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Cynthia Bourgeault¹

From the Egoic Mind to the Mind of the Heart

The Teaching and Lived Experience of the Christian Contemplative Path

Abstract: *The great spiritual traditions unanimously affirm that beyond the bounded egoic consciousness, typically identified along the psychological spectrum as 'myself', lies a more spacious, unbounded selfhood whose attainment (variously known as 'non-dual realization', 'enlightenment', or 'Christ consciousness') comprises the true fulfilment of our human journey. In this paper, Cynthia Bourgeault expounds that the way toward this state is through nurturing the heart in its foundational role as the seat of non-dual perception.*

Introduction

This contribution by Cynthia Bourgeault is formed as an interview by the guest editor Nini Praetorius (NP for short). Here first, as background, a few words about the new views about the teachings of Jesus, adopted by a steadily growing number of Christians all over the world, which Cynthia Bourgeault (CB) has promoted most convincingly in *The Wisdom Jesus* (Bourgeault, 2008).

In her book, CB shows through many different sources, among others the Gospels of the New Testament themselves and the

Correspondence:
Email: treaven@earthlink.net

¹ <http://www.contemplative.org/cynthia.html>.

relatively newly discovered scriptural material from the Nag Hammadi collection, that Jesus was a spiritual master who, just like other great spiritual masters, has a teaching and a path. However, says CB, unlike masters of other traditions, questions about what they are are not addressed by Christianity. She suggests that one of the reasons is that for the better part of the past sixteen hundred years Christianity has put a lot more emphasis on the things we *know about* Jesus and on having the right (orthodox) beliefs about him and his life. Along with these requirements, says CB,

...comes also a subliminal message: that the appropriate way to *relate* to Jesus is through a series of beliefs. In fundamentalist Christianity this message tends to get even more accentuated, to the point where faith essentially appears to be a matter of signing on the dotted lines to a series of creedal statements. Belief *in* Jesus is indistinguishable from belief *about* him. (Bourgeault, 2008, p. 29)

According to texts from the early Christian church this was not how it was originally done. Nor can it ever be done this way, says CB, if what we are really seeking is to come into a living relationship with the wisdom master. What we are supposed to be doing is, as prescribed by St Paul, to let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:5). But how, CB asks,

...do we put on the mind of Christ? How do we see through his eyes? How do we feel through his heart? How do we learn to respond to the world with that same wholeness and healing love? That's what Christian orthodoxy really is all about. It's not about right belief; it's about right practice. (Bourgeault, 2008., p. 29)

In answering these questions, CB first observes, with Jim Marion, author of the 2000 book *Putting on the Mind of Christ*, that

...throughout his teaching, Jesus uses one particular phrase repeatedly: 'the Kingdom of Heaven'... 'The Kingdom of Heaven is within you'... 'The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand'... 'My Kingdom is not of this world'... Whatever this Kingdom of Heaven is, it's of foundational importance to what Jesus is trying to teach. (Bourgeault, 2008, p. 30)

Biblical scholars have debated the question of what is meant by this favourite term of Jesus's for almost as long as there have been biblical scholars. A lot of Christians, particularly of a more evangelical persuasion, assume that the Kingdom of Heaven means the place where you go when you die — if you've been good. But the problem with this interpretation, CB notices, is that Jesus himself specifically contradicts it when he says, 'The kingdom of Heaven is *within you*' (that

is, here) and ‘at hand’ (that is, now). ‘It’s not later, but *lighter* — some more subtle quality or dimension of experience accessible to you right in the moment. You don’t die into it: you awaken into it’ (*ibid.*, p. 30).

CB endorses the suggestion by Marion that

...the Kingdom of Heaven is really a metaphor for a *conscious state*; it is not a place you go to, but a place you *come from*. It is a whole new way of looking at the world, a transformed awareness that literally turns the world into a different place... The Kingdom of Heaven is Jesus’s own favourite way of describing a state we would nowadays call a ‘nondual consciousness’ or a ‘unitive consciousness’... The hallmark of this awareness is that it sees no separation — not between God and humans, not between humans and other humans. (*ibid.*, pp. 30–1)

In effect, Jesus is calling people to a radical transformation — a transformation into what CB has called *the operating system of the heart* (or of ‘seeing with the eye of the heart’). And, CB continues, the fact that he does so

...suggests that this transformation is both possible and intended for human beings. And there may well be some thing in the teaching itself that allows these stages to unfold. (*ibid.*, p. 32)

In contrast, the vast majority of us come equipped from childhood with a very different operating system, in *The Wisdom Jesus* called the *egoic operating system*. It is characterized as a *grammar of perception*, a way of making sense of the world by dividing the field into subject and object, inside and outside:

...When we become aware of our identity using this egoic operating system, we experience ourselves as persons with distinct qualities and attributes. When we introduce ourselves, we usually begin by listing these characteristics: ‘I am a Pisces, a six on the enneagram, a person who loves the ocean, an Episcopalian, a priest.’ We identify ourselves by putting on our identifiers. That list also makes other people separate from me; they are outside, and I’m inside. In this operating system I experience myself as a distinct and fixed point of identity that ‘has’ particular qualities and life experiences, and these things go to make me who I am. That’s what life looks like when seen through the lens of the egoic operating system. It thinks in terms of good and bad, right and wrong, before and after, up and down. And it gives us a solid sense of ourselves as the one at the hub of all this duality, the one inside mastering the experiences. (*ibid.*, pp. 33–4)

According to the teaching of Jesus, we need to be free of perceiving ourselves, others, and the world through the veils created by this egoic operating system and its identifications, fixations, and attachments.

This is what ‘self emptying’ means, and it will slowly but steadily teach us ‘how to live into — and out of — this greater unboundaried selfhood’ — in the Kingdom of Heaven within.

...Our sense of identity generated through the egoic operating system is [an illusion], and the great religions traditions have said it all along. It’s a mirage, and illusion. There is no such self. There is no small self, no egoic being, no thing that’s separate from everything else, that has insides and outsides, that has experiences. All these impressions are simply a function of an operating system that has to divide the world up into bits and pieces in order to perceive it. Like the great wisdom teachers of all spiritual traditions, Jesus calls us beyond the illusion: ‘Hey you can upgrade your operating system, and life is going to look a whole lot different when you do it.’ (*ibid.*, p. 34)

The most significant difference is that the ‘operating system of the heart’ does not perceive through differentiation; the field of perception goes far beyond just the rational. Thus,

...The heart picks up from the emotions, from our sense of proportion, from intuition, from images and archetypes. And most importantly, it keeps us aligned with our innermost, with what we truly know... When heart-awareness becomes fully formed within a person, he or she will be operating out of a nondual consciousness. But it’s not simply a higher level of the same old mind; it’s a whole new operating system. That person does indeed see from a perspective of singleness — and just as Jesus called for, there is now no separation between God and humans, or between humans and other humans, simply because separation isn’t factored into the new operating system. It is no longer necessary for perception, so it simply falls away like scales from the eyes... This seems like a very fruitful approach to the teachings of Jesus ... the metaphor seems to work and brings an underlying coherence to what he is about. His whole mission can fundamentally be seen as trying to push, tease, shock, and wheedle people beyond the ‘limited analytic intellect’ of the egoic operating system into the ‘vast realm of the mind’ where they will discover the resources they need to live in fearlessness, coherence and compassion — or in other words, as true human being. (*ibid.*, p. 36)

One of the ways in which it is borne out most strikingly that Jesus in his teaching is directing us towards a radical transformation or upgrading of our operating systems is in the parables. One of them, probably the most difficult of all to understand and accept, speaks to the clash of operating systems in a way that is unmistakable. It is the notorious challenge of the Labours in the Vineyard, in which the owner gives every one of his workers the same day’s pay, no matter

how long or how hard they have worked (Matthew 20:1–15). As CB elaborates:

...Probably more than any other teaching in the gospels, this parable tends to defy all logic and common sense. People unanimously exclaim, ‘This is not fair’... This is perhaps Jesus’ most koan-like parable: As long as you’re using the egoic operating system, you just can’t get it. You will see the owner’s action as unfair because you’re keeping track of more or less, better or worse, first versus last. And that is a function of the operating system you’re using: The binary mind always perceives from a sense of scarcity and keeps track of the score through comparison and contrast... The only way you can ‘crack’ this parable is to shift your perspective so that you see the glass as half full rather than half empty. When you approach the story from the perspective of fullness, you see that there’s enough for everybody, that the good of everyone has been tended, and that all along it has never been a question of competition, but an invitation to participate and exchange. But that kind of seeing is only accessible within that other operating system, the nondual knowingness of the heart... Like any good Zen master, he is out to completely short-circuit our mental wiring so that we are catapulted into a whole new way of seeing and being. (Bourgeault, 2008, p. 39)

Q and A

After this introductory background on the Christian Contemplative Mysticism espoused by Cynthia Bourgeault follow the questions and answers in NP’s interview with her.

NP Q1: *What, in your experience, are the prime reasons for contemporary folks to embark on the contemplative path? Although we all have the potential and calling built into our consciousness or ‘larger mind’, not everyone realizes or is aware of the calling; and even if one is, it takes a tremendous amount of dedication, perseverance, courage, trust, etc.*

CB: I really do believe in some sort of inner imperative that pushes us along this course, independent of any obvious exterior motivation or rationale. The modern spiritual teacher A.H. Almaas calls this ‘the enlightenment drive’. The poet Dylan Thomas described it much more picturesquely as ‘the force that through the green fuse drives the flower’. There is kind of ‘spiritual DNA’ (my own preferred phrase) in each of us driving us toward the full manifestation of our unique expression of being-ness. This is because our life is actually always *flowing out from God* (or ‘Divine Source’, or ‘unified field’, however you prefer to name it). Our conscious transformation moves ‘from

God, to God — and always within God'. So many of the classic spiritual maps picture us as starting out 'in exile', needing to find our way 'back'. In fact, to borrow an apt metaphor from contemporary Sufi teacher Kabir Helminski, it's much more like being 'knee deep in the river, begging for water'. The 'tremendous amount' of dedication, perseverance, courage, trust that you speak of is simply what's required to remove the scales from our eyes, not to create the larger mind itself, which of course has always been there.

Why the *contemplative* path? Because contemplation teaches the small mind how to shut up. It introduces some interior silence, in which that larger mind, the invisible ground that has always been there, can begin to make its presence known. As the medieval mystic Jacob Boehme once said, 'When you remain silent from the thinking and willing of the self, the eternal hearing, seeing, and speaking will be revealed in you... Your own hearing, willing, and seeing hinder you so that you do not see God' (Boehme, 1978, p. 71).

NP Q2: *Self-emptying by meditation, centring prayer, lectio divina sounds simple enough. But, as you quite rightly point out in your article on 'Nurturing the Heart' (Bourgeault, 2002), shedding or going beyond the egoic mind and its identifications, conscious and unconscious belief structures, and animalistic self-preservation instincts and trauma requires the willingness to let go, first of all, of your will. And it requires a strong desire to see deeply within and face your innermost fears, your self-images of deficiency, emptiness, helplessness, and your inevitable wounds. You cannot bypass these unconscious structures or issues — they are part and parcel of the egoic system, which do not go away — even if you manage to transcend them. Have you got any comments on this?*

CB: It's important to keep in mind that contemplative practice is not an 'uncovering technique' whose ultimate goal is the integration and healing of the *smaller (egoic) self*. It is rather a *direct and immediate encounter with a deeper relational ground*, in which one begins to directly intuit the presence of a larger 'I', which heals by relativizing the small-self hegemony and bringing it into relationship with that deeper ground. Thomas Merton (2003) speaks of this beautifully in one of his most luminous insights:

...This act of total surrender [letting go] is not merely a fantastic intellectual and mystical gamble; it is something much more serious. It is an act of love for this unseen person who, in the very gift of love by

which we surrender ourselves to his reality also makes himself present to us.

Whether this ‘unseen person’ is experienced as a loving ‘other’ or one’s own higher (or transcendent) Self, the breakthrough takes place on *relational* ground, in the energetic field of love. And it is this love that calls forth the courage to face the shadow work, for it is done *in relationship with a greater wholeness already intuited*, not as a dismantling of the only selfhood we know.

And yes, you’re right that all authentic spiritual practice goes through the eye of the needle of facing these unconscious structures. Practice used simply for ‘spiritual bypassing’ — i.e. maintaining a specious calm by repression artfully disguised as spiritual proficiency — is simply creating an inner time bomb that will eventually explode.

NP Q3: *You write in your paper mentioned above about the risk of mistaking the work on the spiritual path for psychotherapy — and of thus derailing the transition to authentic heart awareness into the quest for psychological wellness and a stronger, more efficient, and less painful (often spiritualized) ego functioning — which will make any transcendence or going beyond the conventional egoic system so much the harder, if not impossible.*

CB: Yes, yes, and more yes! See my reflections immediately above. In many schools of psychology (fortunately, fewer and fewer now), this ‘transcendent self’ is still an unknown quantity. The self is equated with the egoic self (in fact, it’s hard to figure out how consciousness can manifest without an egoic centre to manifest it), and therapy is a matter of restoring the ego structure to its optimal level of functioning by freeing it of habitual, unconscious woundedness and compensatory patterns.

In spiritual traditions worldwide, the egoic self is looked on respectively as a veil, an illusion, a lower imposter that usurps the place of the higher Selfhood and renders us oblivious to it. Transcendence lies precisely in learning that one can, in fact, be fully conscious without a localized egoic operator and learning how to live into — and *out of* — this greater, unboundaried selfhood.

NP Q4: *What is the lived experience of ego/self-less being, the being of the heart awareness? What are the most striking differences between, so to speak, before and after the transcendence: how do you perceive yourself, who you really are, your relation with others and the world, and what takes the place of the ego-identity and the*

personal will? Bernadette Roberts and Adyashanti, among others, have said that you only know what ego/self is when it has fallen away, i.e. in its absence. Indeed, spiritual masters often describe the situation beyond the egoic mind in terms of what is now lacking (there is no subject–object divisions, no duality, etc.).

CB: To begin with, I would never claim myself as an ‘enlightened’ being who has undergone some *permanent* and *irreversible* transcendence. I have come to see that being is simply being, and any goal or expectation simply overlays a veil on our ability to fully relax into what actually *is*. Rather than some steady-state transcendence, I experience the rhythmic shifting back and forth, opening and closing, between a more spacious sense of being and a more constricted one. While my spiritual practice over the years has allowed me to return more promptly and voluntarily to that former state, I am unwilling to say that what goes on in the more constricted states is ‘unreal’, ‘deficient’, or not part of the divine equation. Nothing, no matter its state or level of attainment, can possibly fall out of God, and thus, everything is part of the divine breathing and can be lived as a moment of conscious participation if we’re alert to it.

In following my own Christian predilection toward humility, I am simply describing the perspective from which I will be responding to the question. Of those most exalted states described by the Buddhist masters, I have no knowledge. Nor do I claim to be anything resembling an advanced practitioner of egoless states, or to have attained to a permanent and irreversible transformation of consciousness.

As I continue to experiment and grow, I am increasingly convinced that the paradigm of ‘stages’ or ‘progress’ leading to some ultimate goal is not the paradigm that most accords with or helps explain my own experience of the relationship between the dual and non-dual, or ‘big self’ and ‘small self’. I see them nowadays less and less like stages on a trajectory and more and more like bells in a bell rack — a gamut of perspectives — that can be played as needed by a featureless selfhood that can express itself in any configuration of consciousness but is limited to none of them.

What I do know is that the experience of being in that more spacious state is just as fundamental as moving from a kind of ‘particle’ form of oneself to a ‘wave’ form. In the ‘particle’ form, identity is very localized and bounded, tied to a separate self-sense that we mistakenly identify as our ‘personhood’. That smaller, egoic

self, with its limitless ‘I wants’ and ‘I needs’, is firmly in the driver’s seat, and the specious sense of a permanent continuous identity is maintained by a virtually non-stop self-narration, fanned by the flames of memory and desire. In that other, larger sense, self becomes non-localized and interpenetrating. As the fourteenth-century anonymous British mystic who wrote *The Cloud of Unknowing* remarks, ‘Pay attention not to what you are, but to *that you are*’.

What the Inner Tradition unanimously identifies as ‘sleep’ is *the state of being totally identified with the small-self or egoic perspective, convinced that it’s ‘the only game in town’*. Without some sort of a catalyst to jar that illusion (be it a meditation practice or a life trauma), it is very difficult to break through to a larger and more spacious sense of selfhood. As the old saying goes, ‘It’s hard to move a plank you’re standing on’. That is why untold millions on this planet unsuspectingly sleep their lives away, all the while claiming ‘consciousness’ and ‘free will’.

NP Q5: *I am wondering if, when you have crossed the gap into consciousness centred in the heart, you will return or shift back to precisely the same egoic illusory being that you are describing above. Could it be (either) that the egoic illusory self, as a consequence of the realization of being with the heart, although not yet gone, will itself change its values and general mode of operation? (Or) could it be that there won’t be any permanent transition to heart consciousness in the first place, unless you have already surrendered a whole lot of the illusory mental structures (including your egoic will) and content of the egoic self as created by the so-called egoic operating system?*

CB: Even a taste of witnessing presence does in fact change things forever. It’s impossible to go back completely to that state of anaerobic egoic dominion. The crack has been opened, and the light begins to get through. That’s why meditation is such a powerful tool of transcendence; by whatever the method, it immediately plunges people into the experiential realization that there is something there, deeper and infinitely more spacious than their egoically constructed selfhood.

After that — at least in my take — the egoic selfhood does not go away; rather, it becomes a good servant. It’s still a very useful tool for many of the functions we are called on to perform in this world. But it is now ‘transcended and included’; we recognize that it is a modality of action and not the seat of our identity.

Does the emergence of the heart consciousness come first, allowing surrender of egoic structures, or does surrender of egoic structures open the way to heart consciousness, the seat of our larger selfhood? What a great chicken-and-egg question! I think it's both, simultaneously, in an unbroken feedback loop sustained by some higher dimensionality of purpose. It only looks like a causal sequence when we download it into time; in reality the causality is simultaneous and synchronous. The taste of the real allows us more easily to shed the skin of the unreal. And as we shed the unreal, so that it snags us less and less, the heart consciousness grows even stronger and more confident within us as it gradually becomes our 'default' seat of identity.

NP Q6: *What is the lived experience of non-duality (loving your neighbour as your self?)? If you have surrendered both your will and external attachments what then motivates your thoughts and action in the mundane everyday world?*

CB: I love that you equate 'the lived experience of non-duality' with 'loving your neighbour as yourself'. Right on! As to the motivation of action at this level, I can do no better than to quote the profound words of Gerald May in his classic book *Will and Spirit*: 'As attachment ceases to be your motivation, your actions become expressions of divine love' (1987, p. 238). When the eye of the heart finally opens (probably the preferred Western way of describing non-dual awakening), the first thing it sees is that we live, move, and have our being within a field of COMPASSION ABSOLUTE which is objectively real and infinitely flowing. As the small self gets out of the way, compassion itself is what carries us. That is what Jacob Boehme means in the passage I cited earlier when he said, 'When you remain silent from the thinking and willing of the self, the eternal hearing, seeing, and speaking will be revealed in you'. Over and over again mystics of all spiritual traditions (or none!) have validated this core insight.

Loving your neighbour can of course be done from any state, but it looks really different in dual and non-dual versions. From the small-self (egoic) perspective, you will always implicitly hear this question as 'love your neighbour *as much as yourself*'; the neighbour is still objectively 'out there' as a self other than your own, and loving your neighbour means doing good and kind things to this object. In the non-dual vision, your neighbour IS yourself; that perceptual veil between subject and object has dropped out of the picture and you are simply virtual particles in a single dance of wholeness. Either can

stand in the other's place; either can contain the whole. The exchange is the whole meaning of the love.

The small self gets in the way like a stubborn thumb over a camera lens, always skewing the perceptual field by the very mechanism of egoic perception that generates it in the first place. It is always at one end of the subject/object continuum (generally subject, acting upon external 'objects' out there), and its right actions are marked by a subtle — or not so subtle — attachment or identification, and a continuously playing self-narrative. In heart (or large self, or non-dual) consciousness, all this baggage simply drops away.

NP Q7: *Could you describe or give examples of your own (or other's) lived experience of the wisdom and intelligence of the heart and put into words what characterizes the bigger mind as compared to the binary mind?*

CB: In the great spiritual traditions of the West, the heart is first and foremost an organ of spiritual perception. My friend and colleague, Sufi teacher Kabir Helminski, refers to it as our GPS, our 'God Positioning System'. Its purpose is to keep track of the vertical axis, that subtle depth dimension of meaning and value typically designated in the Christian tradition as 'faith' — 'the evidence of things not seen' — and to weave the invisible and visible dimensions of our life together in a single tapestry of coherent meaning and purpose.

The big difference between heart intelligence (i.e. the bigger mind) and the rationality of the binary mind is that the mind perceives through separation and distinction, while the heart perceives *holographically*, by grasping instantaneously the larger pattern of relatedness governing the various components. They are two different operating systems, two different ways of tracking reality.

In my book *Mystical Hope* (2001) I liken the difference between them to sailing in the fog. On a bright sunny day, you can see a lighthouse five miles across the bay and head directly toward it. That's analogous to the mental-egoic way of knowing; you see the target out there and up ahead and make your way towards it. You sail by reference to *where you are not*. But when the fog shuts in so thick that not only can you not see the lighthouse, you can't even see the bow of the boat, then you have to make your way by a different kind of intelligence: you let your senses of smell, hearing, and motion orientate you by opening deeply to them and allowing yourself to belong to the picture; you sail by reference to *where you are*. Or to use another analogy, the heart is like the orchestra conductor who can hear all the

different instrumental parts simultaneously, as a single harmonic whole. The knowing of the binary mind moves from the part to the whole; the knowing of the heart moves from the whole to the part.

NP Q8: The Wisdom Jesus *is calling people to a radical transformation — a transformation into what you have called ‘the operating system of the heart’ (or seeing with the eye of the heart). This in your view*

...suggests that this transformation is both possible and intended for human beings. And there may well be something in the teaching itself that allows these stages to unfold quickly, in a geometric rather than linear progression. (Bourgeault, 2008, p. 32)

And yet, you also write that (although) Jesus leaves us with a path to getting across the gap between what we believe and what we actually live,

...this path has been attained by only a very enlightened few, the St. Francis of the world, the Mother Teresas of the world. And when it is attained, it’s always in the same way: by someone managing to fall all the way through the egoic operation system, with its inherent rigidity and fear, into the fullness of love that can be known only in and through the heart. (*ibid.*, p. 40)

There seems to be incongruence between the last two quotations, i.e. that transformation is both possible and intended for human beings, and it has only been attained by a very enlightened few. So, what is possible for the vast majority of us — indeed, possible in a human lifetime? Why embark on the path with all its hassles, ‘tests and tribulations’ if the Kingdom of Heaven is, after all or in practice, only realizable for the few? Could you please speak to this apparent incongruence?

CB: What if the path is not the *means* to the goal (the goal being spiritual attainment), but rather, the manifestation in every moment we practise of the fruits of attainment? In other words, we don’t fast or meditate in order to *attain* enlightenment, but because fasting and meditation are wondrous, holographic activities in and of themselves that manifest and connect us to that larger field of attained awareness. I believe that the way traditional spirituality (both Eastern and Western) has framed our objective and the means to attain it contributes substantially to the problem that so many people seem to have in arriving there. If we could move beyond the appearance that the kingdom is ‘over there’ — far above us, or beyond us — then we would

perhaps see more clearly how transforming love comes to us with every breath we take, and we already occupy the very centre of the divine milieu in which practice falls from us as an expression of simple gratitude. I love the quote from Robert Browning:

There is an inmost center in us all,
Where truth abides in fullness... and to know
Rather consists in opening out a way
Whence the imprisoned splendour may escape,
Than in effecting entry for a light
Supposed to be without. ('Paracelsus')

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