to you after the big glimpse?

PB: Sure. I took a few notes.....(*looking at Brian*) not as many as the first time.

Brian: (*gripping the arms of his chair*) I'm ready.

PB: (*opening file drawer and pulling out a folder called Personal*) If I recall correctly, I wrote these notes about seven years ago. I was renting a little cottage in Concord, Massachusetts at the time. Here's what I wrote:

"Something new is creeping into my life. I hesitate to talk about it because it is so new and elusive. Last week, on two separate occasions, I found myself being 'invited' into the sights and sounds going on around me which at that time took the form of the clatter of pots and pans, the whir of the refrigerator motor, the feel of kitchen utensils in my hand, etc. I say being 'invited' because losing myself in this purely sensory world did not seem at all intentional. Nor did it require any real effort unlike all the other times when I struggled to be mindful of my sensations. I'm not sure how long each of the two episodes lasted perhaps a few minutes at most.

"Several days after the second such episode I was standing at the sink in the bathroom when I suddenly realized that I had just come out of an extraordinary state. I could remember little or nothing about what I had experienced but I was very clear about what I had *not* experienced. What I had just come out of was radically different from ordinary consciousness, at least *my* ordinary consciousness. And yet it was not bizarre, not sublime. There was no blissful seeing into the fathomlessness of existence as there had been several years ago. It seemed like a state of pure mindfulness but very different from what I expected that to be like.

"The first thing I was aware of (after coming out of the experience) was that there was no way to enjoy the state while I was in it. In hindsight everything about it struck me as extremely plain. There was no excitement, no drama, no vivid sensations. It was not at all, for example, like the ecstasy of eating which I experience almost every time the food is good and I am suitably hungry. On those occasions, best experienced alone, I seem to be totally lost in the taste and aroma of the food, the precise biting of each morsel, it's feel on my tongue, and the glow in my esophagus as the chewed-up remains descend to my stomach. Listening to certain pieces of music lifts me into a similar state of rapture..... as does hiking in the Rocky Mts. I have always assumed that in each case the ecstasy I experience is directly related to the absence of thinking. Without any thoughts arising, each sensation is much more precise and vivid. And the more vivid the sensations, the greater the joy.

"This assumption now lay shattered at my feet. With this first glimpse of true no-thinking, it was clear that during all those episodes of ecstasy a lot of thinking remained subliminal thinking perhaps but thinking nevertheless. By contrast, the present experience, the one I had just come out of, had no thought whatsoever and here there was no ecstasy, no rapture, no awareness that anything the least bit enjoyable was going on. I am not even sure of what was going on or how long it

lasted. My guess is that it lasted a few minutes and that I was just moving around my cottage doing little chores. It seemed very clear, however, that even if I had been eating my favorite meal or listening to my favorite Mozart piano concerto, there would have been nothing to enjoy. Everything about it was plain, absolutely plain.

“It became clear, after coming out of the experience, that thinking had played a critical role in making my eating, listening, and hiking so enjoyable in the past. Without thinking, I could see now, there is no way to reflect on an experience while it is happening, thus no way to savor it, compare it with other states, to judge it as good or bad. Without the capacity to think and interpret the experience, we are left with the bare sensations themselves. These bare, unconceptualized sensations are not only devoid of the capacity for enjoyment; they are devoid of all meaning. They don't add up to anything; they don't go anywhere. In my own case, it puzzled me that I could not integrate them into any concept of 'my life,' that is, into some kind of personal narrative. I could not say (in hindsight), 'This experience indicates that I am getting closer to enlightenment.' It was as if 'I' hadn't even been told about it.....that 'I' had been passed by overlooked. Or that this experience had been cut out of the theatrical that is 'my life' and placed in a room by itself, unrelated to the drama that continued on stage.

“Despite its exquisite freedom and purity, the experience was indigestible. Without some way of linking it up with my personal story, with my quest to become an enlightened person, there was no way for me to use it. The whole experience seemed to stand outside my normal, thought- saturated existence. From the standpoint of my ordinary consciousness, it seemed like a waste. But at least now I could understand what the Zen master meant when he told his students that if they knew what enlightenment was like, they probably wouldn't want it.

“One thing I have taken from this experience is the new awareness of how much my daily life, even when it appears to be relatively thought-free, is colored by the way I interpret what is happening as it happens. A life without such interpretation is radically different much simpler, plainer, devoid of worry or fear. That much I could have predicted. But I am amazed at how much is lost in the process. Without the constant evaluation of what is happening as it happens, without *reflecting* momentarily on each event, all meaning seems to drop out of life. All the movement. All the progress toward goals. All the excitement. All the suffering and joy. But even stranger is the inability to 'know' what is happening. Just as U.G. Krishnamurti says, when all thinking has dropped away, there is no way for the organism to 'know' what it is experiencing. Can you even imagine what it is like to go on looking, listening, smelling, touching for a half an hour without 'knowing' what is happening? Probably not..... because your imagining requires you to think and you can't very well use thought to tell you what it would be like not to be thinking.

“I'm not at all sure what has brought on this experience. No extra meditation. No new insights. Perhaps some letting go earlier in the week, some giving up of the desire to become something. But mainly it just seems to be happening on its own

at its own glacial pace. But I welcome it despite the feeling of loss that goes with it. I know that I have only gotten a glimpse. There is far more to see. Why do I want to see it? I want to get closer to the bone of existence, to bedrock..... to see behind the veil of culture." (*pausing*) End of story.

Stephanie: That does sound strange, Paul having an experience without "knowing" that you are having it at the time. But I guess you're right if you are really one with the looking or hearing or tasting, you don't have any outside perspective on it you can't see yourself doing it. Without thought you don't have any way of reflecting on it as it happens.

PB: For years, this was precisely the state that I longed for.... to forget myself completely and become one with what I was looking at. It never seemed to happen. I can remember hiking high up in the Rockies and finding a beautiful spot from which I could view the valley spread out below me. I sat down ready to lose myself in this sublime setting. I looked and looked as intently as I could banishing all thoughts of tiredness or hunger from my mind. And it *was* beautiful..... extraordinarily beautiful..... but frustrating nevertheless in that, for the life of me, I could not stop *seeing myself see*. Every time I looked at the valley, I saw myself looking. I could not get the monkey of self-awareness off my back. And seeing myself as observer kept me from losing myself in seeing the valley. It seemed to corrupt the whole experience. It robbed it of its purity and vividness.

Stephanie: I understand completely or at least I know from what I have read what you are talking about. You were still outside the situation. You were stuck in the dualism between observer and observed. Zen teaches that to get beyond that dualism, the mind has to be absolutely still one-pointed without a trace of thought. As long as you are thinking, there's going to be some sense of self

Brian: Wait a minute, Steph. You mean to tell me that if I stop thinking, I won't even know who I am or that I even exist? Animals have some idea of who they are, don't they and they aren't known to do a lot of thinking.

Stephanie: I'm sure that the deer you almost ran over the other night was aware of itself in some way. If it didn't, it couldn't have jumped out of the way and dashed off through the trees without getting hurt. But that's simple body-awareness. I doubt that the deer conceptualizes itself as a *self* in the way we humans do. For example, it doesn't see itself as big, handsome, and smart..... (*giggling*) the way you do.

Brian: (*laughing*) So if I meditate for 20 years and stop all thinking, I'll no longer be big, handsome, and smart?

Stephanie: You won't *see* yourself that way any longer.

Brian: (*smiling*) Well, that's O.K., as long as you still do.

Stephanie: (*giggling*) Who said I ever did?

Brian: Well, there must be something about me you like or you wouldn't hang around with me.

Stephanie: Don't push me.

PB: (*laughing*) Let's face it. Losing yourself totally in what you're doing whether it's eating, hiking in the woods, swimming or making love..... can be pretty appealing or at least it would seem to be in forethought. There's none of that silly inner chatter that distracts from the Now. No nagging thoughts about past mistakes; no anxiety about what you have to do tomorrow. None of that existential angst about where you are in life compared to where you think you should be. A quiet, peaceful place..... your mind absolutely still, alert. For years this is what I longed for ... not just on the mountain but everywhere else in life except of course in those situations like writing books where thinking was essential. But after the experience I just described, doubts began creeping in. A lot seemed to get lost in the process of losing myself in the moment. It's true that I felt no fear or anxiety but there was a similar absence of joy and excitement. I began to wonder if I was throwing out the baby with the bath.

Stephanie: You mean to say that after years of wanting to shed your self, you began to wonder if it was worth it?

PB: At first it was just doubtsand then something happened last year that made it clear to me that I wasn't ready to abandon old P.B. altogether. But I hesitate to burden you with another personal story.

Brian: (*with alarm*) Oh, oh. My nose is twitching. More notes me thinks more notes are coming.

Stephanie: (*sternly*) Me thinks you could stuff up that nose and listen. You just might learn something.

PB: O.K. I'll keep it short. It was a beautiful October day. I was standing out on my lawn (*points out the window*) looking at the New Hampshire mountains when I apparently slipped into a trance-like state in which my eyes were riveted to what I saw across the valley. I stood there for several minutes my mind absolutely clear, the colors and lines of the mountains exquisite in their simplicity. Only the mountains existed there was no "I" of any kind no self *doing* the seeing.

Stephanie: Ah the very kind of experience that had eluded you for years like when you were up on the mountain looking down at the valley and couldn't stop seeing yourself seeing.

PB: Yes. But when I came out of the trance, I was immediately aware that something was missing. The thrill of viewing the scene was gone. Many times before I had stood in the same spot and looked at the same New Hampshire mountains and every time I was buoyed by the extraordinary beauty of what I saw.

Stephanie: And now?

PB: It all seemed plain. I just wasn't appreciating the scene the way I always had. At first it made no sense. The mountains hadn't changed. I was wearing the same glasses. I was standing in roughly the same place. Nothing in the situation had changed. It took a while but as I puzzled over the loss it gradually dawned on me that what was missing was the awareness that *I* was there looking at the mountains. I had been left out of the equation..... and without that sense of myself as observer, I felt none of my usual elation none of the "Wow, here I am, standing on my front lawn, looking at these gorgeous mountains." I felt none of the gratitude that I had always felt in the past, none of the awareness that I was privileged to be in a position to take in such beauty. I no longer saw myself looking at the mountains. All I saw was the mountains.

Stephanie: (*incredulously*) You mean to say that after years of trying to lose yourself in what you saw, you finally got there only to discover you didn't want it after all? (*with unconcealed disgust*) You would rather be a separate self an observer standing outside what you see than to be one with what is. Wow. I don't get that at all, Paul.

PB: It surprised me too, Stephanie. But the more I think about it, the more sense it makes to me.

Brian: It makes a lot of sense to me already. I like who I am. Why in the world would I want to give up being a self and become what a nobody?

Stephanie: (*to Brian*) Who knows, honey, improvement comes in mysterious ways. There's a saying in the spiritual community that you have to be a somebody before you can become a nobody. The assumption is that being a nobody is a more highly developed place to be.

Brian: And why in the world should that be?

Stephanie: That's easy. As a nobody that is, a person without self-awareness you are free from most of the everyday "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." You don't have to defend yourself against criticism or rejection; you don't have to worry about getting ahead or being approved of. As a nobody you don't even care whether you're loved or not. And there's great peace and freedom in all that.

Brian: (*uneasily*) You mean, I could stop worrying about whether you still love me?

Stephanie: Yes. (*impishly*) You might even stop imagining that you're God's gift to womanhood..... although that could take a bit longer.

Brian: (*chuckling*) But Paul seems to be saying that you lose a lot when you give up being a self. Sounds like there's a trade-off here.

PB: That's a fair way to put it. And whether or not you're willing to make that trade depends on how you feel about yourself. When you're experiencing a lot of self-doubt as I was when I first took up Zen, the prospect of letting go of the self and all your concern with success and approval is bound to be intoxicating. Becoming a "nobody" promises to wash away all the anxiety and depression that has dogged you for years. But when

Brian: (*interrupting*) But what if you don't feel anxious or depressed to begin with? I don't.

PB: Then becoming a "nobody" isn't going to seem all that appealing. And that's my point. The lure of no-self is felt most strongly by those who are least comfortable with themselves. If you are pleased with who you are that is, if you truly accept yourselfit is unlikely that you will see the wisdom of letting go of that self.

Stephanie: But aside from any question of relief, if you want to be enlightened, don't you have to give up seeing yourself as a separate self, as a subject standing outside the objects you observe?

PB: Without doubt. So the real question boils down to whether or not you want to become enlightened knowing in advance that this implies a surrender of the individual self. For me, getting over the hump of anxiety and self-doubt had the effect of weakening my interest in enlightenment. There were other factors involved but becoming stronger in my self more self-accepting was the major one.

Stephanie: But even if you're no longer anxious about getting ahead, Paul, don't you want the freedom that goes with transcending the self? Don't you want to be done with all those ego concerns ... you know, like wanting people to like you or think highly of you? I can tell from the way my Roshi acts around other people that he just doesn't give a hoot about such things.

PB: That's a very desirable place to be, for sure. But I don't think you have to be enlightened to feel that way. As Brian can tell you from our chat of a couple a weeks ago, I see the waning of interest in attention, love, and approval as a natural consequence of becoming a healthier personespecially at the highest level of self-development the level I call "soaring." The more adept you become at getting

these security needs met, the less obsessive you are likely to be about the way others view you. But you don't have to become enlightened in order to break free of that obsessiveness. Feeling sure about yourself becoming your own idiosyncratic person, becoming self-actualized that in itself should be enough to set you free. You don't have to scale the walls of satori or surrender your separate self in order to dispel the fear of rejection or disapproval.

Stephanie: Are you talking about the self or ego? I think there's a difference but don't ask me what it is.

PB: I think you can be aware of your self and have a positive image of that self without being egocentric. A person who has identified his core values and built a life around them no longer wastes energy trying to elicit love and approval from others. Because he has given up such pursuits, he is unlikely to brag about his accomplishments or get defensive when criticized, tooting your own horn and bristling at criticism being two of the hallmarks of ego. His self-confidence makes bragging superfluous; his self-acceptance makes defensiveness unnecessary. In the end, having a clear, positive image of himself makes him less rather than more egocentric.

Brian: And you don't need to be enlightened to get to that place, right? You just have to learn to what's the word(smiling) oh yes, soar.

Stephanie: But what about death? You said earlier you dreaded the thought of dying. An enlightened person wouldn't fear death, would he? I mean, if he is no longer aware of himself as a separate being, what is there to fear?

PB: You're right. A person who is in sustained contact with the Undifferentiated is not going to worry about dying. He *knows* from direct experience that the self, like all entities, is only a construct arising out of what he would call the One. Most of the time he is not even going to be aware that he exists as a separate being so death is really a non-issue.

Brian: Wait a minute! Even if he's not thinking about himself, he's got to be aware that he exists otherwise he'd keep banging into other people ... or fall off a cliff.

PB: O.K. As long as he is not in samadhi, he is going to have that body-awareness we talked about earlierhe's going to be aware of where he is relative to other objects in the environment. And that should keep him from getting run over. But even in this samsaric state he's going to be riveted to whatever he sees, hears, smells, and so on and that means that he is going to be unaware of himself as an observer, as a separate person. And because he's not thinking about his own existence, he is not going to be concerned about dying.

Stephanie: That might be true but I should think his experience of the Undifferentiated would be sufficient in itself to wash away all fear of death.....whether he goes around thinking about himself or not. After all, his enlightenment experience tells him that all objects are illusory and that includes himself. Once he has seen into the Oneness of Nirvana, won't he take this to be Reality and dismiss as illusion anything that appears to rise out of it?

PB: I agree. Given his Buddhist beliefs, he will be convinced that the death of any particular object or subject can in no way alter the One which is eternal and to which he will ultimately return. With that mind set, it follows that, for him, the death of the individual self is no big deal, even if it means the end of him as a separate being.

Stephanie: But for you it *is* a big deal, right? Now, can we assume that if you enter an enlightened state in the years to come, you will

Brian: (*whispering*) Steph he's already 75 don't stretch this out too far.

Stephanie: (*frowning at Brian*)you will no longer be afraid to die?

PB: (*chuckling*) I doubt it..... less afraid than now perhapsbut still apprehensive. It all depends on how you interpret the enlightenment experience. Even if I grasped the Undifferentiated time and time again, I would not interpret it (like the Buddhists do) as seeing into the Eternal. I would not see IT as Reality, compared to which all else is illusion. Upon coming out of the samadhi state, I would remind myself that this is what the world looks like when all orienting has been suspended. As elated as I might be with what I saw, I would not make the mistake of concluding that I was nothing but an illusion and that the only thing real was the Undifferentiated state I had just glimpsed. Consequently, I would still be afraid of dying. Yet at the same time, repeated exposure to the Undifferentiated would have the effect of reminding me that the self is a construction not an illusion but a construction and that reminder in and of itself would undoubtedly weaken my attachment to the drama of Paul Breer as a person. Such a loss of interest in the self would presumably bring with it a deeper peace than I feel now a peace that I might very well welcome someday in the future perhaps after all my creative juices have dried up and there are no unfinished projects looming. But that's not true now.

Brian: So, let me see if I understand this. You're saying that even if you become fully enlightened, you're still going to be afraid of dying..... even though you will probably be less attached to your self than you are now.

PB: Yes. And that's really O.K. with me. There are definite advantages to feeling that way. Without the fear of death I would not value each day as much as I do now. The thought that I must die is always in my mind not up front necessarily but there somewhere. It reminds me to check my priorities and see to it that I am doing what is most important to me. It colors my decisions about how to distribute my time across projects, how to handle relationships; it even helps me to decide where I want to live and spend my vacations. Knowing that I am going to die fairly soon makes me impatient with anything superficial. It forces me to clarify my most basic values..... and to continue to build a life around what I prize the most.

Stephanie: Well said. Not exactly Zen-like but honest. All this talk about the self makes me wish I had been at that previous chat the one where you and Brian talked about the Maslow hierarchy and something you called "soaring." I gather that you believe it possible to reach a point where your basic ego security needs gradually fade away and you become more and more self-forgetfulstill aware of yourself as a person but no longer concerned with being loved and respected. That sounds like a healthy place to be a place of peace and stability with minimal suffering a Zen-like place. But Buddhism draws the issue more broadly, doesn't it? According to Buddhist psychology, we suffer not simply because we are worried about being loved and admired but because we desire. Desire any desire causes suffering. When the Buddha uttered those words some 2500 years ago, he wasn't referring exclusively to the desire for love or approval; he meant the desire for anything. Now a self-actualized person may no longer be hung up on love and approval but she is still likely to suffer because of all her other desires. No?

Brian: (*head thrown back*) C'mon, Steph. Do you honestly think my desire for an ice cream cone on our drive back to Burlington is going to make me suffer?

Stephanie: Hold on, honey. There's a translation problem here. What most scholars think Buddha meant by desire was what we would call "craving." Your desire for an ice cream cone or your desire for lunch is unlikely to get you in trouble. It's when you start to long for something to obsess over getting it to crave it that you are likely to suffer.... (*eyes sparkling, softly*)..... you know the way you feel about me.

Brian: (*smiling awkwardly*) Aargh. I see what you mean. But Jeez does that mean we have to give up all our cravings if we don't want to suffer?

Stephanie: The Buddha would say yes. It's as simple as that.

Brian: And how does the Holy One say we should do it? How do we get rid of our cravings?

Stephanie: That's pretty straightforward too. The problem is ignorance, ignorance of what is real. To rid ourselves of what Buddhists call desire, we have to awaken to the fact that the objects of that desire are illusory. They really don't exist.

Brian: They don't exist? You mean to tell me that you, my love, are nothing but an illusion?

Stephanie: Of course. If you were enlightened, you would see that.

Brian: (*taking Stephanie's hand*) How can you be an illusion when I can feel you?

Stephanie: If your mind were trained like a Zen master's you would see beneath this dainty frame. You would see the Undifferentiated that underlies what I call "me." It is only the Undifferentiated that is real; the Stephanie whose hand you are squeezing is just an illusion.

PB: (*impatiently*) And this is where we disagree. As I suggested earlier, the Buddhists insist on conflating illusion and construction when the two are quite different. It is true that for the three of us to exist, someone has to construct us, using whatever raw materials are available. That construction process consists of three separate steps the forming of sensations, the combining of sensations into objects and the labeling and evaluation of objects. So here and now we three are constructing each other as well as ourselves. But this is not to say that we are illusions that we are figments of each other's imagination. We are empirical, verifiable constructions, just like that maple tree out there or those mountains in the distance constructions assembled from data fed to our sense organs by materials in the physical universe.

Stephanie: O.K. If you are going to insist that we are real as real as any "construction" can be it follows that you reject the Buddhist belief that to get rid of craving and suffering you have to see through the illusoriness of things..... that is, you have to become enlightened. So ... how *do* you get rid of desire?

PB: I'm not sure I want to. The desires that get most people into trouble are the desires for love and approval and these are the very concerns we can expect to wither away as we become actualized in our idiosyncratic selves. Moreover, there may be other desires indirectly tied to these basic security needs. A thwarted desire for affection, for example, can show up in an obsessive concern

with food.....with all its attendant unpleasantness. An unsuccessful bid for respect can morph into the pursuit of power and a craving to dominate or control others. Similarly, a desire to write music or books this one I can vouch for personally can easily become swallowed up in the head-long pursuit of fame and wealth. The possibilities are endless. All of which means that if a high order of mental health brings an end to our quest for love and approval, it may also bring an end to those other cravings indirectly fueled by that quest.

Brian: And so you end up with no desires.

PB: Not at all. Getting out from under the need to be loved and esteemed frees you to desire an endless variety of things like food, sex and adventure or writing music and books without any hidden security agenda. Stripped of their tie with unmet needs for affection and approval, such desires become less obsessive, healthier, more easily fulfilled..... and less likely to bring on suffering.

Brian: Whew! I'm getting confused. Maybe this stuff is over my head.

Stephanie: Maybe?

Brian: (*gritting his teeth*) Well, Paul is saying that desire is good after all as long as you get rid of certain needs first. But Buddhism is saying that all desire is bad because it's based on ignorance and leads to suffering. Who the heck is on first?

Stephanie: Honey, we're talking philosophy not baseball. Try to stay with it. (*turning to Paul*) Paul, I know that you cherish the deep peace that enlightenment promises. But all the Zen books I have read say that it is impossible to attain that kind of serenity as long as you are holding onto a self and wanting anything beyond the basics of survival. Are you seriously contending that a person can have a strong sense of self and be pursuing all kinds of desires and still be at peace with the world?

PB: I don't think the peace I feel is nearly as deep as that which a Zen master feels. But it is very satisfying. And it allows me to enjoy who I amto enjoy the narrative that is unfolding here under the rubric Paul Breer. And desire plays a big part in that story. I for one would not want to be without it. I love it when I am hungry and can look forward to preparing a meal that will excite my palate. And I dread the day when my sexual urges stop arising.... or when I stop looking forward to spring or when I no longer want to write music. I'm not aware that any of these desires brings suffering in its wake. Occasional frustration for sure but not suffering.

Brian: And there is no suffering because what they're not urgent they aren't tied to ego..... they're not life or death matters?

PB: Yes. Desire doesn't have to invite suffering. It certainly can but it needn't. The secret to breaking the link between desire and suffering is to get your basic ego security needs met. Once you have learned how to get the attention, love, and approval you need, you can concentrate on becoming your own person. As a more natural, authentic self emerges, you will find that your need to be loved and admired recedes. This has the effect of relieving other desires of the burden of serving as proxy quests for ego security. Once you've reached that point, the prospect of a life free of all wanting loses its appeal.

Stephanie: You seem to be implying that Buddhism attracts people who have not yet learned how to satisfy their need for love and respect people who are still suffering because of their unmet desires.

PB: I think that's a big part of the attraction. There are other reasons, of course. But the promise of relief from suffering is one of the greatest lures. We all want peace.

Brian: Even if it means giving up all desires not to mention your personal identity? That's one helluva price to pay for peace of mind, isn't it?

PB: It is radical surgery, for sure.....surgery that cuts so deep that it may even undermine the will to live. By ridding us of our desires, enlightenment and I mean sustained immersion in the Undifferentiated robs life of much of its excitement. It is desire that fuels our pursuit of pleasure, our striving for goals, our never-ending search for truth and beauty. If desire rests on "illusion," as the Buddhists claim, and enlightenment dispels that illusion, it follows that an enlightened existence is a desire-less existence..... a very simple, peaceful, but unexciting affair. For me, the price is too high.

Brian: You say that enlightenment can actually take away your will to live? That sounds a bit extreme.

PB: Among some of the enlightened it is hard to detect any desire at all even the desire to go on living. When asked by a student why he eats, Soen-sa-nim (a Korean Zen master in Alston, Massachusetts) said, "I eat for you." The implication is clear that if it weren't for his students, he wouldn't bother to eat at all. And then there is the example of Ramakrishna (a man thought by many including his biographer Christopher Isherwood to be fully enlightened) who became so indifferent to food, water, and other people that he spent all his time

on the floor curled up in a ball. His followers were so afraid that he would leave (that is, die) that they kept waking him up and feeding him. To Isherwood he appeared to have lost all desire to go on living.

Stephanie: That's not really typical is it certainly not of the Zen masters I have read about.

PB: Maybe not. I think what is more typical of sustained enlightenment is a transformation of sensation and perception. When the Undifferentiated is only the flick of a switch away, the everyday samsaric world of objects begins to lose its solidity. Bernadette Roberts, the ex-Catholic nun who reports her experience in The Path of No-Self, says that with her own "enlightenment" (she wouldn't call it that) she lost all interest in music and art in general, delights which had formerly played a major part in her life. She adds that prior to her awakening she spent many enjoyable minutes at her kitchen window looking out onto a yard dominated by a beautifully proportioned oak tree. As her consciousness was transformed, the tree began to lose its palpability; it appeared to be on the edge of dissolving into emptiness even as she looked at it. Needless to say she spent fewer and fewer minutes at the window. In time she left her home and family altogether and took up residence in a forest hut equipped with nothing but the bare essentials for cooking and eating.

Brian: I still don't get it. If all you see when you switch into the enlightened state is a lot of emptiness, how do you get aroundhow would you know when it was safe to cross the street?

PB : If you don't want to get run over, you'd better start orienting in a hurry. And apparently not every enlightened person is good at making that kind of neurological shift. I remember reading in the Harvard Divinity School Bulletin yes, I actually went there for a year about a Hindu teacher who had transcended the world of objects so completely that she could no longer tell the difference between fire and water. The only way she could function was to have an assistant prepare her food, make her bed, and help her from one place to another. She appeared to have no desire to live other than to help others see what she could see.

Brian: I'm not sure I would care to join her. She sounds pretty helpless.

Stephanie: (*quickly*) You don't hear that kind of thing about Zen masters at least I never have. In Mahayana Buddhism any person who has attained enlightenment is expected to stay fully in the world and use that experience to help others. From the very beginning of training adepts like me are encouraged to follow the Bodhisattva ideal to lead a life of compassion and giving. I

doubt that you could give very much to the world if you can't tell the difference between fire and water.

Brian: Or while you're curled up on the floor.

PB: I think you probably have the most to give the world if you are a very healthy person..... that is, when you know who you are, like who you are and have put the quest for attention, love and approval behind you. When you know and accept who you are, you are free to direct your attention to matters wholly independent of your own security needs. You stop obsessing about yourself. Your attention may be directed to any number of things to helping other people, to preserving the environment, to the pursuit of knowledge, or perhaps to the creation of beauty that will be shared publicly. None of these requires that you become enlightened first.

Stephanie: I think I'm finally getting a handle on what you're up to, Paul. You seem to be holding up mental health self-actualization soaring and so forth as an *alternative* to enlightenment. You seem to be saying that self-actualization and "soaring" are capable of providing the same ego-less freedom that Zen masters enjoy without sacrificing all your desires. It's a bold idea. The only thing left out of your scheme is the big picture itself awareness of the Undifferentiated. And I guess you're saying that if you're really healthy such awareness may not be that important after all.

PB: Something like that. But there are still major differences. The mental health approach that I prefer rests on the assumption of a unitary physical universe..... the same universe that science has been so successful in exploring. Protestations to the contrary, Buddhism follows all the other world religions in positing the existence of a world beyond that of the physical one..... a spiritual realm where science is forbidden to enter. And that alone makes it suspect at least to anyone who gets squeamish about an epistemology not based on empirical fact. We see the dubiousness of a spiritual epistemology in the way Buddhists interpret the enlightenment experience. The Undifferentiated is not a window into the supernatural as the Buddhists, Hindus, and Taoists would have us believe. Nor is it a glimpse into Reality, the Absolute or the True Self. It is simply that mental state we experience when we remain alert while all the orienting mechanisms in the brain are suspended. It is a brain state a very rare kind of brain state typically brought on by years of disciplined mind training. And it may very well be something worth pursuing at least for some of us. But it is of this world the purely natural, physical world that we inhabit every day of our lives. To think of it any other way is to engage in fantasy.

Brian: I don't know about you guys but this critter is ready for lunch and a trip back to Burlington. Yes, I have a *desire* for a club sandwich, chips and a dish of ice cream.

Stephanie: And how strong is your desire, my sweet? Has it reached the craving point yet?

Brian: I think it's getting pretty close.

Stephanie: Then maybe you should sit right there and meditate for an hour or two. You know, if you were enlightened, Brian, you would be happy with a couple of pickled radishes.

Brian: A couple?

Stephanie: Well, two or three.

Brian: I don't even like pickled radishes.

Stephanie: That's irrelevant.

Brian: (*sighing*) I think I'll just give in to my desire and accept whatever suffering comes my way.

PB: (*laughing*) Doesn't sound too life-threatening to me. But please, stay for lunch if you can. I could probably rustle up a modified club sandwich you know, without the bacon or turkey.

Brian: (*nose wrinkled*) Modified? Maybe a grilled cheese would be easier.

Stephanie: (*interrupting*) Paul, I would love to stay for lunch but I really have to get back for a meeting at 1:00. I certainly have enjoyed our chat and you've given me lots to think about. I doubt that I'll ever give up my faith in Zen but one never knows.

Brian: O.K. Hold the grilled cheese for another time. I hope we can come back and continue this discussion. I must confess that 'm still a little confused about this desire thing.

Stephanie: (*rising*) Come along, honey. A little lunch should go a long way toward clearing your mind.

Brian: (*smiling*) And if I start to suffer?

Stephanie: I'll be at your side.

PB: (*at the door*) Good bye, you two. I look forward to seeing you again soon.

Stephanie: (*with a warm hug*) Good bye, Paul.....and thank you.

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