

Following are the Introduction and several spiritual exercises from Nicholas Coleman's *A first-personal journey from dust to God*. The book is an autobiographical narrative about seeking the ultimate reality of everything and finding the supreme identity commonly known as "God". *Dust to God* provides an encouraging account of the spiritual journey to enlightenment from the perspective of the perennial philosophy. The wide range of exercises in the book offers activities appropriate for all age groups. Hard copies of the book are available for \$25 from the author, contact: Nicholas.coleman.101@hotmail.com

Introduction

The world is a beautiful creature blessed and alive, said Plato, two and a half thousand years ago. Nowadays, we might say cosmic consciousness produces life, the universe and everything. One infinite mind is present in all things and lives and minds. That single spiritual life integrates and animates everything as a whole, including us. One and the same life of mind gives sentience to all living creatures. And thinking beings experience that universal mind as their own self-awareness, in light of which the world is indeed a glorious creature.

The visible world around us is the unconscious creation of the spiritual life within us. The finite universe is a projection of the infinite mind. What appear as things in the world are really thoughts in a mind. Physical objects in space and time are individual parts of a whole universal consciousness. Ordinarily, we see the many finite parts yet overlook the one infinite mind that creates and contains them as a whole - still less do we realise The One whose infinite mind it is.

Consciousness is inherently first-personal. Universal consciousness has a universal subject. The first-personal subject of universal consciousness is The One, commonly known in religious circles as 'God'. Although there's much misunderstanding surrounding that general appellation, we're actually more familiar with The One than with anything else. For our own experience of self-awareness is the infinite life of The One seeing itself partially reflected in the mirror of our finite consciousness. You experience The One as the constant subject of every passing thought you have and thing you know. The One is the 'I am' you are, right here right now, and forever here-after.

The knowing mind of The One, God, contains the whole universe. The consciousness of The One is alive and aware in all things and lives and minds, including the body, life and mind you are. That universal mind, or cosmic consciousness, is a first-personal subject; it knows itself to be the 'I AM' it is. The singular consciousness of The One 'I AM' is present in every part of the whole universe, including the part you are.

As a self-aware part of the conscious universe you can discover the whole consciousness of which you are part. Correlating awareness of thoughts in the mind with perception of things in the world leads to the self-actualisation of cosmic consciousness. That alignment between the moving centre of individual awareness and the motionless sphere of universal awareness clears the way for God-realisation of The One whose awareness it is. For The One, God, whose consciousness is the cosmos is the 'I am' you are and have always known yourself to be. Teachers of Zen refer to The One as 'your "original face" before your parents were born.'

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This book explains my philosophy of 'Platonic Zen', named after the ideas of Plato and the insights of Zen Buddhism. The philosophy has taken my whole life to formulate and grew out of my efforts to understand my spiritual experience of reality. So, it seems appropriate to communicate my philosophy in the form of stories and reflections from

my life which will give an idea of what I mean by the 'spiritual reality of the universe'. These life-stories and reflections provide a vehicle for recounting my spiritual journey to the remarkable experience I refer to as 'God-realisation', which is the goal of Platonic Zen and (for me) the fulfilment of all living.

Advancement to self-actualisation and God-realisation require a sensitive mind and open heart to detect the presence of a reality so obvious it's virtually invisible. The following story illustrates the ease with which we can overlook the obvious and not see the whole of what is right in front of us.

There aren't squirrels in my country, so I was excited to visit an English forest reputed to be full of them. Skidding my little, soft-top, Citroen 2CV to a stand-still in the car-park, I bounced out happily imagining myself to be some kind of Enid Blyton character on his way to visit the magical Faraway Tree. Striding purposefully into the musky ambience of the old growth forest, I looked eagerly everywhere for a few minutes in hope of catching my first glimpse of a squirrel, but saw nothing apart from the wood and the trees. Concluding there were no squirrels to be found, I lost interest in looking for them. Walking back to the car my gaze fell down towards the narrow leaf-strewn forest path and my attention drifted inward towards thoughts about work in London, home in Hammersmith and lunch in a minute.

In that distracted moment a flickering movement caught the edge of my sight and mind. I looked up at the trees but there was nothing to be seen. Yet my superhero spider-senses were still tingling. Something was happening just beyond the threshold of my vision and awareness - I could feel it, even though I couldn't see it. As I vaguely wondered what was going on, it occurred again. In the corner of my eye I glimpsed a quick motion on the trunk of a nearby tree; but the movement was gone by the time I'd brought the tree into focus. For a little while more I kept imagining movements in the trees but didn't see anything when I looked.

Eventually I realised the apparently empty forest was in fact teeming with squirrels, and all of them were scared out of their wits by my concentrated presence. Whenever I turned my attention inwards the squirrels would come out to play; but the moment I started to look in their direction something in my body-language warned them of my intention. By the time I focussed on the trees the timid little creatures had already scurried into hiding on the far sides of the trunks. My attention must have felt to them like the threatening cross-hairs of a gun-sight.

Interestingly, the squirrels were always one step ahead of my intentional thought - by the time I looked up they were gone. Thus it was only with my peripheral vision that I could catch a glimpse of them. Once I worked out they didn't like me staring at them, I kept my eyes downcast and hoped to see them in the corners of my visual field. Thereafter, the elusive little creatures emerged from behind the surrounding tree trunks to scamper in plain sight as long as I didn't scare them away by trying to look directly at them.

That story of looking for wild squirrels in a forest is a great symbol for seeking and finding the spiritual reality of life, the universe and everything. What we're looking for (be it squirrels, soul, spirit, or God) is always everywhere all the time, but we don't always see it. As the story suggests, we seek without finding because our way of seeking gets in the way of our finding. When we look with physical eyes at things in the world and expect to see spiritual realities, then we're often disappointed because we're using instruments that aren't adequate to our goal. The principle at work is, 'like only knows like.' To see spiritual things we need to look with the inner spiritual eye of the soul, for the inner eye is suited to seeing spiritual realities that are invisible to the outer eyes of the body.

We cannot see ourselves with our physical eyes. The eyes of our body only provide outward sight of things in the world apart from ourselves. Physical vision offers information about a reality from which we are absent. To understand the reality we actually inhabit, we need to see the world and ourselves with the inner eyes of our soul. With spiritual eyes we gain inward knowledge or understanding of things in themselves, including ourselves. If we wish to know the meaning of life here-now and the fulfilment of life here-after, then we need to open the inner eyes of our soul and see everything in the light of the divine consciousness that brings all to life.

Five thousand years of mystical traditions in the east and west have taught their adherents pathways to self-actualisation and God-realisation. Something like Enlightenment, cosmic consciousness, Salvation, Nirvana, Moksha, the kingdom of Heaven, the Beatific Vision or the meaning of Life has been the goal of the saints and sages, the mystics and *mahasiddhas*, of all times. Indeed, the English word 'religion' derives from the Latin term *religare*, which mean "to tie back to". Essentially, spiritual religion and mystical philosophy are forms of belief and behaviour that restore the individual self to its source in the universal consciousness of The One, commonly known as 'God'.

The One is the first-personal subject of consciousness in life, the universe and everything. The One knows itself to be The One it is in all things and lives and minds. That unique first-personal subject is present in each of us as the familiar experience we have of being the 'I am' we are, here-now and here-after. The supreme accomplishment of God-realisation is to know The One you are, the I AM whose consciousness contains the whole of reality.

To realise The One I AM you are is to enjoy the ultimate happiness of being alive, now and forever. The Hindu sage Shankara characterised the ultimate reality of The One as Being Aware Joyfully (Sanskrit, *sat-cit-ananda*). Plato spoke of The One as Beauty, Truth and Goodness. Realising The One "I AM" you are leaves nothing to do but affirm the realisation to the best of your ability while you have the chance to do so as an individual.

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In today's secular society, traditional religious language has fallen on hard times. It's out of favour and picked over for commercial advertising slogans - "heaven" is an ice-cream and the "ultimate" is a laundry powder. To speak meaningfully of "God" or "spirituality" can be a cause of embarrassment.

While the idea of looking for the meaning of life, the universe and everything may be derided, there is often a wistful note to the scoffing. Many people discretely seek fulfilment beyond mere material affluence. What drives the search is the feeling that meaning can be more than just what we create for ourselves and project onto surrounding events. Meaning can be real in its own right.

Sometimes we recognise a more substantial experience of meaning, one that seems to arise in the world and exist in our mind independent of our own thoughts. Meaning is an integral aspect of life. An activity, a relationship, an experience is felt to be "meaningful" when it engages our true self. Meaning cuts through our superficiality and moves the core of our personality. When life is meaningful we feel that we are at home in our life, our identity is strengthened. Encountering meaning is a very powerful experience. We recognise this experience when a conversation suddenly feels important, real, true; or when in a relationship one suddenly feels one is more oneself when together with the other person.

Sometimes meaning seems to have a pervasive energy or vitality of its own. Suddenly our mind and the world seem to align with a clarity and comprehension that are unequivocally sharp and focused; Life, the Universe and Everything appear inherently organised, as if by an Intelligence far beyond our own. In a sudden and unexpected convergence of events beyond our control, we see our life as part of a grand, meaningful and enduring whole.

Such spontaneous experiences of meaning are referred to as 'synchronicity'. One thing happens at the same time as another to produce a feeling of sudden, uncontrived significance. Carl Jung coined the term 'synchronicity' to name the 'acausal connecting principle' that he believed held together the universe of lived experience. While the principle of synchronicity is an organising power as real as gravity or nuclear forces, it functions differently from extrinsic mechanical connections that allow measurement, prediction and control of discrete objects in the physical world.

Synchronicity is an intrinsic psychic force we experience first-personally as a spontaneous expression of inherent meaning. Such occurrences are commonly known as 'meaningful coincidence'. I recounted a quirky occasion to my Jungian analyst in Cambridge and asked her if it was an example of synchronicity. She replied, if it was meaningful to you it was synchronistic. That's when I realised subjectivity is indispensable for complete experience.

Synchronicity refers to the experience of meaningful coincidence. What synchronicity means is that there is an organising force in the universe that works independent of human contrivance. Moments of synchronicity give glimpses into the intrinsic nature of reality. They show the cosmos as it is in itself, a value-laden and purposively integrated whole. The mere fact of existence is a miracle so radiant we can hardly bring ourselves to look at it directly. We need to diminish its splendid reality by adding unnecessary concepts or subtracting unbearable truths. For our own psychological comfort we create the half-light of a material world in which the shadows of spiritual reality appear more real than the brilliance of the reality that casts them.

The psychophysical universe is not a closed system of spatiotemporal reality. Rather, eternal divine-light-energy is continually pouring into the world in the form of life and mind and meaning that connect and sustain everything as an integral whole. As Leonard Cohen says: 'There are cracks in everything - that's how the light gets in.' In moments of synchronicity - meaningful coincidence - we chime with the ceaseless power, pattern and purpose of the cosmos. Briefly, the inner eye opens and we glimpse the larger picture from a God's-eye point of view.

Aldous Huxley says: 'At any given moment, life seems completely senseless. But viewed over a period, it reveals itself as an organism existing in time, having a purpose and tending in a certain direction.' Purpose and direction are intentional qualities; they are manifestations of meaningful thought that indicate the presence of a mind. To say that life as a whole has purpose and direction implies that the whole of life has a single mind of its own. Individual lives, which also have minds of their own, are parts of life as a whole and so share in the one mind of life itself. Hence, we are not the sole authors of our lives. Our personal stories are written in between lines that are laid down by the mind of life itself. The power, pattern and purpose of that cosmic mind are manifest in individual lives as occasions of spontaneous meaning that offer glimpses of the eternal spiritual order and integrity of the universe.

For me, the following portrait is synchronistic. At four years of age mum and dad said their friend Paul was going to paint my portrait. I kicked up a fuss over having to wear my blue school uniform on a weekend so mum said I could take my favourite gun and holster. Not too many toys were designed for left-handed kids in 1957 and I wore

the blue holster strapped in an awkward fashion for my own convenience. When Paul insisted that the gun be holstered properly on my right hip I kicked up another fuss, so he gave me an apple to hold in my left hand. Sitting still for what seemed like ages while Paul left me alone in the studio, I got hungry and nibbled on the apple but rotated it to hide the growing bite in the palm of my hand. Eventually Paul noticed the apple was moving and had me turn it back to its initial position. He was quite amused to see the bite I'd taken and left it in the portrait.

Fifty years later, my daughter Madeleine pointed out that an apple is a traditional fertility symbol and my wife Robyn rejoined that a gun is a common phallic symbol. Like the *vajra* and bell in Tibetan Buddhism, the gun and apple can represent the fundamental duality of the ordinary world. Taken together they symbolise the mystical union of opposites, which summarises the path and goal of the spiritual quest for enlightenment. So there I am, set for action, simultaneously joining and separating mystical symbols of the fundamental duality, holding the balance in the palms of my hands without even knowing it. What a striking coincidence that the future journey of my life should be foreshadowed in that portrait of a four year-old child.



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Growing up Irish Catholic in 1950s Melbourne was a tribal affair. Among the numerous uncles, aunts and cousins I knew who went into the Church, my family included three parish priests, two Reverend Mothers, a missionary, a theologian, a monk, a Monsignor and a Bishop. These kind and wise relatives greatly contributed to my first religious education, not in classes and sermons but by the examples of their lives. From them I learnt that God is good and loves people and the world and that Jesus, who is also good and loving, worked hard to bring people and the world back to God.

Four-year-old Kindergarten in 1957 at the local Catholic convent school offered a different slant on God, reality and me. I was taught that people were made in God's image but were wretched sinners. We inhabit a paradise which is also a valley of tears, and God is an infinitely loving and forgiving Creator who judges and condemns parts of creation to eternal suffering. The nuns obviously believed in the same God my family did. Everyone agreed that God was powerful and important and everywhere all the time and knew everything that people thought and said and did. But the emphasis on God's character was different between school and home. At school I was told God is generally unimpressed with my performance so I'd better shape up, while at home I learnt God is pretty happy with my efforts so I should keep up the good work.

Trying to reconcile those conflicting views of God caused confusion and anxiety. In the playground I'd become quite stressed by the thought that God was ceaselessly watching and always coming to an unfavourable judgement. During prolonged bouts of acute self-consciousness, I'd feel utterly transparent with nowhere to hide. I couldn't escape the feeling of being scrutinised by the all-seeing eye of a disapproving deity.

Fortunately my mum had reflected on her faith with wisdom and compassion. She admitted there are various ways of thinking about God but insisted the best people

believed God is always good and loving and happy to know us. My mum was firm in her conviction that doing one's best was important and as long as we thought the best of God, the world and ourselves, then God would provide the rest to ensure the proper outcome for life, the universe and everything.

My earliest ideas of God were too much to think about too often, so I put them to the back of my mind for the best part of a decade. Then in my 'Teens I came to think that something was missing in life - I had the feeling "more" was going on everywhere but I just couldn't see what it was. By my Twenties I'd started to look for Enlightenment. In my Thirties I came to understand it was "God" I'd been seeking all along. In my Forties I realised what "Life" really means. Now in my Fifties I'm trying to share what I've found. But it started when I was quite young.

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I've led a mystical life as long as I can remember. My mum's sister Maev, my aunt and Godmother, used to tell her nieces and nephews many traditional and contemporary stories of Irish mysticism. As a five year-old I read loads of Enid Blyton books about adventurous fairies inhabiting magical forest-realms. Then I'd spend hours musing about the worlds in which they lived and what they'd be like. From books such as Blyton's *The Faraway Tree*, I learnt how the ordinary world included places where one could access an enchanted reality. The children on an English farm used to visit the Faraway Tree at the centre of a nearby forest.

Blyton's *Red Story Book* described another enchanted world and explained how to engage the fairies and powers that inhabited its spiritual reality. Her stories affirmed that magic was real and told how to perform magic spells. I memorised the incantations and the powers of the spiritual beings she described. But her story-books didn't give details of how magic worked, nor do I recall them explaining why magic even existed. It was through my own reflections that I came up with a view on the how and the why of magic.

Among my clearest early memories was finding a classmate who shared my interest in the invisible spiritual world. I recall walking in the schoolyard under the cypress pines and taking a confident lead in a conversation about nature spirits and how to perform magic spells. My classmate was amazed at what I knew, and I was surprised and thrilled that he was interested. His questions went well beyond what I'd acquired from my reading and listening. So it was lucky that I could draw on some of my own ideas and reflections.

We strolled out from under the giant trees and made our way along the gravel path to the overgrown and elaborate concrete garden feature called 'The Grotto' which honoured the Virgin Mother Mary. I recall describing to my friend the feeling of the sunshine and the smell of grass and the sound of the earth beneath our feet. These experiences were natural energies and magical powers as far as I could tell. I felt the presence of elves and pixies and fairies and gnomes in the dark corners of the surrounding garden. Indeed, I always approached the Grotto with a certain trepidation, imagining that the three-metre statue of Our Lady was watching me and just might, one day when I wasn't expecting it, turn her stone head towards me and smile. To explain how magic worked in life, the universe and everything, I simply told my friend how magical the world felt the way it was - and that feeling it can make it happen.

My explanations completely satisfied him. I like to imagine they left him a little more thoughtful about the possibilities of reality. It made me feel happy and useful to learn someone else was interested in what I had to share on a subject that was very

close to my heart. That experience as a six year-old is my earliest memory of teaching out of my own reflections on spiritual reality.

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Until I turned sixteen, I'd never doubted the meaning of life, the universe and everything. It was as simple as breathing and as obvious as thinking. Then one sunny autumn day in May, I experienced a dramatic shift. About 11 am it suddenly struck me that until the previous day I'd been absolutely sure what my life was about, yet now I couldn't recall what I was doing here. Nothing external had changed: as I looked around everything was exactly as it had always been. Yet I couldn't remember what it was that made my life meaningful. I felt as though something crucial was missing in life itself; I no longer felt part of it. It was as though reality had unexpectedly skipped a cog while I wasn't watching, and somehow my life had dropped out of sync with the rest of the universe. I'd forgotten my place in the big picture of everything.

Following this bewildering moment, I was certain of two things. Firstly, I was positive that the universe did make sense and life did have meaning; and that there was a place for me in the big picture. I knew this to be true because I remembered - until the day before - understanding the sense and purpose of everything. I'd simply forgotten what it was. Nor did I doubt that somewhere in the back of my mind (just one thought away from consciousness) was the memory of what everything meant, so I wasn't really worried; I was sure it would come back to me.

Secondly, I knew that my own lapse of memory was to blame; it was me who'd forgotten what connected my life to everything else to form a meaningful whole. Since it was my forgetfulness, obviously I was the one who had to do the remembering.

Both these convictions echo my strong Roman Catholic upbringing. The basic lesson I'd learnt from the nuns at my convent school in the 1950s was that God made the universe as an orderly whole and had given everyone and everything (including me) a role in it. On this basis, if I'd forgotten the reason for life in general, and for my life in particular, then it was my fault and it was up to me to fix things (with God's help). Recovering that forgotten meaning became my Holy Grail.

Theologically speaking, that morning in May was my Fall from God's grace. Later, I'd see it from an eastern viewpoint as the moment I awoke to my own forgetfulness and began the journey to enlightenment.

My devoutly Irish forebears expressed their faith through the institutions of the Catholic Church. My parents sent me to the best Catholic schools in Melbourne. From the nuns and priests I learnt a system of concepts and language that enabled me to think and talk about things to do with God. What I didn't learn was how that system of thought and talk related to my own life and actual experience. I had to work out for myself the connection between God-talk and God-realisation. Making that connection became a life-long fascination with divinity.

Although I wasn't aware of it at the time, my lapse on that May morning planted a seed that grew into the major preoccupation of my life. From that morning onwards, I was driven to work out what was going on in my life, and in life as a whole. I didn't initially think of the project in terms of seeking the meaning of life - this kind of language only entered my vocabulary with the arrival of the new millennium.

Nor did it occur to me to refer to Catholic theology. Instead, I embarked on a twenty-year journey of thought, talk and walk before I became comfortable using Christian concepts to communicate my understanding and experience of life. My journey took me through work-sites, coffee shops and university halls in Australia, Melanesia,

Asia, the Middle East and Europe. Scouring 2500 years of mystical teachings from the East and the West, I collected thoughtful ideas and practical expressions to forge into a spiritual philosophy that explains, for me, the meaning of life, the universe and beyond.

This spiritual interpretation of the universe will be familiar to anyone aware of the wisdom common to the world's spiritual traditions of philosophy and religion. What I'm saying simply passes on understandings that were already ancient before anyone imagined writing history. My explanation of the timeless teachings of universal *gnosis* provides new keys to access old-fashioned knowledge. The ideas may seem unusual by the conventional standards of today's thinking. Yet, really, they're old ideas in a new light.

I'm in no doubt that there is a single wisdom within all traditions. I hope to communicate that wisdom. Yet the thing about wisdom is that it cannot be told. As Lao-Tzu wryly observes in the opening line of his gem, *Tao-Te-Ching*: 'The Tao that can be told is not the unchanging Tao.' Hence, we must find wisdom in ourselves before we can recognise it in the world.

If I were to philosophise about my May morning experience, I'd start by referring to the Hebrew story of 'The Fall' of Adam and Eve. This famous tale appears in Chapter 3 of the Book of *Genesis*, a sacred text for the religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The story is told in synagogues, churches and mosques all over the world so it might already sound familiar. I understand it in light of a spiritual philosophy put forward in the middle of the third century of the Common Era (CE) by Plotinus the Egyptian. My interpretation may remind some readers of the kind of thing suggested by Carl Jung, the twentieth-century psychologist.

In brief, the *Genesis* story of The Fall of Adam and Eve tells how God created a pair of human beings and placed them in the best of all possible worlds. They inhabited a paradise that produced life spontaneously and affirmed life gracefully, without any division or effort. The first people lived in an unselfconscious state of pure and innocent Oneness with God and all things. They enjoyed the unity of all existence, including themselves and God. In that primordial state of original innocence, Adam and Eve were completely happy without thinking about it at all.

Then everything changed. Adam and Eve fell out of Oneness with God by adopting a viewpoint other than God's. Rather than intuitively participating in the harmony of God's all-inclusive vision of creation, they became self-conscious. Turning their minds away from God, they relinquished the notion that everything was One. Instead of seeing themselves, existence and God in harmonious unity, Adam and Eve felt alienated, separate from God, and alone.

In the Christian tradition, The Fall from God's grace is said to have been due to 'original sin', which is inherited by people throughout the ages. While such a view may be correct, the *Genesis* story has other significance. Maybe it illustrates in mythic terms how human consciousness develops the commonly glum sense of a fundamental duality between "self" and "other." Through adolescence, the child's unselfconscious experience of inclusive unity gives way to the adult's feeling that the world is made up of many things all distinct and separate from each other and oneself. Perhaps the *Genesis* story contains a hidden lesson for the human spirit. The child's pre-conscious intuition of unity may continue to linger at the edge of the adult's perception of diversity. The yearning to return to the innocence of childhood might actually be a lure for the spirit to transcend the dualities of the ordinary world and find true meaning and happiness by recovering the experience of original unity.

A clue to the spiritual path towards unity may be found in our ordinary experience of self-consciousness, for we know what it is to have a mind. Under encouragement from

great world religions for a couple of years precipitated further spiritual realisations beyond imagination.

I found that reality exists quite apart from our conceptions of it. What we call trees and flowers and mountains and sky and stars all existed long before humans came on the scene. And long after humans disappear and what we see as our sun has suffered the heat-death of entropy, there will still be other bright stars shining their light into the darkness. All things and lives and minds, from the Big Bang to the Big Crunch, are parts of a whole that never dies.

As far as life-after-death goes, all I assume is that others are open to the possibility that, in the future at some stage, they will find themselves enjoying a kind of life-experience that is far beyond the current horizon of their imagination. Whether that new life in the future comes after the death of their present physical body or after the regeneration of their current way of thought, I leave that for others to decide for themselves when they're ready.

The Big Bang is a secular Creation story for our times. From the theory, it follows that nature has been going about her business at least from the first moment that time, space and physical energy came into being almost fourteen billion years ago. Now, here we are, as I see it, like an individual eye of consciousness that has suddenly opened. We wake up and look round to see a universe that's been moving and balancing and growing for a very long time indeed. If we're lucky, we get a one hundred year glimpse of a reality that is more than one hundred million times older than we are. The difference in scale between the individual and the universe is huge. Yet if we're focused on what reality is all about, we can realise the truth of it before we go, God willing. The journey from dust to God is a long time in space but instantaneous in mind.

"No one knows the meaning of life," so young people and others often claim nowadays. Yet this opinion is simply without foundation. The fact is that the meaning of life has been known since time before memory. Everyone is born knowing the meaning of life, just as they are born knowing the sound of their own heartbeat. If you don't know the sound of your heart beating, then it's because you're not listening closely enough. If you don't know the meaning of life then it's because you've forgotten to remember it. If you really want to know what life means then be still and silent, listen and you'll realise.

Yet it's not easy to find stillness and silence in today's world. Consumer, materialist society is a busy, noisy distraction from the inner life where meaning is found. Contemporary culture is a fast-paced race to reap the public rewards of fame, fortune, power, prestige and pleasure. Little time is given to solitary individual pursuits. Yet, the meaning of life is a first-personal experience of enduring connection to a more comprehensive reality. Inner reflection is essential for creating the still, silent space in which to realise whose life it is. Think about it.

Mental healthcare professionals have become deeply concerned about the risk-taking, self-harming, life-threatening activities that increasingly appeal to young people and others. Diagnostically, the need to engage in physically dangerous behaviour points to a deficiency in felt quality of life. Because people don't know the value and meaning of life, they put it at risk. Thrill-seeking produces a rush of adrenaline that speeds up the heart so it beats loud enough to be heard, briefly, above the temporary distractions that otherwise overpower and drown out the simple appreciation of being alive. For a fleeting moment, on the edge of peril, the thrill-seeker feels the value of life. Then the moment of meaning passes. And as the memory of meaning fades, the need to risk it all again arises. We need a much more sound approach to sanity.

It is hardly necessary to threaten life with cessation in order to find its meaning. From earliest times, in all ages and all cultures, wise and holy people have shown the way

to discover the meaning of life. The teachings and writings of the saints and sages of the world's traditions of philosophy and religion are filled with what is essentially the same advice. They consistently affirm that the meaning of life is not a puzzle to be solved but an experience to be enjoyed. To find that experience, they say, seek within stillness and silence.

The present ideas on self-actualisation and God-realisation are based on insights and instructions from the perennial philosophy, or universal *gnosis*, that constitutes the essential wisdom at the heart of all the world's spiritual traditions. These old ideas are presented here in a new light. People in every age must find the wisdom for themselves. Even when the institutions of human society don't obviously help, life still wants to look itself in the eye.

The rest of this book consists of stories from my life and explanations of my philosophy. The stories are arranged chronologically to form a potted autobiography. The reason for telling these particular stories, rather than others, is that they illustrate lessons I've found worth learning. The main lesson is that universal Life is constantly revealing its value, meaning and purpose through synchronistic events in our individual lives, but we often take a while to realise that's what's happening.

The ideas I explain from my philosophy are the best understanding I've gained of who and what and where and why we are. These ideas are based on the succinct convergence of reason, tradition and experience. The balance of content in the following chapters echoes my own journey of understanding. Initially there are lots of personal stories interspersed with some philosophical reflections. Then the chapters are mainly descriptions of philosophy with some personal stories included.

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Three spiritual exercises

Clearing your conscience

In King David's *Psalms* 46 (verse 10) we read: "Be still and know that I am God." To know God, we must be still in our heart and silent in our mind.

Yet, our mind is often restless because of unhappy feeling we have in our heart. Some people feel they are not worthy of God-realisation. Some people feel they do not deserve love. Some people feel themselves to be unforgivable. The last thing some people will let themselves feel is stillness, silence, happiness and the presence of God. Such unresolved negative feelings often act as distractions to our contemplation.

There's no reason not to be happy. Give yourself permission. Do what you need to do in order to clear your conscience of concerns that won't cease bothering you in moments of stillness and silence. Take positive action to dispel negative self-talk. Get on good terms with yourself and others so you can enjoy being present in the unity of life without distraction.

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Breathing God

Jewish Kabbalah teaches that, just as there is a physical environment around our body, so there is a spiritual environment around our soul. Through the practice of "Breathing God" we can tune in on the invisible spiritual world that surrounds and sustains us.

What we breathe is the air of the atmosphere. The English word "atmosphere" derives from the Sanskrit term "atman" meaning "soul" (literally, "breath"). The Hindu

Upanishads teach that soul (atman) is God (Brahman). If atman is Brahman and we are breathing atman (soul), then we are also breathing God.

Think about that while you practice this.

Sit upright with your back straight

Feet flat on the floor

Hands in your lap

Now notice that you are breathing

Feel the steady rhythm of air incoming and outflowing

Breath is life

Think of the air you breathe as "soul-stuff"

As you inhale the soul-stuff of the air, imagine you are breathing in God

As you exhale, imagine you are breathing out God

Just sit and imagine yourself breathing God in and out

Debrief

Did you find the practise easy or difficult to take seriously?

Did you notice any change in your sensory awareness during the practise?

Did you notice any change in your spatial awareness during the exercise?

Did you notice any change in your inner self-talk during the practise?

Did you notice any relation between your body, breath and mind during the practise?

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There and Here

Withdraw in fantasy to some place in which you experienced happiness in the past.

Do not just remember the occasion; enter into fantasy about it. Don't just recall the place from your position here-now; actually relive the event in an active manner, so that you participate fully in it and cease to be aware of your present surroundings.

Use all five senses to enjoy the details of your fantasised place. Make it vivid, with colour, sound, smell, feel and taste. Bring that happy moment alive.

Notice yourself there: what are you doing? how are you feeling? Now return to the present. Notice the details here. How do you feel? Re-enter the previous happiness. Enjoy it. Now return.

De-brief

Do you notice bringing happiness back here with you?

Fantasy is a powerful resource of spiritual energy in our lives. We can tap into it, and we can discover new ranges of freedom and recognise new dimension of ourselves while we become more empowered to conduct our own journey within and beyond the present life.

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About the Author

Nicholas Coleman received his PhD in philosophy of religion in 1990 from the Cambridge University Divinity School for original research into Platonic metaphysics and the mind of God. Dr Coleman is Head of Religious Education at Wesley College, Melbourne; he is a World Religions consultant and deputy director of the Interfaith Centre of Melbourne. His books include *Studies of Religion* (Science Press, 2006), *The Worlds of Religion* (McGraw-Hill, 1999), *The Journey of the Soul* (Leftbank, 1997) and *Perennial Philosophy today* (Leftbank, 1994, 1996).