

ETERNAL QUESTIONS

a Journal of Metaphysics written by
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Black Eagle Stoic Monastery

“to explore the eternal metaphysical questions of our time”

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“Knowing God by Other Means, part 1”

I'm a Stoic philosopher. You may disagree, but that's okay. Stoics are allowed to disagree. We've done it for thousands of years, and we have never stoned, burned, drowned, tortured, beheaded, or hung one another when we disagreed. Regardless of whether you agree or disagree, a Stoic philosopher would certainly be at least these four things:

1. A master of all aspects of Stoic theory, including Stoic Logic, Physics, and Ethics;
2. Knowledgeable about Stoic history and well-read in all the Stoic philosophers and teachers of antiquity;
3. Committed with their lives to the principles and legacy of the Stoa;
4. And, they would teach our philosophy to others.

All these things I have done, so that's all fine and dandy, but I especially want to make a comment on that third requirement—the one about committing my life to the principles and legacy of the Stoa. Yes, I made this commitment many years ago. In addition, I have searched for other discoveries about life in our cosmos in ways that may seem extreme and inappropriate to some of you.

If you become startled and uncomfortable with what I am about to tell you, let me remind you of what Seneca said in Letter 33, passage 11 of his *Letters from a Stoic*:

"Truth will never be discovered if we are content with discoveries that have already been made. Besides, he who follows another not only discovers nothing, but is not even investigating... Those who have made these discoveries before us are not our masters, but our guides. Truth lies open for all; it has not yet been monopolized. And, there is plenty of it left even for posterity to discover."

Please remember this, because what I am about to tell you is NOT the usual study, practice, and investigation of the typical Stoic philosopher. But, what I have done can and should be acceptable. In addition to all of the things a Stoic philosopher should be, I have chosen to go further. I have investigated the subject of God by means other than words printed in books and papers by attempting to investigate God directly. And, as Paul Harvey¹ would say, "Here is the rest of the story."

Empty Sky

By January of 2002, I had quit all of my bad habits, and by October of that year I was restless and felt empty inside. Okay. We're not going to elaborate on my bad habits except to mention that if you're interested, the story about them can be found in my book, *A Monastery of One*, located at the Eternal Questions website. I only mention any of this because it may be useful to know I was not an emaciated hermit living in a Himalayan cave. I was a normal householder living a common life.

Work was going well. I had promoted a couple of times and was now a Senior Probation Officer working in downtown San Diego's Hall of Justice. Married life was excellent. My wife and I had moved to our own house in a better part of town. The Stoic Registry, founded in 1996, was registering Stoics all over the world. My health was good. So, why was I feeling restless and empty inside? Why was what I had accomplished not enough? Because, I didn't need more money or social status; I needed more work on soul evolution. I wanted to understand enlightenment and the mystical experience.

I had read about it, mostly from Walter Stace, Princeton philosophy professor who wrote *Mysticism and Philosophy* (J.B. Lippincott Company, 1960), and I had puzzled over the fragments of Heraclitus, as so many had for millennia before me. I had heard and read the stories of seekers finding a guru in India in the 1960s and 70s, but I wasn't even slightly interested in sitting at the feet of a master. In fact, the very thought of it, then and always, was anathema to me. I had to figure out how to have a mystical experience on my own. That is my nature. My

¹ According to Wikipedia, Paul Harvey Aurandt was an American radio broadcaster for ABC News Radio. He broadcast News and Comment on mornings and mid-days on weekdays and at noon on Saturdays and also his famous The Rest of the Story segments. From 1951 to 2008, his programs reached as many as 24 million people per week.

compulsion to always do it myself can perhaps be best illustrated when I tell you that I have cut my own hair all my adult life. I still do. I wouldn't even know how to behave in a barber's chair.

After reading professor Stace I learned that the methods of the Yogi or Zen master preordain the kind of mystical experience one has. If one practiced long enough and hard enough, enlightenment would be whatever that school said it would be. If I was going to have a mystical experience, I had to find my own, not someone else's. And, unlike the Asian models that guaranteed nothing, ever, just in case I didn't have a mystical experience I wanted at least some practical benefit from all the effort I was about to undertake. At the very least, I wanted some practice that would strengthen the discipline of my will. Because, as every Stoic knows, good and evil are choices of the will.

I've been meditating off and on much of my adult life. While in my twenties, I briefly studied a Hindu technique with the Ananda Marga Yoga Society in Portland, Oregon. Unfortunately, I made the mistake of meditating after my work day and dinner was done, near bedtime. I could never stay awake long enough to get anything out of it. So, I quit. But, from Ananda people I learned about the lotus position, a Hindu yogic sitting technique, and a kind of meditation that could be summed up in a single sentence: Sit still, focus on your breathing, and stop thinking.

Oh, yes. And they said that if my left nostril was plugged I shouldn't meditate that day. Oddly, I've never forgotten that bit of advice. I don't know why the left nostril must be open and clear, but it doesn't matter if the right nostril is plugged. I never asked.

I gave my practice a name, Pneuma Will Power Meditation (PnWPM). I called it "Pneuma" after the Stoic name for the divine breath of the cosmos, and "Will Power Meditation" after the practical benefit I knew I would achieve simply by sitting still, focusing on my breath, and not thinking. With insights based entirely upon that conceptual foundation plus many hours of practice, I gradually became aware of three levels of meditation. Here is a very brief description of these levels that I discovered in my practice.

Level:

1. Will Power, so-called, because it was the most effortful stage and required considerable strength of will even to get into position and begin meditating.
2. Deep Meditation. The aches, pains, and itches were still present, but they were much less troublesome.
3. Ananda. Several months after I began daily meditation, I suddenly and unexpectedly experienced what I later discovered the Hindus call Ananda, or bliss. Ananda is also said to be the *feeling* of God.

I meditated in a room of my house designed and dedicated exclusively to meditation. I called it my monastery. After eight months of daily meditation, on June 16, 2003, I discovered a new level of insight I had never known or heard of. Here's what happened on that day, a Monday, and a work day.

Quoting from notes in my journal:

16 JUN 03: 5:10 AM: after my usual Stick Action Meditation (SAM) exercise on the back porch, I began meditating in the monastery. After about 20 minutes I looked at the clock and decided to continue meditating a little longer.

Sometime between 5:35-5:45, I went deeper than I ever had. I seemed to withdraw from the world through my face. Okay, I don't understand it either, but that's what it felt like. Then, suddenly I was in an empty space. It seemed as if I emerged from a great sea into the sky. It was an entirely empty space and a profound calm. I didn't want to return. In fact, while I was there it was as if I was physically incapable of returning. I remember wondering, "Is this enlightenment?"

I think I could have stayed longer. And even though I'm not used to a half hour in the Full Lotus position, I was in no pain or discomfort. I returned only because I had to get ready to go to work. I didn't think those thoughts, I was just aware of them. Not having a guru or guide to explain any of this, I didn't know if this could be called a mystical experience, but I didn't really care.

Okay. This is important. On the day that it happened, I was neither celibate nor vegetarian; I was not a hermit; I worked at a full-time, demanding job as a Superior Court Officer representing the San Diego County Probation Department; and; the night before this event my wife and I had watched the movie "Training Day," a police procedural story. The reason these details are important is because of what we are often told is necessary, the many extreme forms of fasting and other practices of self-mortification commonly demanded of disciples by their masters.

In other words, mystical insights can be discovered by normal people living normal lives in a worldly culture. You don't have to follow a guru, and you don't have to live on bread and water in a Himalayan cave. But what actually happened in this experience? After several days of thought I entered these conclusions in my journal:

- Empty Sky is the *nothing* we don't know. It is ineffable because it is *para-normal*. In its presence there is a feeling of awe, and a very great attraction.
- The Great Sea from which I emerged is great because it is so vast. It is the universe. The physical world. It is a sea in that every part is connected to

every other part and they combine as the Whole.

- There is something divine about the Great Sea and the Empty Sky; but it must be known that the former is the child of the latter. The Whole is contained by the All.
- The Stoics do *not* relate the Whole to the All as a child to a creator, but that's how I experienced it. That's how it was perceived by some part of my consciousness in very deep meditation.

When I emerged from the Great Sea, I “saw” the Empty Sky. I was unprepared for a concept that was beyond usual human comprehension, because we can't know, or at least I can't know, something so far beyond the structure of human intelligence. Empty sky was the only thing I could think of to call it because that's how it appeared visually—a black emptiness of a sky without sun, moon, or stars or any other defining features. And yet it was a very real presence, a benevolent presence, with a sense of joy in its presence which I felt immediately after emerging from the Great Sea, the physical world. And although my body didn't *leave* the Great Sea, my head, shoulders, and chest were out and above it the whole time.

I have no reason to call the Great Sea a sea other than that's what it seemed to be. I have no reason to say that it represented the material universe, except that's what it seemed to be. In this experience, water was perhaps a superior symbol of the cosmos than fire, because while we are in the Great Sea everything is connected by watery contact. Every part was connected to every other part until all become what Stoics refer to as the Whole.

Joy Love

After the Empty Sky experience, I was motivated to increase my meditation time while sitting in the Full Lotus position, and my right hip became so inflamed it became increasingly difficult to continue. Eventually I had to get medical attention and was diagnosed with acute bursitis.

I thought of quitting meditation altogether, but I couldn't. In two weeks after the bursitis incident my knees began aching so much I couldn't walk. Back to the doctor for more pain pills, and I stopped meditating in the Full Lotus position altogether. Instead, I meditated sitting on a stool feeling sorry for myself. It didn't feel like real meditation at all. I vacillated about quitting meditation entirely or just dealing with the pain.

In about six weeks I was able to resume sitting meditation on a cushion on the floor. I adjusted my seating to the Burmese position (see Internet), which is similar to just sitting cross-legged, but much better. Then, this happened:

On the 18th of September, 2003, about a half hour into deep meditation, I became aware of a "Mona Lisa smile" at the corners of my mouth, then it spread from head to heart. First joy, then love. I was awash in it for about 5 or 10 minutes, maybe more, maybe less, I don't know, but the feeling completely consumed me before gradually subsiding. I didn't know what to make of it. Joy and Love for what? Nothing. There was no reason. Just the experience, the profound feeling. Here's what I wrote about the experience in my meditation journal:

- Joy love has neither ally nor alloy. It is pure and without attachment. It manifests itself as the life force in all things. Stoics would call it Pneuma, but they did not connect it to Love. Love is not a subject that Stoics understood well.
- Great Insight #1, Empty Sky, was a mental construct with a feeling of awe and wonder, while Great Insight #2, Joy Love, was all feeling. There was no environment of any kind for that feeling; the lack of environment was necessary to keep it pure. As a result, every thought I have about its relationship to Empty Sky is hypothetical. Is there a relationship between the two?
- But first, what is Joy Love? It appears to be a natural force or power that generates attraction and procreation throughout the cosmos.
- If Pure Love is the regenerating power of Nature, our God, then it is either an attribute of the Divine, or it is the Divine itself. At the very least we can accurately say that it is an attribute of the Divine, and that's enough. In every way it deserves our respect, even amazement. Think of all it does in the cycles of Nature and in the lives of every creature on Earth.

Anyone who has known the power of great love for any person, place, or thing knows what this feeling is. But, to experience great love without any reference to *anything* is quite extraordinary, and I have never felt such a thing before or since. To me, this pure love suggests that this is like a law of nature, such as gravity. The feeling of pure love was complete in itself. It started, lasted for a while, then ended—not unlike a light turned on for a specific interval, then turned off. There was no residual influence or benefit—so far as I could tell.

Later that morning, I remember sitting on the San Diego trolley on my way to work downtown. I watched all the ways people distracted themselves from having to think about and feel their lives. Smart phones and texting hadn't been invented yet, so people occasionally interacted with one another. A couple of men were talking about the baseball season with the incredible knowledge of dedicated spectator sport fans. It felt strangely odd.

I looked around again at everyone in my trolley car and tried to recreate the feeling of pure love I experienced in that morning's meditation. I thought maybe

it had increased my affection for humanity somehow, but I felt nothing more or less towards them than I usually did. They were all strangers. Their existence today was no more significant than it was the day before.

For ten years I continued meditation without any more mystical insights, but I was encouraged to continue my practice by frequently experiencing the Ananda euphoria (see meditation levels), the *feeling* of God. Then over a period of three years I had four more mystical experiences. More on that in future issues. 13 years after I began my investigation of the mystical experience something changed. I was unable to go deep in my meditations, I stopped experiencing Ananda bliss, and I lost interest in meditation altogether. I didn't know why.

Discourse on the Mystical Experience

In October of 2016, fourteen years after I began meditating to understand the mystical experience, this is what I wrote in my meditation journal:

I'm done. I really don't want to do this anymore. Many times, I think I have just wasted years of my most precious time, free time, in the pursuit of enlightenment. I have had some interesting experiences, yes, but it matters less than it used to, and I'm tired of the tedium of meditation. I rarely have Ananda or even mild euphoria in my practice, and without that motivation it's all just cold silence.

How many more years before I have another insight of any value? Will it take another ten years as it did between Great Insights #2 and #3. If so, then I'll probably be dead. If I'm dead before I have my next insight, then I won't need it anyway, because either my consciousness will continue beyond the grave and I will know what's going on, or my consciousness will die with my body, and I will be entirely without concern.

A disgruntled mystic. I don't like to call myself a mystic any more than I liked to call myself an artist back when I was trying to be an artist. It seems pretentious and, frankly, wrong. Isn't a mystic supposed to be something special? I don't feel special. Most of the time I'm grateful for the Great Insights I have had, but they haven't made me in any way special. Or, if they have, I'm not aware of it.

Would I recommend that others do what I have done? Well, that's too personal. I can't know if someone is going to be more successful than I have been at seeking enlightenment. Some seem to have a real talent for this sort of thing, and I don't feel like I do. So many years. So much effort. . . .

Well, it was my nature, and I did what I could with it. Now, I'm 71-years-old, [this was in 2016, remember] and it seems too late to change. I mean, if I had some

assurance that I could live another 20 years, then, maybe. I don't want to sound like I'm complaining; I'm just tired. Once again, as I have so many times before, I wonder if I should just quit ... I don't lack for comfort or love. I have both in as much measure as I could ever want or need. If I wanted more *things* I would have also had to be busy all the time, seeking and grasping for more and more. But, really, I prefer to sit still and explore the world inside. The older I get the less I care about all the stuff I'm supposed to desire.

Perhaps it's true, as Marcus Aurelius said, that one can find happiness even in a palace, but why would one voluntarily take on such a burden? I can be thankful that having a palace was not my destiny. Marcus often wished he could be what I am, a Stoic philosopher. I have something the most powerful man in the world once wanted and couldn't have: peace and contentment in a cottage far away from those who want you dead so they can have your job.

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And that was that. I was done. Or, so I thought. A few days later my wife handed me a book and told me she thought I might find it interesting. I wasn't really interested. It looked like a load of rubbish, but I decided to give it a quick read, skim through a few chapters, and be done with it. I reluctantly read the first chapter, and my life changed. Again.

^^^

OUTSIDE:

California Scrub Jays

Contact. For some reason, The Boss likes to hop around my bare feet while I'm sitting on the deck. Today, he hopped right up to my left foot and pecked my big toe. I don't know if he thought it was something edible or if he just wanted to say hello and let me know who was boss.

Scruffy finally got up the courage to hop on the table and take a shelled peanut a few inches away from my hand. It took a long time—hopping back and forth on the deck railing, looking at me with one eye, then the other. Finally, it hopped on the table, grabbed the peanut and flew away.

Long Tail, that's what I call the shy one, went for the six shelled sunflower seeds on the deck shelf; and; instead of just grabbing one and flying away it scooped up all six of them before dropping to the ground below.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

Alexander, Caesar, Pompey—what were they beside Diogenes, Heraclitus, Socrates? These last looked at things and their causes and what they are made of; and their master-spirits were cast in one mould. But the others—what a host of cares, what an infinity of enslavements!

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, book 8.3

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For the Readers

The Eternal Questions Journal of Metaphysics is published online monthly by Brother Erikos, a Forest Monk of the Black Eagle Stoic Monastery

<https://stoicmonastery.com>

If you have a question or comment for Brother Erikos go to the Contact page of the EQ website at <https://theEternalQuestions.org> Please state your name, email address, the issue number, and the nature of your question or comment in 200 words or less.

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