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This essay, set out as a Socratic dialogue, discusses the steps we may all have to take if we are to progress along the spiritual path to enlightenment.

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## A DIALOGUE FOR UNIVERSALISTS

by

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## INTRODUCTION

The most superficial glance at history shows the damage done to the world by organised dogmatic religion. For centuries we have been killing and persecuting each other in the name of Christianity and Islam, even of Hinduism and Buddhism, while the fratricidal strife of Muslims and, particularly, Christians shamefully continues. There has, in fact, been a 'religious' element in the great majority of the large scale armed conflicts I have been involved in or know about.

How can this be when the central teaching of Christianity is love, and of Islam (these being the two worst offenders) is of the supremacy of one God whose chief qualities are compassion and mercy? The simple answer is that the teachings of the great masters have been woefully ignored and/or misunderstood by the institutions set up to preserve and promote them. Instead they have perverted them. There have, of course, been exceptions, the mystics who taught the perennial philosophy based on a common experience of the sublime, and smaller groups such as the Quakers with minimal organisation or dogma, who espoused peace; but such as these have been persecuted. On the whole the Buddhists have been the most peaceable and tolerant of the larger religions, but even they are capable of the greatest violence as we have recently seen in Sri Lanka.

I am driven to the conclusion that a 'spiritual' teaching that is separated from its source and imparted by an institution that is structurally secular loses much of its 'spiritual' power - consider, for example, the political and economic apparatus of the Vatican or the Church of England. This, of course, is retained by many godly and dedicated individuals, but there is little they can do to stop the juggernaut of organised religion from crushing and distorting the message of those whose teachings it was supposed to venerate and protect. (I dislike the word 'spiritual' for reasons that will become clear later, but employ it now as I think there is a sufficient vague consensus as to its meaning.)

But what can we do? Can we preserve and

propagate the great teachings of Jesus, the Buddha, the Sufis, the Vedanta, the Native American Shamans, the Hasidim, the fourteenth century mystics of Europe, the seers of our own age, without a structure that will ultimately degrade them as have done the churches, mosques and temples and the great ecclesiastical empires?

I have mentioned the Quakers, who as a Society (how wise to describe themselves thus rather than as a church) have been very successful in this respect. They have an organisation, it is true, but it is relatively simple and non-hierarchical. Those who hold office in the various (probably necessary) committees, do so for a specific period. This is usually three years with possible renewal for another three. Thereafter office-holders who might have had a considerable amount of responsibility, revert to being ordinary members of the Society, back benchers, so to speak. None are paid, except for a small 'civil service' at the various central offices of the Society. As I have said, there is very little dogma, virtually nothing a would-be Quaker 'has' to believe; the 'visitors' who meet those who have asked to be accepted into membership are specifically told that they should not probe the applicant's doctrinal position. More attention is paid to her or his attitude on what are termed 'testimonies'. Perhaps the chief of these is the Peace Testimony, a general rejection of violence as a way of resolving differences.

It is also noteworthy that the core belief of Quakers concerns 'that of God in everyone', a belief that we can look to the Inward Light, the Christ Within, for guidance, and that for this reason our nature is founded in divinity.

Having said this, I must add that Quakerism is not always free of dogmatic discord. There are some, the Universalists, who believe that it is right to look to any wise teacher, of whatever faith, for inspiration. But others are suspicious of anything non-Christian. The latter would maintain firmly that Quakerism is a branch of Christianity, and that Quakers should look only, or at least primarily, to the teachings of Jesus for guidance and instruction. Quakers who hold this view, however,

may find it hard to reconcile Christian teachings on sin, redemption and salvation with traditional Quaker tolerance and lack of dogma. Any reading of Quaker journals will show the strength of feeling yet also the confusion, divisiveness and conflict that these issues arouse.

I most diffidently suggest that the Quakers have suffered from one of their great virtues. Although they believe in the divine authority of inner guidance, they have nevertheless been loath to preach (except when speaking under the compulsion of the Inward Light) or instruct. The young or newly joined Quaker has very much to find her or his own way. This is fine, the effort is certainly salutary. However, I believe there are some disadvantages. For example, the centre of Quakerism is the Meeting for Worship in which people sit in silence unless they feel moved by the Spirit to speak. And yet, in this noise-ridden age when most of us feel threatened by silence, there is little instruction in how to direct thoughts and attention for a whole hour; it is like asking someone to play the piano without ever having had a lesson. This compares strangely with the minute attention given by, for example, the Tibetan Buddhists, to the process and techniques of meditation. This in no sense usurps the role of inner guidance; but is more like the piano lesson that gives us the method of playing but without affecting our choice and interpretation of music. At times of crisis or uncertainty the lack of method coupled with the otherwise admirable absence of doctrinal constraint may lead to confusion and unhappiness.

In the following pages I have tried to set out what I have gleaned from many years of searching and practice, not only with fellow Quakers, but from profound teachers of different faiths in many parts of the world and from different periods of history. All my life and particularly during the last twenty five years I have been absorbed by the great questions of our existence: who are we; what if anything is the nature of the divine; where do we come from and where are we going; what is the nature of evil. Eventually what I had learned began to shape itself into a pattern, a coherent whole. This has opened up what had seemed mysteries; there were still

treasures of truth to be found.

I now feel a strong impulse to share what I have learned. The pattern I referred to is imperfect and incomplete, but it may possibly help some others to put their thoughts together. It does not deal with issues of faith, or morals, or theology, nor does it tell us what we ought to do. It tries instead to show how we work and what we are. It is more a sort of psychology concerned with the somewhat undefined borderland between psychotherapy and pastoral care - such matters as feelings of sin and guilt, the defences of the ego, the nature of wisdom and compassion, levels of awareness, our understanding of our own nature, the widening of consciousness, our perception of reality. It tries to show the inextricable inter-relatedness of all things. This must be understood if we are effectively to resist the disintegrative force of a confused and corrupted society, and of churches that have lost their way.

What I have done is to present a discussion between a teacher and a group of enquirers. The teacher has no name but is always referred to as 's/he', that is she or he, and so can be taken as referring to either a man or a woman. It is, however, written, except in the first instance, as 'she' to avoid an odd-looking text - and because I think of her as a woman! The three or four enquirers are unnamed, but are interchangeably men or women.

## SALVATION, COMPASSION AND WISDOM

S/he asked: "Which of you wants to be saved?"

They all put up their hands. "All right," she said. "Let's look into this. You" - she pointed - "Why do you want to be saved?"

"Because I want to see God," he answered.

She looked at him intently for a few seconds, then laughed. "Fiddle," she said. "But we will go later into what this might mean if you meant it." She pointed to another, "and you?"

"So as to avoid the pains of hell."

"Another question-begging answer," she said. "But a more honest one." She pointed at the third person: "What's your reason?"

"I want to be saved because I assume that if it means anything, it means that one is somehow liberated from faults and limitations that hold us back."

She asked: "Back from what?"

He said: "I suppose from helping others to be saved, too."

"Is that all you would get out of it?" she said.

"Well, I think it would make me happy to be of use to others."

She smiled and said: "And presumably the people you had helped to be saved would be happy for the same reason. So is happiness the motive for salvation? Or is salvation the same as happiness; perhaps in this context bliss would be the better term."

He said: "I'm not sure. But I do know I'm upset by all the unhappiness I see around."

She looked at him gravely and said: "I am sure you are. Concern at the suffering of others, the burning desire for their happiness, is of course called compassion. Real compassion, not just sentimental or conventional dislike

of misery is one of the greatest human qualities. It's not only *useful*; it is the measure of our inner evolution, it is the essence of love, it is the first of the great attributes ascribed by Muslims to Allah."

One of them said: "We were talking about salvation. Are you saying that when we are sufficiently compassionate we are saved? I feel compassionate about all sorts of things. Am I saved?"

She said: "I don't know. In fact the usual idea of salvation as our highest spiritual objective is not something I am very interested in."

He answered: "If that's so, why did you ask if we wanted to be saved?"

She said: "Because I thought it might lead to a constructive discussion. Being saved has become a catchword that actually blocks our understanding of reality. It absolves us from genuine psychological enquiry. I'm OK, we say, and smugly leave it at that. So I thought it would be useful if we looked at the idea seriously. If we concluded that it was useless, and why, we might more easily discover what was genuine and useful."

"Do I take it that you substitute compassion for salvation?"

"Yes, partly. But there is a difference between the way we tend to think of the two things. According to popular theology we are either saved or we aren't; no one is partly saved. But compassion is like any other quality such as friendliness or politeness; we have it in degrees varying from a lot to a little, and the degrees alter according to the circumstances. We all have some compassion, but we could all have a great deal more."

She then added: "But to achieve enlightenment, which comes closest to the concept of salvation, something else is needed."

One asked: "How do we increase our compassion?" and at the same time another asked: "What is the other thing you referred to?"

She said: "The other thing is wisdom. It is by rightly applying our wisdom that compassion develops."

They asked: "What do you mean by wisdom?"

"What do you think I mean?"

They suggested: "The knowledge gained by studying philosophy and the scriptures?"

She laughed and said: "There's no harm in that, provided you do so sceptically and realise that much of what you read is misleading. Any more ideas?"

One said: "What about our teachers? Do they not teach us wisdom?"

"Who are your teachers?" she asked.

"You are, for one," they answered.

She said: "Oh, no, I'm not. I am a mirror. I reflect back to you what is already within you. I know nothing that you don't know, but in reflecting it back I make it easier for you to know what you know: wisdom is recognising what you knew all along. Basically, you are your own best teachers. When you realise that, you won't need people like me."

One said: "Well, you are certainly helping us now. But I would rather like to think it's not all one sided. Isn't there some way in which we can be of use to you?"

She paused, then said: "You are quite right. I realise that what I said, have been saying, sounded arrogant; perhaps it was - the ego certainly pushes itself in. In fact we all, always, need each other, though in different ways, as we develop."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well," she said, "at this moment I can make you more aware of some things about *yourselves*, but at the same time you make me more aware about some things about *myself*. You have just done so; thank you."

She said nothing for a few moments, then continued

quietly: "But as we go further with these exchanges, this *sharing*, we shall become more free of misconceptions and thus closer to our own and each others' essential individuality. We shall really be able to exchange the gifts of ourselves. So if I seem to talk like a bossy know-all, please forgive me."

They all smiled.

Then one said: "If I may go back a little - you mentioned wisdom. What does it really mean? Can you say a bit more about it, please?"

She laughed and said: "Sorry. It might mean anything, mightn't it? I mean understanding of the nature of reality."

He also laughed and said: "That's not much better. The reality of what?"

She asked: "What do you think?"

"Life?"

She smiled, saying: "You are being just as imprecise as I was."

"Well," he said, "what about objects, people, events?"

She said: "Fine. Phenomena. Happenings of every sort, things - everything, one might say. Now obviously a cabbage, a baby, a machine, a parliamentary election, a school, an elephant, a war, a dream, a philosophical system have, at one level, very different realities. Of course we all know about these differences, and if we want to know more we can look them up in the encyclopaedia. *But it is when we understand the reality they possess in common that we have wisdom.* What do you think it is?"

They looked at each other and talked quietly together for some moments. Then one said: "We are afraid we don't know at all."

She said softly: "Don't worry. That's not surprising, because to answer the question you have to turn your

usual way of thinking upside down."

"Well," said one, "all *things*, like the cabbage and the baby are formed of molecules and atoms which break down further into sub-atomic particles, but what can they have in common with philosophical systems and dreams?"

She said: "Let's start with the things. You are right to mention molecules and the rest. But what do those forming a baby and an elephant have in common? What are babies and elephants?"

"Is it that they are mammals?"

She said: "They are both mammals, of course, but supposing I had said salmon and wasp, which aren't?"

"Living things, then?"

She said: "No, because I could equally have said a chair and a stone."

They laughed and said: "We give up."

"All right, I'll make it a bit easier for you. You know that matter and energy are interchangeable and that at the sub-atomic level there is constant flux, but that the pattern of the object seems to the observer to remain more or less the same. The baby grows, of course, or the stone may be worn away or chipped, but they both *look* unchanged from moment to moment. However much the atoms alter, they constitute a pattern of interaction which maintains a particular appearance. Together they constitute a *system*, a superficially stable system of interaction."

One spoke excitedly: "Now I see the link with the events and the philosophies. They are systems too. Any event is the product of interacting happenings. If it's the war you mentioned, it results from the interaction of an enormous number of elements - historical, economic, political - and of the character and aspirations of leaders. Geography and natural resources also play their part in the inter-relationship that leads to conflict. Any event, I suppose, is the product of the coming together of an

infinite number of strands."

"Great," she said. "What next? What about the philosophy?"

He continued: "Well, what Plato or Wittgenstein formulated derives from an interaction of the culture they grew up in, their teachers, what previous philosophers thought - for example, Plato influenced Wittgenstein if only by offering something for him to argue against - and whatever they brought to their work, such as their genes and the family that laid the basis of much of their character. So each philosophy, from the simplest to the most sophisticated, is a system built out of an enormous number of intellectual, social and biological elements."

She asked: "How about the stone?"

He said: "I think it's the same, but the factors are geological, chemical and climatic. For example, basalt is the product of volcanic action, but there must be other conditions too, and of course there must be a concatenation of conditions which lead to the volcanic action - and they are a part of it too."

She said: "You've got the idea very well. But there's yet another thing. Look again at the stone, philosophy, war, baby and so on. What do these conclusions lead you to think about them?"

"That they are dependent on other things; that these other things and happenings are a part of them. And then I suppose it follows that everything I had thought of as having a quite separate identity is in a sense a part of a whole lot of other things."

She said: "Yes, and we can take that a step further. The baby, for example, is not simply the product of its parents, the air it breathes, what it eats and so more remotely of the people who make the baby food and the people who invest in the baby food company, and the people who produce the mother's food if the baby is breast fed - it is something much more; it is one of the elements contributing to the being of all these others, the stone, philosophy, war and so on, and to the events

and happenings of *their* beings. They are all a part of each others' existences."

They said: "It's difficult to realise that we are not just self-contained creatures, but the product of and interacting with so many others. But where does it end? How far does this web of interdependence spread?"

She asked: "How far do you think?"

They said: "Well, the way you put it, it could be infinite."

She said: "Yes, and it is. We mentioned systems a few minutes ago. That is precisely what we are talking about now: a system in which everything, but everything, in the world is included - and who knows perhaps beyond, but let us settle for what our present knowledge can cope with."

One said: "Could you explain that a little more?"

She said: "Certainly. Let me give you an illustration. First, did you have coffee for breakfast today?"

They all said that they had.

She said: "Good. Well have you ever thought what effect your harmless addiction has on the world? Firstly, it probably keeps a population of hapless peasants in poverty-stricken servitude to oppressive landlords somewhere in Central America. These, together with their equally oppressive governments, are equally in servitude to the rich nations that really control their economies. But it is all very precarious. The price of coffee may change on the world markets; economies which largely depend on one such cash crop are often ruined - and of course the peasants suffer most of all. It's precarious, too, because the peasants may become desperate and rebel. The coffee may no longer be harvested, and the country again be bankrupted. What does this do to the stability of the region, to the hemisphere? Does conflict become more probable; do the states speed up their arms purchases? What effect does this have on international relations and of course on the global economy? We can only be sure that there will be some effect."

Someone said: "You seem to be saying that all these elements only interact to worsen the situation."

She answered: "No I don't want to give that impression. I'm simply saying that everything does act on everything else. Sometimes it appears that the result of this interaction is undesirable, sometimes that it is desirable. But even if we are able to make such a judgement, it can only apply to immediate observable consequences. But the ripples from any event will spread to the shores of eternity, far beyond our knowledge or recognition. Some will be what we might consider 'good' and some 'bad' - but what we might mean by those words is something we will discuss later."

"Now I simply want to make the point that your decision to drink or not to drink coffee, will have repercussions that go right around the world. These will in turn affect you and you will respond to them in a manner that contributes to yet a further cycle of events, and so on ad infinitum."

"I don't quite understand the last point."

She said: "Supposing some economic issue related to coffee growing or selling triggers off a war, you might become involved. You might fight in it; your investments might lose or gain value. These and similar things might alter the course of your life in unimaginable ways, pleasant and creative or unpleasant and destructive. But this is surely just a matter of common sense, isn't it?"

They agreed, but one said: "You make it all sound very straightforward, even mundane."

She said: "In a sense it is. I wanted you to see that so that you could the more easily understand the aspects which are very subtle and, to our normal experience, very mysterious. Oddly enough, however, some of these are based on scientific discoveries. For example, if certain particles of the same atom are separated and one of them is made to rotate in a different direction, the other will also change direction, even if it is thousands of miles away. Likewise, to illustrate on a minute scale

what we have been discussing globally, all the particles in a field of force are in a state of constant interaction, affecting each other in a manner that is in detail unpredictable.

"Now then, if that's settled," she went on, "let's get back to something else fundamental. Wisdom. That's where this particular part of our discussion began. Do you have a better idea of the wisdom which I mentioned as being the partner, so to say, of compassion?"

One said: "It has to do with the fact that we are not entirely separate entities but are the product of a large number of interacting factors."

She agreed. "Quite right. And all these factors, since they are subject to the same conditions as we are - or as all things are - are constantly changing. Consequently we are always changing too; the idea of permanency is an illusion."

One said: "So recognition of the impermanency of all things, stones *and* philosophical theories, is wisdom."

"Yes, indeed, it is an important part of it. But to recognise impermanency and to recognise that we are interdependent rather than separate entities, may lead us to a further conclusion. Can you imagine what it is?"

One said: "It seems to me that if all this is correct, we are bound to see everyone and everything, including ourselves, somehow differently . . ." his voice trailed off.

"Yes," she said encouragingly. "And what next?"

He continued with some hesitation: "It must mean that the concept of 'I' must change, and also obviously, of 'you' and 'it'. I think of myself as being me, something self-existent, an entity in its own right. Now I see - intellectually, at least, even if I can't actually *feel* it - that this idea was false and led to all sorts of negative thinking and acting."

Another said: "Yes, I agree, and it makes me very uneasy. It seems I wasn't what I thought I was; I'm



nothing, I'm unreal."

She smiled sympathetically and said: "I know how you feel. However, you have only understood a part of the pattern. There is no suggestion that you, or for that matter the stone, the elephant, the baby, or any of the other things we have been discussing, don't exist. You and they obviously do; others can recognise you. What doesn't exist, what is an illusion, is the sense of I that you had, or the belief in the permanence and separate-ness of the stone, etc. Shall I try to demonstrate that before trying to discover what you in fact *are*?"

They nodded.

"Try and think," she said, "where your I-ness resides. Is it in any particular part of your body? It would be absurd to claim that it was, for example, in your right big toe. But what about your head, your brain? But is that more important - some would say it wasn't - than your heart? Or is it perhaps your body as a whole? If your body, or any part of it, is you, your I, then what about your thoughts, your feelings, your loves, fears and so on? Are they not as much or more a part of you than your body? But your body changes, it grows old, it gets sick. Is a body with Alzheimers disease which affects both body and, through the body, the mind, the same you as you are now without it? Is there any aspect of your being of which you can say with confidence, 'that's I, the essential I'?"

"But without anything so drastic as Alzheimers, is the you I'm talking to now the same as the one that woke up this morning, or yesterday? Think of yourself in different settings, with people you know well and love, people to whom you are indifferent, people you want to impress, people you are afraid of, people who share your interests and those who don't, when you are happy or when you are miserable. Are you the same person? Are your hopes, fears, longings, anxieties, degree of happiness or misery the same in all these circumstances? Look back one, five, ten, twenty years - were you then the same person in all these respects? Who is your I, where is

your I? Is there any persisting core of I-ness? We all like to think there is, a 'real I' (who is usually rather nice). But are we kidding ourselves? Think about it. Watch your 'I' changing and shifting for the next day or two and then we will discuss it again.

"In the meantime, however, let's provisionally think about how you might consider yourselves if what you have always thought of as I, your identity, is a fraud, or at best something impermanent and constantly shifting."

He laughed and said: "Thanks, this non-I was beginning to get worried."

She said: "Ah, well. There's nothing to be worried about when we realise the I, the ego, doesn't exist. The only trouble is that we constantly forget, or almost forget that we know this. So much so that we don't know that behind, below, beneath, beyond that I, with its puling fears and quirks and conceits - nothing personal, you understand - is your real nature.

"And your real nature," she said, "is perfect, complete, capable of so much more than you dream, continually creating - and," she added with a smile, "nothing personal about that either."

"Gosh," he said.

"Gosh indeed," she said. "You are, I am, we all are what the Christians call the Ground of Being, the Buddhists the Buddha Nature, the Sufis call Al-Haqq or the True, the Hindus call Atman; we are an active part of a much greater life. That is what we are in the eyes of eternity, but to our own eyes, through the distorting lens over our eyes, we are very different."

"But I thought you said that we were a sort of patchwork of different forces and influences having no central essence."

She said: "That's right, too. Confusing, isn't it? It's quite correct that we are this patchwork, this shifting pattern of interactions, but the patchwork forms what could be thought of as a prism. This retains a certain

stability because some of the components, such as the genes, are more durable than others. It's because of this that we can recognise people we haven't met for a long time; they have changed, both in appearance and attitude, but enough traces of the past remain.

"Each of us is a prism through which shines the light of the eternal and universal reality." She spoke very seriously. "Because the components of each prism are necessarily different we each bring a different gift to the totality of which we form an element; the light is refracted differently through each one of us; and being refracted, is part of us. The wonderful paradox is that the light is everywhere the same. It is the ground of our being; it is what binds us together in the essential unity of all things. Yet everywhere it is manifested differently, a miracle of unity in diversity; we are one, yet each of us has individuality."

She looked around the group. She said: "And now can you tell me why gaining wisdom is indispensable to the growth of compassion?"

One said: "Because the more we understand the nature of things the more we can understand and sympathise with human suffering."

She said: "True. The more we see how things really are, the more we see how painful and confusing ignorance can be. Is there anything else?"

Another said: "Is it because when we understand that ego desires and fantasies are based on illusion, our selfish preoccupations that get in the way of compassion for others get weaker?"

She nodded.

## WHAT HAS GONE WRONG?

One said: "You gave us a picture of the splendour of our essential nature, yet throughout history we have been guilty of such terrible things, so much violence, cruelty, oppression leading to such fearful suffering. How can you explain the inconsistency between what you portray as our real nature and the horrors all around us?"

"How indeed," she said. "This is the rock on which so much theological and philosophical speculation has foundered. The Christians come up with the terrible idea of original sin."

One asked: "Why terrible?"

"Why? Because it's insulting to God - whatever we consider she, he or it to be - to impute to her such vindictiveness; it has no scriptural justification, anyway, coming from Augustine not Jesus. And because believing in our innate badness is a terrible psychological handicap; guilt, as I have already said, is the source of both pain and destruction.

"Nevertheless," she continued. "it is obvious that we do have a potential for bad behaviour. I must emphasise, however, that having this *potential* does not mean that our *nature* is bad. It is just that we don't possess the absolute wisdom that would ensure right action. I think that if the concept of original sin means anything, it is that while we are acquiring wisdom and the capacity for compassion, we make mistakes."

One said: "Then the light of the universe shining through the prism doesn't preserve us from error. Why is that?"

She said: "I've no idea. But perhaps the implied freedom and the potential for growth and evolution depend on, and are more important than, the potential for mistakes. And it's not difficult to imagine how these arise."

One asked: "How, then?"

She answered: "Well, I imagine that all of us, each human and each insect, all living things, have found

ourselves immediately at risk on entering the world as apparently separate beings. And these beings, these prisms, are in fact under constant threat of destruction - by other beings, by hunger, thirst, and natural calamity of all kinds. It may be this that focuses our superficial intelligence on danger and self-protection, which are the very obvious things that separate us, rather than the much subtler ones that unite us. And no doubt, after countless millenia of reacting in this manner the illusion of separation has become universal and almost irresistible."

One asked: "How do we know that this feeling of separation isn't true?"

She said: "Because the many wise people, all our great teachers of truth, have found the same thing whatever their culture: if they can pierce the illusion, they discover a unitary reality. The sense of separation drops away."

There was a short silence. Then she continued: "But it's wasteful to spend time on this sort of speculation. Our main task is to identify the illusion of separate self, of 'I', of ego or whatever we prefer to call it and to see how it affects our thinking, feeling and behaviour."

"You will remember," she continued, "the early part of our discussion. Beginning with the pump-priming idea of salvation, we then identified the quality of compassion as being what we should strive for instead of some nebulous salvation, and wisdom as being the quality most needed to help us. We spent quite a time discussing wisdom, or rather the picture of reality we acquire as we gain wisdom. This is essentially a realisation that all things, living or to our senses not living, are one, interconnected, and have no separate existence of their own; that we and all around us constitute an enormous boundless system in which all elements are constantly interacting with all others. If one changes, all change."

One said: "I accept all that. I know with my understanding that it is correct, but I can't *feel* it."

She said: "Don't worry. Intellectual understanding is a

good start as long as you aren't satisfied by it. When you meditate on it it will become increasingly real to you, you will in fact *realise* it."

"We haven't talked about meditation yet."

She smiled and said: "I repeat, don't worry; we shall. Now let's consider how ignorance, the lack of knowledge of how things really are, the lack of wisdom, leads us to violent, destructive, uncompassionate feelings and actions."

Here she paused. Then, looking at them, she said: "Would any of you like to make a start?"

One said: "Perhaps our false sense of separation makes us feel lonely."

Another said: "Perhaps we are somehow dimly aware of being deluded, of not acting in accord with our real nature, and so feel guilty."

The third said: "Yes, and in consequence we try to compensate for the loneliness and guilt. Like everything done in a state of illusion, this leads to something bad."

She said: "Great. I think that's all very helpful. One point, however, is that I would not speak of things being bad, or for that matter good. This implies a dualism which is unhelpful and a type of judgement that is not for us to make. The Buddhists use the term 'unskilful means' - that is to say, impractical means of seeking enlightenment - to describe 'bad' behaviour. However, we won't discuss that now. For the present we should concentrate on how people like us respond to lack of wisdom and to the loneliness and guilt you have mentioned. What do we do?"

One said: "You have already said that we have a wrong sense of 'I'. I suppose what we try to do is to create an 'I', an ego, which will counteract the loneliness and guilt."

"Very good," she said. "And how would this work?"

He said: "It would be a false identity, something aimed at convincing its owner that he was not as bad (I suppose

I may use the word in this context), unloveable, or as inadequate as he thought."

She said: "That's quite right, but because we all bring such diverse qualities, such a complex social, psychological, genetic, etc. mixture to the formation of our personalities, the products will be very different. We all have different ideas of what will make us attractive, appealing or impressive. Often we little know that they will have the reverse effect on those we want to influence, but of course the person we most want to impress is ourself. We want to look at our image in the mental mirror and say 'this is good'."

One asked: "Is this false identity consciously constructed?"

She answered: "Only partly. For example, in writing about themselves when applying for a job, people only mention details which they think will show them in a favourable light; they don't mention that they seldom brush their teeth or are addicted to picking their noses. On the whole, however, our self-image, the ego, is built unconsciously from a vast variety of sources - compensations for 'forgotten' pains and humiliations in childhood or fears of loss and abandonment; pride in family or culture, particular achievements, particular skills, one's appearance, one's career and the posts one has held. These are things that support and give comfort in times of threat or stress. 'I'm not so bad', one thinks, hoping that others will think the same."

One asked: "How efficient are these false identities in shielding us from the sense of inadequacy and ill-doing?"

She said: "Well, what do you think?"

"Not very efficient, otherwise I would never suffer from worry or depression."

She laughed and said: "Join the club. But seriously, they are efficient up to a point in their own very fallible and illusory context. Most of us rely on them to keep us on a more or less even emotional keel. If something happens to upset or worry us, the false identity immediately

comes to the rescue with some reassurance and we feel better. It's only when the threat is so great that we can't counter it, that we fall into a genuine depression; but this only happens when the defences of the ego are seriously undermined."

"How does that happen?"

She said: "It happens when something which was a key element in the false identity is gravely jeopardised. Suppose, for example, that the core of a man's identity is his professional eminence, but he is forced to retire because of malpractice and is now not only rejected by those who previously respected him, but has no other interests or abilities strong enough to restructure his ego: he suffers what is called a breakdown. I am sure you all know comparable cases."

One of them said: "That's an extreme example, but it seems to me these mechanisms are always somewhat in jeopardy. If we are good at tennis and our skill is built even slightly into our false identity, and we lose a match we had expected to win - well, we feel a bit unhappy."

Another said: "Yes, and I feel the same if one of my poems is harshly criticised. I really feel as though it were *me* that was, in a quite fundamental sense, being assaulted. My sense of security feels threatened, and my misery becomes quite unreasonable and really ceases to have anything to do with the poem."

A third said: "I can see that this false identity may be OK while the going is good, but that it can easily break down and make things much worse than they need be."

She said: "That's right. However, I would also like to say that we do not operate entirely or constantly on this level. The real identity which is clear and universal is always there too. We only need to be aware of its presence. Even when we make no conscious effort to do this, it will often modify destructive impulses of the false identity, guiding us to act with common sense based on experience. And then at times of crisis, it may

virtually take over; we find ourselves acting with great precision and power and doing the right things spontaneously. By comparison, the false identity may be thrown completely off balance by the unexpected, simply flailing around for solutions in a state of muddle and confusion."

One said: "I can see that the ego, false identity or whatever we call it, is basically unrealistic, but I don't see that it's really the source of all evil, as you seem to be portraying it."

She said: "Just remember its function: it has been constructed to make us feel good, strong, and safe in the face of threats from guilt, loneliness, the feeling of being unlovable and worthless. We pile up all the attributes and achievements we feel we can lay claim to, in order to counterbalance the bad things we dimly sense about ourself, our inadequacy, unworthiness, badness. The inner, unspoken argument goes like this: 'If I have/am all these *good* things, how can I be bad?' Now what are the things most likely to give this reassurance?"

One answered: "Anything that makes us feel that we are not only good, but better - in one way or another, or at one thing or another - than other people."

She said: "You mean something that enables us not only to keep up with the Joneses, but to feel *superior* to them?"

He said: "Yes, that's it. And these may be all sorts of things according to individual tastes and interests; they could be moral qualities or physical ones or social ones or artistic abilities or intellectual achievements . . ."

Here another interrupted: "All those certainly, but surely the ones that could cause most damage are to do with the search for power, possessions and position as a 'proof' of virtue. These are all too common and can lead to violence and oppression, envy and jealousy."

She said: "I found the way you put these points very helpful. Thank you. What you have said leads me to mention something that ties some of these things together."

## THE THREE POISONS

She said: "The Tibetan philosopher-psychologists who stress the importance of wisdom, equally stress the unsatisfactory effects of its opposite, ignorance. When we are unaware of, or turn our backs on, reality - the interdependent origin of all things including ourselves and the essential goodness of our nature - all sorts of unfortunate things follow. Would any of you like to discuss this?"

One said: "We have just been talking about it, haven't we? Surely the false sense of 'I', the false identity, is one consequence?"

She said: "Of course, you are quite right. But I just want to see if it can be expressed in another way which will help us to take the argument further."

"Do you mean," he asked, "that the ignorance that leads to the false identity also thereby creates desperate craving and longing for whatever it is that strengthens that identity?"

She said: "Precisely. It creates attachment to and yearning for things that can never really satisfy."

Another said: "Why can't they satisfy? If I'm hungry and have a good meal, I'm satisfied."

She laughed and said: "Only for a few hours, though. But no, the sort of craving I am talking about can only ultimately be assuaged by dissolving the false identity and the ignorance in which it is rooted. There has to be an inner change of balance. We have to reach a point where we no longer need to be convinced that we are good because we *know* that we are: not in a cocky way, you'll understand, but because we are aware of the total goodness of the ground we share with all beings."

One said: "I remember as a child thinking that if I had some toy, I would be happy for ever. But then, when I had had it for a few days, I suddenly felt miserable."

She asked: "And what happened then?"

He said: "Believe it or not, although I was only five, I realised what you have just been saying: that real happiness only comes from inside."

Another said: "When I was starting my professional career, my ego got a terrific boost the first time I was asked to give a radio talk. The second time it was much less, and the third time I treated it quite casually. I realised this and wondered a little anxiously whether throughout my life I would need ever-increasing doses of stimulus to get the same satisfaction."

She said: "That just shows, doesn't it, how terribly destructive the false identity can become when it is focused on wealth or power?"

She went on: "So we have ignorance leading to desire, longing, wanting, yearning, needing - all these not just to satisfy reasonable personal or family needs, but *ego needs, identity needs*, needs based therefore on fantasy and illusion. And what do these lead to?"

One said: "To competitiveness, I suppose."

She asked: "And what emotions accompany competitiveness?"

He said: "Envy and jealousy probably."

Another added: "I would say dislike and hatred when we lose out or are frustrated, or fear that we might be."

She said: "Correct. And anger and other related feelings, like irritation and resentment. And what do these lead to in turn?"

Several suggested various consequences such as war, disputes, quarrels and other unpleasant exchanges. But she was awaiting a response which no one gave. So she said: "Of course what you are saying is right, but there is one particular consequence that perpetuates a cycle of misery: hatred and all those similar emotions simply strengthen ignorance."

One said: "How is that?"

She said: "I'm sure you know the phrase 'blind with anger'. When we are feeling great dislike of another person, we cease to see them as they are. We see a distorted picture of them, a picture we have made ourselves. One of the first things that happens when a war breaks is that we demonise our enemies. Forgetting all the good things we knew about them, we transform them into cruel and bloodthirsty devils. Especially we *forget that they are us; that we share the eternally divine nature with them.*"

After a pause, she went on: "Ignorance, craving and hatred and the related emotions, are what the Tibetans call the Three Poisons. In Tibetan iconography they are depicted as a cock, a pig and a snake endlessly circling around biting each others' extremities. Of the three, ignorance, lack of wisdom, is considered the worst by a short head since the others usually flow from it, but they are interconnected and inseparable, a genuine vicious circle."

One said thoughtfully: "It seems to me that our civilisation is dominated by institutions conforming to the principles of the three poisons. Most religions tell us that we are bad or that people of other faiths are bad and a number of political 'religions' have done the same; our economic institutions pander to the craving for power and possessions and I see why the taking of interest used to be forbidden; and our military institutions, armies, intelligence agencies, the armament industries are a crystallisation of hatred and fear."

Another added: "It is small wonder that growing up in the shade of such institutions we should lack wisdom."

The third said: "If that's so, it looks as if the cards are really stacked against us. Is there anything we can do?"

She said: "Yes, there certainly is, otherwise there would be no point in our meeting and talking. We can develop our awareness."

## AWARENESS

She said: "Everything depends on awareness or, as it could equally be called, being awake or more conscious or recollected or mindful - I prefer awareness only because it comes from a root implying watchfulness. This is highly appropriate: Jesus urged his disciples saying 'watch, I tell you'. Its opposite is being asleep, in a coma, fuddled with drink or drugs, day dreaming. In general we are *unaware* most of the time - not that we are perpetually drunk or asleep, but we are absent-minded - *the mind is absent*. Or we are thinking about what we are going to do tomorrow while we are automatically, in a machine-like manner, doing something today."

One said: "I find it hard to believe we are so unfocused."

She said: "Do you? It is the most difficult thing in the world to keep the mind intently on what we are doing, whether it's washing up the breakfast dishes or doing a scientific experiment. Let me tell you a story.

"St Francis was travelling with his donkey when he fell into conversation with a fellow voyager. They got onto the topic of prayer and Francis said he found it very difficult - for the reason we are discussing; he couldn't keep his mind on the prayer. The other man said he had no such problem. 'All right,' said Francis, 'If you can recite the Lord's prayer and honestly tell me at the end that your thoughts never strayed for a second, I'll give you this donkey.' The man laughed and said: 'The donkey is as good as mine.' He started to recite: 'Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come . . . ' then he broke off and said: 'Will you give me the saddle too?'"

They all laughed.

She went on: "You see, we are in part automata and indeed we have to be. Our bodily organs function unconsciously and as babies we also learn to perform, without thinking, countless operations, from simple things like feeding or dressing ourselves leading up to complex

adult skills like driving a motor car. If every time we wanted to put on socks or drive a car we had to think out and practise the process, life would be impossible. But being aware doesn't mean that we have to be thinking about how we spike a piece of food on a fork and lift it to our mouth; it means *knowing what is happening and that we are at this moment letting the machine do the work*, that we have, so to speak switched onto the automatic pilot. But we usually do not do this. We are like the driver of a car who has handed over control to the car and gone to sleep. There may be some electronic device that will cope with normal situations, but it cannot be programmed for all emergencies; sooner or later, unless we wake up and resume control, there will be a crash.

"In our lives there are countless situations that urgently demand awareness, particularly those that involve human relations or moral judgement. But too often we respond to them automatically with responses to which we have been conditioned by past experiences, especially those of childhood. I could perhaps make a loose comparison: we feed information into the data bank, a particular set of circumstances, then presses the retrieval key and out comes a standardised response which may be quite unsuitable. If, for instance, we have developed the habit of responding to any frustration with aggression, we may immediately get into a quarrel. But possibly what is really required is understanding of what caused the frustration so that it can be altered or removed."

One said: "I am not sure that I really understand the difference between being aware and not being aware."

She said: "It's to some extent one of degree. If you have had too much to drink you may laugh at silly things, get angry at fancied slights, talk tactlessly. If so, you are being dominated by machine-like responses which have no relevance to the situation, of which you are largely unaware. If you have drunk less, you will do this to a lesser extent. And in your sober moments you will wonder how you came to behave in that way,

realising that you perceived everything through a sort of muzzy mental mist. But this doesn't only happen when you are drunk. It happens to most of us to some extent most of the time. Consider how you can carry out all the operations required to get you out of bed, dress, wash, have breakfast, travel to work without *really* being conscious. The machine takes over and your mind is off somewhere else, thinking about the day that lies ahead, what you will have for supper or watch on the television, or whatever. A friend of mine driving to work in this manner, woke up, so to say, to find he had arrived somewhere else!"

He laughed, and said: "Yes, I remember the same sort of thing happening to me. I took a bus instead of walking as I had intended and when someone asked me what I had had for breakfast, I couldn't remember. I had in a sense been asleep ever since I had woken up."

Another said: "What can we do to be more aware, more mindful?"

She said: "One of the more helpful things is to break the bad habit of unawareness by the good habit of trying to be aware. But it's very hard to be mindful enough to do it. This is why monastic orders, Christian or Buddhist, have regular routines. Everyone stops whatever they were doing several times a day to pray or meditate even if only for a few moments. In some places church bells ring at particular hours to remind people to pray, which of course is to be mindful of God, but if one is mindful of God, one is also mindful of, aware of, the higher parts of one's own nature. For partly the same reason people say grace before meals - and in fact the brief moment of calm recollectedness (if we are not too obsessed with the anticipation of food) is also good for the digestion.

"There was a time," she went on, "when I used to practise awareness as I walked to work. I was discouragingly bad at it. Every so often I would awake to find I had gone half a mile completely unaware of anything around me, not really seeing it although my eyes had rested

on it, absorbed by the pointless rambling of my mind following up a series of associations. But when I did become suddenly conscious, it was as though the light had been switched on. Everything seemed to be brighter, more alive. I saw things my eyes must have rested on a hundred times, but that I had never consciously noticed."

One asked: "When you say you practised awareness, what exactly did you *do*?"

She smiled: "A good question. I tried to be conscious of my whole being, how my body felt, how my mind felt, who I was in the sense of living interdependently with all other beings and yet being unique. I tried to hold these realisations as long as I could."

Another asked: "Are you saying that to be aware means to be simultaneously aware both of yourself and the divine, whatever that is."

She said: "Yes. The divine I believe is the All, the Everything in which we are all joined. We are truly and fully alive to the extent that we are aware of it."



## NON-DUALISM

She said: "To the extent that we are aware, we are not only aware of ourselves, although that is how it may seem. We actually see everything with a different vision."

One said: "Can you describe it?"

She said: "I have already said that things seem to be more alight, more full of life. We are also struck with their wonder and beauty. We see them as they really are, aspects of the universal, not through the distorting lens of our deluded sense of self, the false identity. The ugly products of the three poisons fade into insignificance beside the new vision of reality."

He said: "Does that mean that we should pay no attention to the violence, the injustice and sufferings of the world?"

"No. On the contrary. We become even more conscious of these, but recognising that they don't represent the ultimate nature of things, we are not overwhelmed by them; we are not prevented from enjoying what is worthy of enjoyment - which, basically, is life itself. We see the miseries as blemishes to be removed and, being now more aware of their nature and their origin, are more able to do so."

Another said: "So you don't think that our main task is to save our souls, or seek enlightenment, or whatever we call it, rather than to work to ameliorate the condition of human beings or other creatures?"

She answered: "It's an illusion to consider that the two can be separated. What we *are* and what we *do* are inextricably interwoven. To adapt the teachers' maxim that we learn by doing, we gain wisdom by *doing* and the wisdom helps us to *do* better. If we were to wait until we were perfect before acting, we would never do anything - and we would never become perfect!"

She went on: "The fundamental nature of awareness is awareness of one-ness, of the interdependency, the unity

of things. It marks an escape from the tyranny of dualism which separates and distinguishes between the natures of everything: I am I, you are you and - to adapt Kipling, never the twain shall really meet. When we believe this, as to a considerable extent we all do, we make comparisons. We judge. We say 'I am worse - or better - than whomsoever he, she or it might be'. We form opinions about whom or what we like and don't like, and behave accordingly. We believe in rules about right and wrong; we identify 'sinful' and 'virtuous' people and acts; different religions as 'true', or blasphemous and offensive to God. In these senses, our acceptance of duality is the basis of strife and violence.

"One of the most damaging aspects of dualistic belief is in the dichotomy we have preached between God and man, to use the old sexist phrase, between the creator and the created. Many people are much comforted by the idea of an omnipotent and loving God who exists quite independently of the lives he has, as it were, launched upon this sea of troubles. He watches over us, he will succour us if we pray sincerely to him, chide us with punishment if we disobey his will, but ensure that if we behave properly - which means faithfully following the instructions of his agents in this world - we will be all right in the long run and join him in glory in the next."

One said: "But of course you don't believe this?"

She said: "I have no evidence for believing or not believing it. What I definitely do not believe are the statements made by theologians about the nature and intentions of God. If there is a God who is the author of the whole universe in its vast and incredible intricacy it is surely ridiculous for any of us to theorise about what he is like and what he wants; such anthropomorphism is childish - no, children would not be so silly.

"But I have to say that if this concept of God is correct, then almost everything else I have said must be wrong. The concept of reality I have been discussing is based on the sense of unity shared by the great teachers and often experienced by the members at a Quaker

Meeting for Worship and, of course, by many others worshipping together. As we have considered, this is not only a sense of unity between individuals, but between individuals and all life, and in fact with the cosmos. The more we escape the distracting preoccupations of everyday life, the more strongly we feel this wider kinship, a sense of *affinity* that reaches out, if I may put it like this, to *infinity*. This sense is accompanied by feelings of joy, wonder and all-encompassing love. We are not looking in awe at something outside, beyond ourselves, but something within and all round us, something of which we form a part."

One said: "How does non-dualism relate to what you were saying about the prism which we constitute. You seemed to be suggesting that the prism structure was physical, based on heredity and environment, and experience and social influences, through which the eternal mind (if that is the right term) shines. Surely that is a dualistic position?"

She said: "I can see that it may seem like that. However, I believe that everything is divine (if *that* is the right term). I would hold that all aspects of the prism, both the framework and what passes through it are, in fact, different manifestations of the one great creative force. Once we realise this, that is, *make it real within ourselves*, all distinctions and differences drop away: everything is holy. For the same reason, I tend not to use the word 'spiritual'; it implies a misleading dichotomy between finer, or what some would call more subtle, substances or essences, and what we might consider coarser or more material ones. But this is like calling electricity spiritual and coal material. However, both are elements of the universal system of all things that we have discussed, sharing the same ultimate ground. And indeed both are sources of energy for our 'material' needs.

One said: "Are you then saying that good and evil are the same?"

She answered: "I am not talking about 'good' or 'evil'.

I would speak, as I have told you that some do, of skilful or unskilful behaviour. These are ones that are more, or less, helpful in dispelling illusions about reality and so are more, or less, conducive to wisdom and compassion. But I would not refer to anything as being intrinsically bad. Even murder can be an enlightening and enlightened action if carried out with a good motive."

He said: "I thought you didn't talk of things being 'good'."

She laughed and said: "Quite right. You caught me out. I should have said 'skilful' and gone on to mention what the Buddhists, who are basically very much against the use of violence, employ as illustration. In an earlier embodiment, the Buddha, serving as a ferryman, killed a man who was about to sink the boat, thus saving many lives and preventing the would-be murderer from piling up more bad - sorry, unpropitious - karma. But of course the broad principle is that since all things are interdependent, nothing can be *of itself* either good or bad."

Another asked: "Are you then saying that it doesn't matter what we do?"

"Don't kid yourself," she said. "What we all do all the time matters very much. Only by acting wisely and with selfless love can we contribute to the greater harmony of the whole."

"And what is the point of that?" asked the third.

She smiled and said: "I don't know - to glorify God, to fulfil the divine purpose, to follow the guidance of the great teachers, or just to follow what we all feel, inwardly, to be right. Does it really matter as long as we do it?"

"No," he said.

She said: "Then let's not worry about it."

## QUESTIONS OF GENDER

She said: "There's one more important aspect of dualism/non-dualism. We should consider it because it affects us all."

They asked what it was.

"It is the division of the human, and indeed most other species, into male and female."

One said: "But that's an unquestionable duality, women and men. It's not a philosophical issue like good and bad, true and false which you can perhaps genuinely argue to be different aspects of the same whole. Women and men *are* different."

Another said: "*Vive la différence.*"

She laughed and said: "*Vive* indeed. But that's part of the point. We delight in the difference for the pleasure of eliminating it by joining together two halves that were separate, even though the joining may be superficial and short-lived. And of course it's also handy, because that is how we perpetuate life."

One said: "But the difference has led to the oppression of women throughout history."

She answered: "Sadly that's true. A monstrous edifice of myths, fantasy and malpractice has been built around gender. As a result, although we know a lot about the physiological differences, any psychological ones are very largely obscured and confused. People talk about things like feminine intuition or masculine logic as though they could be defined accurately and were in fact inherent qualities. But instead, to the extent that they exist, they are largely cultural constructs, though by imputing some to women and others to men, we thereby give them a type of spurious reality."

One said: "So we are trapped in an illogical framework of concepts about each other."

She answered: "Yes. But that doesn't weaken the

powerful drive to come together. However," she continued, "we are not separate beings, and the total system of which we are a part includes both what might be termed our external relations with others and our internal ones within ourselves. So our gender issues are not simply between us and another man or woman, but within us between whatever derives, genuinely or not, from our own physical femaleness or maleness."

One said: "But you just said we really can't define these differences."

"Right," she said. "We can't, but we can infer that they are there, just as we have learned to infer the differences in the function of our right and left brains: we don't have to be able to say, 'that's my right brain in action', to accept in a general sort of way that one hemisphere is more creative and the other more analytical. In the same way, we can realise that some people have a stronger than usual component of the opposite gender."

"We may assume, for example, that a man who likes and is liked by women has a stronger development of the feminine potential than one who, without necessarily being homosexual, always seeks out the company of men in the golf club or at the party."

"You may wonder why I'm saying all this. I'm not suggesting that it's better for men to get on well with women than men, or for women to get on better with men than women: simply that this is partly affected by the balance of whatever relates to the feminine and masculine in their nature. The reason why it's important is that, to the extent that this balance is uneven, we are unhappy, uneasy and find it hard to fulfil our potential. It is also a major source of loneliness; the failure of these two parts within us to come together is somehow linked to, and in its effect similar to, frustration in our 'external' relations with men or women."

They seemed somewhat worried and confused.

One said: "If this is true, and I've never heard anything

like it before; what, if anything, can we do about it?"

She said gently: "It's really only an extension, into a specific very sensitive sphere, of principles we have discussed already: the unity and constant interaction of all things, the great system of the All. What I have been telling you about is taught by Tibetan psychologists, who practise a yoga to bring these two sides of our nature together."

They asked if she could teach it to them.

She said: "No. You would have to go to one of the Tibetan centres, where it would form part of inter-connected teachings. But what we have been talking about here will, I hope, be helpful; all aspects of reality are related.

"And this," she continued, "reminds me to stress another aspect of the inter-relatedness of the inner and the outer. So many people bemoan the fact that they are powerless to affect things outside themselves - war, injustice, poverty and the like. But they aren't. We, all of us, have actually created these things. They are projections of our collective fears, confusions and negative emotions; and of course they, that is the external things, rebound on the internal ones thereby strengthening them. But don't despair, because through our positive feelings of love, compassion and concern we also affect each other. So we aren't impotent, but for the same reason neither are we blameless; we have contributed, in however small a way, to whatever afflicts us.

"Finally, let me say one thing in relation to the sex/gender questions we have been talking about. Our ability to harmonise the different aspects of our own nature reflects, and is reflected by, our ability to establish and maintain loving human relationships, sexual or otherwise."

## PRACTICE

She said: "I hope I have now reminded you of what it is good to have in the forefront of your minds - and which has always been in the backgrounds."

They said: "But what do we now do?"

She laughed and said: "Nothing in particular. Whatever you were doing before, but do it with as much awareness as possible. Try to work out a routine for becoming conscious of yourselves."

"How?" they asked.

"Oh, lots of ways. For example, every time you change from one activity to another in the course of the day, pause for a couple of minutes, that's enough to make a considerable difference. Remember who you are, what you are doing, place yourself in the universe, remember your loved ones. At the end of the day remember what you have lost or done wrong by failing to do this. Look for the divine in everyone you meet, especially in yourself but not, I need hardly say, with self-congratulation, rather with wonder and praise for the All."

One said: "Should I stop going to church?" and another: "Should I start going to church?"

She said: "If church gives you negative emotions - irritation, boredom and the like - don't go unless you can turn it to good account."

He asked: "How?"

"If you can resist these debilitating feelings by observing them, you will gain. You will also profit from being able to recognise the elements of truth present in all religion, however overlaid or distorted.

"And if," she went on, "you already go to church because you like to, well, just continue: communal worship, prayer, meditation is always good, but once a week is certainly not enough, it must be supplemented by private and personal meditation otherwise you will lose ground."

One asked: "What sort of prayer or meditation should we use? Is there any particular method?"

She said: "There are many; make your own choice, but the actual methods, the techniques, are relatively unimportant provided you practise diligently and don't follow some pseudo-spiritual charlatan; meditation is simply a means of clearing away the mental mess and penetrating deeper into reality. It's not magic, there is no instant ecstasy - although you may have rewarding experiences to encourage you to keep at it; basically it's a method of weakening the false identity, the ego, and so opening the way to explore what lies behind and beyond."

"As for what is generally called prayer, it is only meditation for a particular purpose, though when the purpose is very mundane, like asking to win the football pools, it becomes something else. For a start you might like to use the Christian Lord's Prayer; study it mindfully and you will find everything there. Prayer and meditation are essentially acts of recognising, adoring and contemplating the reality, the truth, the All, God.

"This is the nourishment we need. All pain comes from hunger for it. The false identity, the three poisons, the failures of awareness that bring such suffering to ourselves and others can all be attributed to the lack of this holy food.

"Finally," she said, "we have not been talking about anything new. But few of the churches, the Christian ones anyway, are explicit about these matters. I say again that we all know them inwardly, but need to remember them. This is our first task. The second is to help others to remember them also."

## THE QUAKER UNIVERSALIST GROUP

The Quaker Universalist Group believes that spiritual awareness is accessible to men and women of any religion or none, and that no one Faith can claim to be a final revelation or to have a monopoly of truth. The group is open to both Quakers and non-Quakers.