Chapter 3  In search of the Non-self

“When we consider the I, whether it is something lasting or not, outside Buddhism they always presume that the self must have a form. They make it something quite definite. But in fact it is an error to think there is a permanent self which we can call I.” From The Heart Sutra, quoted in Trevor Leggett -The Tiger's Cave [1977]

For some people I suspect I might as well have called this chapter 'In search of the Yeti', for all the sense it makes to them. But for those who can grasp the basic concept that the idea of a Self, a psychological notion of the conscious element of my whole being, might actually be a result of cultural conditioning, I have quoted the above passage from a Buddhist text merely as a starting point in the ambiguous process of suggesting how the all-encompassing idea of 'myself' comes into being. So let's just start with a couple of basic premises to this sketch which I am outlining for the purpose of showing how the concept of a defined psychic 'person' who I call my 'self', becomes a foundation stone in the construction of metaphors of personal identity no less than social participation.

To start with then, a western cultural viewpoint would suggest that having a concept of myself as an outline of both my mind and my body is a basic premise in the definition of the world as a finite and objective place. It is somehow a given that all things share this sort of identity as being definable merely because they exist, and that this existence is a basic foundation of any further descriptions or qualities pertaining to that sense of being 'me'. On the other hand we have the idea, partly derived from Buddhism, that what passes for a functioning concept tied to all the others, really has no sensible basis in experience, because, not only is all of life relative to everything else, but, on a spiritual plane, the psychological component of a secure base to observe from, is empty of any necessary idea of form.

It could be countered to this that as consciousness is, by definition formless, what we have instead is an experience of a concept of being which acts as the basic condition of self-awareness. From a holistic perspective, this however, would commit the error of assuming that the individual experience is necessarily disconnected from the totality of the event of my existence, and therefore needs to be framed more as a sense of how my thoughts and behaviour become part of a symbolic and cultural whole which involves me in a multiplicity of relationships and roles. This gives us a broad-brush definition of what I am trying to elaborate and I will now go on to suggest some other ways of looking at the problem before attempting to draw from my examples a theory of how the concept of human individuation functions as part of other processes of defining reality and the moral implications which they lead to.

Impermanence

In his introduction to his book 'The Ages of Gaia' [1988], James Lovelock says that the process of writing a book must reflect the sense outlined in his theory
that all things are related and interdependent, therefore in writing, we should be aware of the organic process of self-expression and allow it to unfold as part of a life which includes all the other wholesome parts which constitute quality of life. On this count the practice of meditation can but lead to a feeling that, if concepts have any relevance in the intellectual structure of life, they must necessarily conform to the shape of life as a whole, which is both euphoric and mundane and allows us to observe ourselves in the act of attempting to achieve more than what is presented by our immediate experience.

From a Buddhist perspective this sense of the natural propensity to look at human thoughts as inhering in the myriad operations of our existence, provides the starting point of meditation as a process which must first divest itself of the 'clutter' or 'chatter' of a busy mind. If we then manage to still the mind and synchronise this with a process of physical relaxation, we have gained the space in which to reflect on the contents of the mind as perceived by a hypothetically impartial observer. Presuming then that we did not arrive at this point single-handedly, but were somehow guided through instructions, we will soon come across the concept that what we are experiencing is a basic realisation of the fundamental emptiness of experience. This is not to suggest that it has no value, but that fundamentally there is no absolute reference point which marks it as having any particular orientation; it is perhaps a kind of limbo like floating upwards in a hot air balloon in which the vehicle of our experience is the emptied shell of our minds which are used to the busy traffic of a crowded railway station.

The point of this description is to posit this state of introduction to a holistic notion of self as somehow in transition to a further step towards self-fulfilment; in answer to that basic awareness of an empty space. From a western perspective this really is a leap of faith from the idea that we are an actor in a real-life drama populated by structured forms which signify particular values and personal dispositions. But presuming that we are keeping an open mind, it is equally possible that we will overcome our scepticism in face of an imposed emptiness, and sense that what might appear to be absent of familiar reference points in a defined system, is actually not just rather barren and haunting, but has a quality of depth and purity which grows on one the more one relaxes into it like a comfortable armchair, and switches off the paranoid conversation going on in the background in favour of an intellectual rigour which gradually notices the pervasive sense of peace and security which emerges from that act of faith.

This is a spontaneous description of how I see the transition from a reductionist idea of me as the actor in my mind, to a sense of abandon in a holistic universe whose fundamental starting point is the eradication of any personal opinions, in favour of a receptivity to the potential for liberated experience, and a renewed perception of the fundamental harmony of the natural world which sustains us. As I suggested in my introduction, my own experience gave me a different starting point in the refined sensibility of nature watching. Indeed this is how Zen differs from mainstream Buddhism as focussing predominantly on the coherence of nature as a model for human
behaviour. But as I was already quite advanced in the contemplative way of introspection, I was ready to understand my experience of the harmony of the life force as being a reflection of something I was striving for in my interior spaces. As I also mentioned, it was my study of the landscape which led me to the conclusion that it was my perception that was in crisis; and which then led me to further practice of meditation. So when I really discovered the truth of what the Buddhists call the fact of 'Impermanence', that basic awareness of the fundamental emptiness of introspection, I was able to develop that in the knowledge that what I was searching for was likely to be recognisable as the peaceful and comforting energy of nature. As such a retreat led by Zen monks into the concept of 'The Nature', which stands for the perception of the fundamental character of the life force behind all illusions of form, gave me the chance to apprehend the mystical energy of nature in a kind of suspension of the normal framework of my self-awareness.

I am using my own path as an example of how ideas of form in the personality might emerge in the context of western culture, but this is really a theoretical exercise to give substance to the further contention that a concept of selfhood both obscures the possibility for a more inclusive idea of life; and also bolsters an understanding of personal identity rooted in a culture of mind/ body dualism. Indeed it is tempting to conclude that somehow this whole issue is insinuating that the real problem is merely one of the disjunction of the body from mental processes, but I feel that this would be to presume that we could stitch them together again and achieve a kind of repair of the soul a bit like Frankenstein's monster. The deeper message is that mind is somehow a spokesperson for the more fulfilling sensation of wholeness of being; which introduces us to a power to connect with the world at large in a way that heals the rift of self doubt by appeal to a sense of belonging rooted in compassion.

What do you think you are doing?

To make a detour from that rather theological and interior perspective, let's consider the idea of how I actually make decisions on the level of how I justify my behaviour to myself. In other words I am not talking about what to have for supper, but how I believe that my thought patterns are somehow a logical and correct soundtrack for the ongoing self-awareness which continues behind the mundane process of choosing. To give an example of this might be: 'I am sitting at my computer because I want to write a book about holism; i.e. what I believe I am doing conforms to the perception that I am correctly interpreting my thoughts by sitting here tapping away at this book. And to give this a bit more perspective perhaps I could suggest that what I might in fact be doing is behaving according to some undisclosed motivation to write a bestseller and make loads of money.

I give this example merely to sketch how what we think we are doing might somehow belie some deeper yearning for something else. Equally we could in fact be making a mistake and not actually achieve what we intended because we followed the instructions wrong such as in putting up an Ikea shelf unit. But this is not what I want to get at. The point is that we are assuming that it is
the thought process behind the actions which is essential for determining the outcome of what we want to achieve. The alternative, that our thoughts might be based on a false interpretation of what is going on, and therefore leads to equally false behaviour, is one way this process might break down. And the other one, which I want to emphasise, is that we could behave in a way that does not actually require any thought and derives its 'form' or 'expression' from the elements of the behaviour itself. By this I mean something like what Eugen Herrigel describes in his successful book 'Zen in the Art of Archery' [1948]; and it does'nt seem to detract from the meaning of the story to realise that he was in fact a member of the Nazi Party!

He describes himself undergoing a course in Archery guided by a Zen Master. After a couple of weeks of introduction into techniques for handling the bow and firing at the target he has advanced considerably and is managing to find the target successfully. At which point the Master intervenes and moves the target to a point just 6 feet in front of him and tells him to keep practising. Herrigel is infuriated with this as he feels it is a measure of the Master's lack of appreciation of his progress. On reflection however he comes to understand this as a way of pointing to the need to regard the process of firing the arrow as not conditioned by the success or failure of hitting the target, but in developing a technique which is in harmony with the essence of the potential of the bow.

From this sketch I want to draw the idea that we can behave in a way that refines the activity as a process in itself to be learned and remembered by the sensations of harmony with all aspects. Ultimately we should be aiming to achieve a unity with the whole process; which comes naturally because we have internalised the activity, not so much as a thought process, but as a feeling for the inherent balance of the activity. You could say this is like how any manual worker who gains a sense of the contentment of creativity in itself, comes to regard the act of behaving as not directed by the mind, but by the altogether different narrative of perfecting a process which they regulate according to that sense of inner coherence and satisfaction in achieving a balance between all the elements of their craft.

This example serves to point to the idea that what the mind creates as an explanation of the behaviour of the body, can in fact be dispensed with on the level of providing a justification or rationale. This is because we can direct our actions from a point of the sensation of how our activity fits into the natural context, through the felt balance of the sensations our bodies generate. I hesitate to call this intuition, because this tends to imply a kind of superstitious idea of determining hidden motivation through magic or supernatural powers. But actually the intuitive process is at work constantly, and it is only because we have evolved a culture of suppressing the basic sensations of our immediate experience in favour of more conventional or hierarchical adherence to social norms, that we have lost the available knowledge of behaving in connection with nature.

Anyway what this all means, I feel, is that what we think we are doing might
not reveal the entire story, or lack enthusiasm for the activity, because it overemphasises the role of the rational mind in attributing to behaviour unambiguous explanations. Equally, this perception frees up the potential for behaving in a way that is primarily concerned to perfect its appreciation of the activity in itself, without any desire for an explaining rationale. The parallel to be drawn with the previous example of meditation is that there are alternative ways of construing the exchange between the thought processes of the mind and the sensation of being a whole person, either through a spiritual or 'undefinable' experience, or the activity of refining a particular process to the point that we achieve a sensation of harmony with an equally ambivalent life-energy which gives us the feeling of liberation from the mundane. As such, meditation becomes a kind of metaphor for life in general in which our whole being relaxes into a dialogical, open and passive awareness of the ultimate depth of existence.

Who are you?

The problem then arises that if there is no absolute or fixed form to attach my concept of self to, how can I express the feelings or ideas which arise from my experience of spiritual unity or creative harmony with nature? Or in real terms, if I am suggesting that the experience itself can be used as a reference point by which to value other elements of life, then what form, other than the particulars of the experience, should it take? Perhaps the most obvious answer, to which this book attests, is language. Briefly though, I have already outlined that language is fundamentally the point of contention between holistic and materialist ways of describing reality, and this is compounded by the feeling that conventional moral pronouncements claim both an objectivity derived from the commodification of the natural world, and also an exclusive sense of authority invested in its legal structures bolstered by the undisclosed but inevitable absence of a logical connection between the Moral and Material spheres.

Conversely the holistic idea of language is, I would argue, one that pre-dates the later classical insistence on grammatical correctness, and locates itself in the mythological and symbolic elements of culture. This is a central theme of the religious historian Karen Armstrong, and revolves around the idea that in Ancient Greece before the classical period language was an oral medium, and that the effect of writing and the reductionist mentality it presaged, if not the intention, was to disconnect the mythical element from the logical. In semantic terms the effect of this rupture is categoric. It marks a crevasse of seismic proportions between the function of language as an embodied behavioural norm, which is essentially holistic in character, and the onset of a form of knowledge and culture which eschews the intuitive role of the senses in delineating the central feature of symbolic communication.

So what do we mean by a symbol? In order to really give substance to the idea that a symbol has a greater depth and weight in all aspects of culture we need to go beyond the modern idea of something such as a flag which denotes a kind of abstracted shorthand representing a general concept, e.g. Nationality.
To appreciate how the idea of symbolic communication and its central place in the formation of concepts functions, even though we pretend that it doesn't exist, it is worth going back into prehistory to get an idea of what happened before the invention of forms as pillars of an establishment hierarchy.

Terracotta Goddess figurines, fifth millennium B.C., Bulgaria [from The Living Goddesses by Marija Gimbutas, 2001].

“Our cultural programming leads to the assumption that female representations invariably represent “earth as fertility”; therefore all naked female artefacts become “fertility figurines”. The Old European cultures certainly cared about fertility. But the wide variety of figurines, and particularly their Neolithic archaeological contexts, suggests that the feminine force played a wider religious role.”

Basically a symbol can be anything from a found object, such as a stone, to a sculpted work, to a more refined process such as the idea of a Goddess and even the word itself as an expression of a scripted form and the sound of its utterance. Ultimately the way that symbolic forms function to aid communication and act as a store of cultural values, rests less in their attributes as particular objects or concepts, and more in their use as vehicles for a process of perception which enhances the subjective view of many individuals by combining it in a form which expresses something about their shared values. Although we could say that the object acquires a form which emphasises certain familiar features, and thereby points to a particular experience, the process of how these come into being is circular. It is the fact of familiarity which encourages the perception of particular features, and it is the establishment of symbolic cultural forms which lends itself to familiarisation by those participating in that community.

Perhaps it will be easier for those who lack acquaintance with the role of
symbolic forms in art to gain a broader view of their role when they play a significant part in the construction of myths. In the modern world the culture of scientific objectivity tends to obscure the role that myth has traditionally played, even though it continues to use this basic fact of perception to construct an ideologically attuned version of current affairs. But in the past such ideas as the central figure of the Goddess, which formed the focus of an Old European culture of Matriarchal lineage; highlighted the way that life worked as part of an ecological whole which imposed limitations as well as rewards. This allowed for the growth of community as part of a system of natural symbiosis in which concepts of identity emerged wholesomely from the womb of the Earth Mother and nurtured a sense of belonging which was mystically attuned to the rhythms of their environment.

To elaborate this story which draws as much on the imagination as it does on the observation of extant cultural forms, we can suggest that ideas of life and death as expressed in our view of how past cultures functioned, naturally involve us in the very same process which gave birth to them originally. This is exactly as it should be because we exist at a point in time which can look back as well as forward, and appreciate that such stories can reflect both our curiosity about how our ancestors might have thought, as well as a desire to enhance our own culture with the promise of a renewed vigour and sense of rootedness. That myth is primarily about the construction of meaning, leads us necessarily to interpret the past in terms of our current agenda for change. So when we conclude that what we have lost from previous cultures is their capacity to weave a seamless culture of community through the seasonal variations of their particular environments, we are drawing on a deeper search for meaning in the present which is dissatisfied with the narrow focus, for example, of modern ideas of femininity and reproduction which cast women purely as reproductive vessels. Such a stereotypical view of women's role leaves a gaping whole in the picture of past cultures who managed to enhance the idea of fertility to include a sensibility for the integration of community within the dictates of both ecology and climate.

Jumping forward a few thousand years we can then see how the ancient Greek civilisation of city states produced a concept of citizenship which lent itself to the fruition of Athenian written cultures. In this way the emergence of a concept of identity is tied to concepts both of participation in collective struggles, as well as the demarcation between the different forms of participation as either slave or free person. That it is a central concern of these written scholarly works to establish a foundation for their ideals of both how society and the natural world function, which is fundamentally different from the previous oral culture; obviously leads to speculation as to why they chose to abandon these previous types of knowledge and culture.

Anyway on that note I will conclude my survey of the variety of concepts of the formation of self-hood and move on to the more savoury topic of how this influences the formation of modern knowledge systems, and also how they work and the conclusions that can be drawn in the context of an alternative and restorative philosophy of symbolic form.
The man who mistook his wife for a hat!

This is the wonderfully provocative title of a book by Oliver Sacks [1985], whose work revolved around the neurological peculiarities of different members of our species. In the context of how the modern cultural insistence that we are primarily guided by the expressed moral codes of our society, we seem to be gravitating towards an ever-increasing plasticity of disposable symbolic icons. As such what was once a varied and colourful expression of cultural individuality, the hat, has mutated into a production line rubber stamping of identity as pertaining to a motley few cheap symbols of Americana. One is either a baseball player, a cowboy, a gangster or a beanie – whatever that means. That people are ready to lap up this synthetic culture of identity attests both to their economic marginalisation as consumers, and also to their unwavering support for a system which headlines compulsive anxiety for the latest sales figures like the obligatory tears at the late North Korean leaders funeral.

Seriously though, I use this example as a simple illustration of the almost schizophrenic way that modern consumerist culture irons out any genuine feeling for the way that people naturally relate to each other on a human scale; and, because it has lost touch with the personalising influence of local culture, manufactures a plastic commodified and digital identity which must fit all sizes. This is the absolute opposite of natural diversity and the way that an intuitive sensation of the elements of one’s local environment shape our consciousness and helps form bonds with the other members of our community. As such it substitutes a synthetic notion of belonging through the mass culture of celebrity which casts everyone in a limited number of roles or hats, and lays down absurdly superficial guidelines as to how we should behave towards each other. On the other hand, if we allow ourselves to connect with the sensations of our bodies and come to a balance with our natural propensity for health and happiness, this becomes the basis of respect for others and the onus to value our environment as the source of that vitality.

Inevitably when I try to explain what I think is wrong with the world I end up pouring derision on the masses and casting industrialists and those in power as demonically possessed. As I mentioned, this does not chime with my attempt to experience life as wholesome and altruistic. My only excuse therefore is that if the problem, as I see it, is one of the lack of something fruitful and stimulating, then it does not really make sense to logically construct an argument against it in its own terms. Really it is just a corruption of the opportunity for a fulfilled and peaceful existence. As such, my attempt to define that problem goes round in circles trying not to attribute blame to any one thing rather than another because fundamentally the problem lies in the attitude of the individual. We can either learn to take responsibility for the planet or we will gradually become extinct from sheer inertia and lack of vision.

So where this leads me at this point is to make a quick sketch of how the concept of personal identity functions in the reductionist worldview, and to
map out how this came into being before attempting to heal this wound through a description of a more positive way of being and another brief stab at how we might get there. Anyway, it seems to me that we can approach the concept of what constitutes personal identity from 2 angles. Namely:

1). My idea of myself comes from a feeling for my role in the culture to which I belong. My allegiance to the security that this brings inclines me to behave in conformity with the rules of that society and so I think of myself fundamentally as defined by the particular role I have adopted.

2). My idea of myself is somehow a parallel of my understanding that the world itself functions as a system of the interaction of its parts and so my concept of myself relies on the feeling for the separateness of all things to give me an individuated concept of existence.

Of course it is probably true that most people who are content to function purely as part of a defined humanist project will draw on both of these concepts depending on their preference for an intellectual or social measure of value. What is interesting I feel, is that in this definition, if we turn the argument on its head and ask which came first, we are left with an equation similar to that which I posed at the end of the last chapter; but not from the angle of the formation of morality, so much as a possible source of identity. This is to suggest that if I turn No. 1). above around and say that maybe it is not the society that defines me, but it is more a sense of my having an innate sense of the potential of belonging which gives rise to the cultural ideal of society, what we have instead is a kind of natural concept of community. And if we do the same thing with No.2). and say that maybe we have a natural propensity to understand the world as somehow an extension of my sense of individuality, we have something similar to the idea of subjectivity and the feeling for personal responsibility that invokes.

Turning now from that speculative suggestion of a hidden role for the subjective view, I want to return to my tentative question of the end of the last chapter, which posed the question as to how the so-called Age of Reason construed the role of the body, in contrast to what it felt were the limitations of the classical worldview dominated by superstitious folly ungrounded in the light of reason. In terms of how this relates to the idea of individuation, civic identity or the concept of being a self, perhaps we can imagine why the ancient goddess culture abandoned its all-providing matriarch in favour of a warring and jealous father figure. Notwithstanding that the inception of a Goddess might also have been an unnatural reaction away from a more instinctive connection with the spirits of the wilderness, such as can be detected in the earlier cave paintings of southern Europe, I feel that the creation of a Godhead idea was fundamentally something which galvanised humankind's newfound invention of language and abstract thought, into an institutional control of cultures who were also emerging into a more orderly relationship with the land and the domestication of animals. To this end the role of the body and the sensation of a living earth are somehow subsumed into a symbolic culture of classical mythology no less than the imposed conditions of citizenship which
exerted considerable pressure on their physique.

Fast forward a couple of millennia and what characterises the enlightenment of the intellectual classes of a flourishing European culture is the widespread belief in the power of the mind to solve all known problems of the universe; through the medium of the telescope, the sailing ship and the concept of ownership of the material world backed by the expanding theoretical knowledge of the universe, governed by mathematically demonstrable principles. In this new economic paradigm the ingenuity of the inventor and the merchant replaces the infallible power of the king; and the reasoning of the philosopher overturns the divine right of the church in favour of a secular order in a fundamentally chaotic moral space.

So to infer from this sketch what is going on in terms of how the individual defines themselves as a self, it seems reasonable to characterise the role of the Godhead figure as taking the place of the need for a sense of identity per se, and that this emerges as somehow a substitute for an unquestioning allegiance to a mother figure who was successful in nurturing the souls of the community for several thousand years. What perhaps turns the questing human away from this seemingly stable culture is the 6 million dollar question. For my money it is not the growth of those cultures into super abundance which gives the individual the time to conjure up ambitions of personal power and dominion over others, which is a common explanation; so much as the feeling that, if we follow through the implications of the establishment of male-dominated and competitive cultures, what they stand for is fundamentally a rejection of the natural order.

Obviously this idea is predicated on the belief that cultures of hierarchical and idealistic dominion over the natural world are indeed suffering from a lack of vitality and peaceful fulfilment on the spiritual level. But if one does make this conclusion, and also one has experience of the regenerative and healing powers of an immersion in the ecological wisdom of earth cultures, it becomes easy to sense how the underlying gist of deterministic and over-rational paradigms of humanity's place in nature, fundamentally disavows the very force which nurtures their physical well-being. Could this rejection also be the rationale behind the later middle-age rejection of the authorities in their culture? This seems unlikely, despite their perhaps valuable assertion of the power of reason to contribute towards individual liberty and the discovery of new ways of wresting a living from the earth.

Interestingly this period was also characterised by a strong religious upheaval and brings to mind the idea that if the sands of human identity were shifting along with the bid for human rights, then its vehicle appears to be in the cult of the personality, not just of the divinely created Christian leader, but a more down to earth sense of righteousness emanating from the divine medium of the inspired prophet on earth. Somehow it becomes the project of man to create his own spiritual destiny; and the humanist bid for divinity itself through the power of his mind, bestows on him a zeal to cleanse the fallen nature of humanity, particularly of women, for their descent into the original sin of the
realm of beasts and evil spirits, i.e. nature. Can we see in this transformation also, in its nascent form, the transition of the message of the patriarchal god from one located in the temple and scriptures of the chosen people of Israel, to the new religion of man personified by the character of Jesus? An event which focussed the power of knowledge on the concept of human identity rather than the mythological character of the Bible. And also we could suggest that the appeal of the new religion of Christianity to a diversity of cultures, derives from its flexibility as the movable personality of the disciple, rather than the located and territorial temple of the promised land. As such the modern propensity to identify with the powerful and knowledgable spiritual leader capitalises on this universality of selfhood as essentially a movable feast, with fries on the side.

To be or not to be?

Well if this is the whole question, then from a holistic perspective, as I said in my introduction, it is not a question of being a sum of many parts, but more a sense of what the whole really is. If the experience of the formlessness of being gives way to a sensation of belonging to a mystical and infinite depth of truth, known in Buddhism as Nirvana, then it is our job to understand that this key to living represents a commitment to a way of life rather than an abstract form of knowledge. It is a guide to being in relationship with a force of vitality which we grasp only as a value system, which attests to the basic fluidity of material being and the infinite possibilities that this conjures up. But as this is a generalisation about life itself, the purpose of this book is to point out that we do not arrive at this understanding of what life is through a piecing together of the parts of a complex, but theoretically known, system; rather we have to learn the slow process of emptying ourselves of the conditioned imperatives of a grasping materialist outlook and make ourselves open to a truth of being which defies rational understanding.

The other fundamental aspect of this way of looking at life is that once we have a sensation of the mystical unity of all the diverse elements of life, we need to work out a way of participating in it which enables us to act as authentic parts of that undifferentiated whole. From the standpoint of personal identity this is a process of valuing ourselves as equal with all of life in order to then behave in conjunction with the life force as equals in a common value system. In terms of how we conceive of the systems of the natural world this translates to the perspective that what I am is necessarily part of the same equation as what I perceive. I am projecting my energy onto a backdrop of life which reveals its message in a contiguous event of mutual recognition. On this count we are recognising the agency of all that is 'other' in the relationship, and making ourselves receptive to the truths of that other as a refinement of our own sensations of participation in an event.

To summarise then, if we can accept that life is an unknowable, because infinitely variable, depth of being which is synonymous with our idea of truth, then we can proceed from this revelation to a working knowledge of holistic identity as a dialogical relationship with a world which is fundamentally
ambiguous. The processes of valuing and constructing a home on the earth become part of a multiple whole of participation which recognises the agency of the earth, as much as our own, to regulate its own being in harmony with all its life forms. Therefore the responsibility to develop our own lives becomes equally one of maintaining a healthy body as part of a whole reciprocal system of symbiosis, and also one which views our place on the planet with the respect and reverence it deserves.

And to end this chapter I feel it would not be complete without at least a mention of how to approach death in a holistic manner. Like all things in life, we have only our own experience to really convince us of the truth of ideas, so on that count I feel I must be as much an expert as anyone else alive to talk about death. Obviously the openness to the meaning of death is an essential part of our openness to the meaning of life, and the acquaintance with the death of others is naturally the next best thing to teach us what it is all about. So on that basis my limited experience draws more on my hearing the accounts of others, and my own contemplation of life and death within the context of meditation which relies on the emptiness of the mind to receive its wisdom. As such I feel there is a significant connection between that sensation of emptiness, which we can perhaps call an absence of the ego, and the aura which surrounds death.

Having made numerous references to the distinction between the different roles of the mind and body in western culture, I feel that this dichotomy emerges as a decisive factor in our understanding of what is happening when we die. That is to say that, if we have a firm conviction that our mortality is just the end of our earthly selves and that a spirit continues in some way after death, then we obviously recognise that what is happening during the dying process is the gradual letting go of the need for a body. And when we draw a parallel to this with the process of meditation we realise that, in the absence of a defining form of a psychological self, what we are doing is stilling the body of its disposition to behave as a purely earthly being. On both counts we are attempting to reach a purely spiritual dimension, and therefore the process of meditation is recommended as a preparation for death and a way of maintaining that spiritual outlook during the process of dying.

Lastly to give some indication of a possible route towards a more holistic concept of death, I feel that the whole issue of what we think we are comes into sharper focus. On the psychological front we have an idea which may adhere to a sense of duty towards the collective whole; and this has emerged strongly in western cultures since the Enlightenment as the process of reasoned conditioning of the role of the individual in an authoritarian state. On the so-called material front the culture of western Europe has cultivated a general disdain for physical processes of the body no less than those of the natural world, and leads to a constricted sense of the value of the body linked to a prohibition of natural feelings as part of a sense of moral correctness or even sanity. This double bind theory creates a potentially catastrophic impasse when we finally approach the end of our lives because it means we have both an impersonal sense of who is actually dying; and maybe also a tangled web of
physical constraints on our sensations of the body generated by the complex interventions of medical science.

Although I would in no circumstance attempt to withdraw the supportive network which the dying person requires, I feel that what we can work with is the person's awareness of what they are going through. And again, I feel it is important that any help we might be able to give to that person comes from a place of pure empathy and compassion rather than a rational process of assessment of their needs. But perhaps what we can give is an increased awareness of the person's situation through that empathy, and from our own peaceful centre attempt to offer a vision of how acceptance of that condition could be made in light of the process of death as a whole. Central to this is the person's capacity for experiencing the pain they are in, and allowing it to exist as part of a transformation of their being from a stepping stone of self-awareness into a mystical journey beyond the beyond.