

Thought as a Window on the Soul

Here is the end of choice. For here we come to a decision to accept ourselves as God created us. And what is choice except uncertainty of what we are? There is no doubt that is not rooted here. There is no question but reflects this one. There is no conflict that does not entail the single, simple question, "What am I?" - A Course in Miracles¹

"Can I finish my purpose in this incarnation, so that I will not need to return to the earth?" asked a 49 year-old widow in her life reading with Edgar Cayce.² [CR 1037-1] According to the Cayce reading, anyone can accomplish this fete. Our purpose for incarnating on the Earth involves an awareness of the "I AM conscience" that resides within each of us and connects us directly with God. Intellectual knowledge of this I AM conscience, or even belief in its presence, while helpful, is not enough.

Edgar Cayce, who lived from 1877 to 1945, discovered early in life that, when in a deep entranced state, he could diagnose illnesses and prescribe treatments for people who came to him with ailments that had stumped all of the doctors who had attempted to heal. Later in life, the people seeking his help started asking questions about their life purpose and other more spiritual, metaphysical topics. He was able to answer those as well. Although he personally had no recall of the answers given while the "reading" was in progress, a stenographer was present so that the information obtained would be recorded verbatim.³ The text of the readings, over 14,000 in total, have been preserved by the Association for Research and Enlightenment and are intensely studied not only for their insight into a holistic approach to health and living, but also for the mystic lens they provide for understanding life and reality. They harmonize very nicely with ancient mystic wisdom from Jewish, Christian, Islam, Hindu, Buddhist and other religious and philosophical traditions.

According to the Cayce reading, the type of awareness that fulfills our purpose is the result of a change in our pattern of living and thinking. Like a change in clothes, we have to "put off the old" and put on the "new" – the one based in God. Our essential self remains the same despite the change in the outer "garments." The difference is that the old garments obscure awareness of this essential or "true" self, whereas the new ones provide clarity. Thus, the type of clarity needed to fulfill our life purpose requires an objective exploration of the "outer garments" created by our mind - our thoughts. As is discussed later, our thoughts provide a "window on our soul," but let's first take a look at why this quest for self-discovery is so important - and so challenging.

First Find Self

In the midst of a messy divorce and other family-related difficulties, a friend of mine arranged a private healing session with a shaman a few years ago. She went into the session hoping perhaps for some energetic razzle-dazzle or past life revelations that would "fix" those parts of her life that caused her pain (or at least provide a good story to tell her friends). What she remembered most about the session was the shaman spent "too much time" asking her a question that seemed both obvious and inconsequential:

“Who are you?” She struggled to come up with the “correct” answer to that question. No answer given – her name, her roles (mother, daughter) – seemed to satisfy the shaman. Frustrated that so much of her session was spent on this “irrelevant” subject, my friend never went back.

My friend did not recognize the gift she had been given. Over and over again in the Cayce readings, when advice was requested on what a person should do in this life, the person was told to “first find self” and self’s relationship to its Creator. Frequently, the seeker was also instructed to find self’s “ideal” (which is a value or set of key values that we adopt as the polestar by which we “navigate” when making our choices) and whether the ideal was of a selfish or a universal nature. These are “the channels through which [we] may gain the greater insight, the greater awareness of [our] abilities, of [our] activities; and through same find harmony, peace and understanding.”⁴

Finding self, self’s relationship with his Creator and Self’s ideal are the first steps towards bringing our lives into true focus. In advising a man on plans for a spiritually oriented school for boys, a Cayce reading stressed the importance of a curriculum that placed the “greatest stress” upon vocational guidance that helps the students focus on the questions, “Who am I?” and “What is my purpose in this experience?” Without this type of self-understanding, “many a Liszt or Mozart is digging ditches or shoveling coal. Many an artist, many a Rembrandt or a Hunt is selling clothes or fooling with stocks or bonds or the like.”⁵ According to the readings, it does not matter whether the choice involves selection of a mate, occupation, place to live or diet. As we bring our lives more into focus, we are better positioned to make choices that would bring fulfillment and spiritual growth.

What the Cayce readings describe as finding your “self” is referred to in this story from the Jewish tradition as establishing your “center.”

A student was sitting in a garden with his grandfather. “I am getting excellent grades,” he said, “and my professors see a great future for me. And yet I am miserable.”

“A happy and wholesome life is like a perfect circle,” his grandfather replied, picking up a stone and a small tree branch. He placed the stone on the ground and, using the branch as a compass, drew a perfect circle with the stone at its center.

“When you have a fixed and steady center, then your circle will be perfect,” the grandfather said. “However, if the center is constantly shifting, you will never be able to draw a circle. Today, many people receive a good education and establish a successful career, but never establish a spiritual center around which their life’s activities orbit. Especially in these turbulent times, one needs such a center.

“When you establish your center, my son, and it is clear, all else will follow.”⁶

What is the big mystery in knowing “who we are,” finding our “self” or establishing our “center?” We have spent every waking hour with ourselves. We know a

lot about ourselves. We are children, parents, siblings, employees, musicians, tennis players and the like. We have our likes and our dislikes. We know some of our strengths and also our weaknesses. If that kind of familiarity is not sufficient, what is it that we need to better understand about ourselves?

The problem is that much of what we have come to identify with in ourselves is not our “true” self. The mystic wisdom of the Jewish tradition, the “Kabballah,” teaches that each of us is a “divine spark” covered by a “husk” (like a corn husk). Although the spark looks like it is severed from its Divine Source, it is still connected. The “husk” is something built by our minds that obscures the visibility of the spark to our perception and to others. Strand by strand, our resentments, grudges, angers, prejudices, emotional wounds, confusions, guilt, fears, false beliefs, and the like (“husk builders”), create a series of energetic knots and entanglements that give the husk its body.

We often cling to these husk builders as if they were treasure. Like the body odor of a person who hasn’t showered in several days, these husk-builders may hardly be noticeable to the person who wears them, but they can offend the people around him. They are harmful to our health. They attract negativity from the outside world (“like attracts like,” “misery loves company”). They build up energy like an over-pressurized vessel so that the slightest provocation can trigger a disproportionate, explosive response. Moreover, they skew our perception so that we can be miserable in the midst of wealth, family and apparent success. When our perception is distorted, we make choices based on skewed premises. Thus, our choices become skewed as well.

Generally, we think we know who are we, but our self-perception tends to blend the husk with the divine spark. Suggest to a person experiencing claustrophobia that he enter an elevator and he will resist. His divine spark is not the source of this resistance. It is the “husk” that is speaking. He thinks of that fear as an integral part of who he is. However, heal the fear and the irrational resistance disappears. His divine spark, on the other hand, can be hidden by the husk, but never goes away.

“Putting off the old” – the patterns of thinking and behavior driven by the husk’s distortions – and “putting on the new” – the patterns of thinking and behavior that provide clarity and give expression to the divine spark – is a necessary part of the type of self-discovery that leads to awareness of the I AM conscience within. As the distraction of the husk (like the fear experienced by the claustrophobic) is diminished, the divine spark (or true self) becomes easier to “see.”

Working with our Thoughts

How do we recognize the husk builders that need to be “put off?” In this respect, a husk is like an iceberg. A small percent of the iceberg, like the claustrophobic’s fear, is so obvious that it is readily visible to most observers. The rest of the husk is more subtle, better managed or becomes a problem only intermittently. Like the part of the iceberg that lies below the ocean surface, it is frequently invisible to us, yet still poses a hazard. We can access this hidden part of the iceberg only by diving below the surface and

working with it there or by evaporating the visible part so that the formerly submerged portions begin to rise to the surface and become visible.

A starting point for distinguishing our divine spark from the husk is our thought. As is the case for the iceberg, there are at least two ways to work with these thoughts in order to explore our individual husk in aid of healing. In one, the “deep dive,” we can take a particularly troublesome thought and dive below the surface to explore its origins. In the other, the “surface melt,” whenever we recognize that a particular thought directed at other people is heavily influenced by the husk builders, we simply “melt them away” through forgiveness.

By exposing the husk, as well as its sources, and helping them to be healed, these two techniques help us over time to unravel the distortion of the husk. They allow our divine spark, our true self, to become more and more prominent in our awareness (and that of those around us). They give us a “window on our soul.”

The Deep Dive

Thoughts are things. Like words and deeds, they are acts of creation, just closer to the subconscious so there may seem to be less “executive control” over them. They change our world for better or for worse depending on where we let the stream of thought go. By tracing a thought back to its origins – its roots – we can gain insight into the husk we have accumulated and the opportunities for healing.

When “unconstructive” thoughts arise – for example, ones that are morally judgmental, that are infused with fear, jealousy, self-aggrandizement and the like or that we otherwise feel would be inappropriate to speak or act upon, it is not sufficient (or true) to say that we have no control over them. For example, if a child cannot study for a test because he is thinking about sports all the time, we would tell him to get his act together and focus on what he needs to do – study. If he tries, he can find a way to study. If he does not try, he will continue to fail. Similarly, we have to accept responsibility for our thoughts. If we do otherwise, we give up any opportunity to improve.

The first step of this “deep dive” is to objectively monitor what we’re thinking. Our first reaction when we realize the unconstructive nature of a thought or feeling may be to suppress it as if it were “wrong.” There is no need for guilt, fear or abruptness. The purpose of this exercise is not to judge or keep score, but rather to start living consciously. It will lead to change, but the change can be graceful rather than disruptive.

The second step is to begin working with the streams of thought that are headed in directions we don’t want to go. We could suppress them or divert attention from them, but these are not the preferred ways of addressing them. Alternatively, we could release them with blessings and make a new choice as to where we want to go with our thoughts. Better yet, we could “transform” them into realizations and thoughts that take us in a more constructive direction. For example, a thought that arises as a fear, e.g. a fear that something will happen to a child today, can be transformed into gratitude and wisdom by

the realization of how vulnerable we would be if our protection were solely dependent upon our physical resources and how blessed we are that God is involved in every aspect of our lives.

In the third step, we examine our unconstructive thoughts, words and deeds as if they were the “fruits” of a tree. We are the tree. When we find unhealthy fruit, we shouldn’t just focus on banning or judging this type of fruit. Our more important focus should be on understanding the internal mechanism of the tree that affected the fruit so that we can heal the tree. Heal the tree and it will naturally begin to produce healthy fruit.

To do this, we try to discern where the thought came from. What is the “husk builder” that gave rise to the thought? Like the boy who hasn’t showered in weeks, we aren’t really aware of the stuff we are wearing because we have gradually grown used to it. It is part of the “comfort zone” we have developed. In this sense, the thoughts that pop up can help us become aware of the resentments, fears and the like that operate in our blind spots to give form to our husk.

An example sometimes offered to support the contention that we don’t have control over our thoughts is the typical reaction to being cut off in traffic. If a person were suddenly cut off by a rude driver and started to think resentful thoughts towards the rude driver, can he be said to have control over those initial thoughts? Isn’t it a simple matter of reflex? Didn’t the rude driver deserve it? Isn’t it a matter of dealing with it like it is?

The answer is that we have control. The reflex is a conditioned response based on the habits, attitudes and expectations that we have built up one choice at a time. Change our attachment to these and the reflex will follow. Our outrage is not “dealing with it like it is” because we do not see it like it is. We “see” a misleading half truth. The driver’s action may appear “rude” to us, but we are not seeing the whole picture. We don’t know his perspective. Instead of connecting with the divine spark in that other person and the experience as a whole, we are allowing his husk to monopolize our attention.

If the Dalai Lama were cut off in traffic, he would probably not experience a wave of resentment from the experience. We have to go back a few stages in the process that produced the resentment to see where the ability to control comes in. For the person who experienced the resentment, the powder keg was put in place long ago. All of the parts of the process were in motion. The action by the other driver was simply the friction that ignited the powder keg and brought the explosion into manifestation.

As noted above, the first step is to become conscious about the resentment and realizing that it is a choice. Many people do not notice the resentment or assume that it is normal and does not matter. The second step is to make a choice about whether we want to linger in the resentment or get past it. We may initially feel resentful, but we do not have to continue to feed it. It is not healthy or constructive. We can simply make another choice about what to focus on. The third step is to begin to think about what it is within us that produced resentment as a reaction when we were cut off in traffic.

Perhaps we may find that we are lacking patience or that we are attached to some expectation as to how the world is to work. Perhaps there is a prejudice involved towards the race or sex of the driver who cut us off. Perhaps we are carrying repressed anger from other events that happened in our lives earlier in the day. Perhaps we are seeing in the action of the rude driver some aspect of ourselves to which we have otherwise been blind. In any case, as we come to better know the antecedents to the resentment, we'll find that they also show up in other parts of our lives.

Once we become more aware of these husk builders, we find that we need not be a prisoner to them. There are several choices we can make. We can attempt to suppress them or distract ourselves from them. We can stop “feeding” them mentally so that they begin to “wither on the vine.” We can release them through forgiveness or transform them through understanding. Suppressing and distracting a husk builder may “control” it in a temporary sense, but rarely results in healing. Suppression can even feed the husk builder (via the resistance) and distort it so that it arises elsewhere in a more powerful form. Healing requires that the negative aspect be released or transformed and the divine spark within be redeemed.

The Surface Melt

The Baal Shem Tov (a notable Kabbalist and founder of Hassidism) taught that “our fellow is our mirror.” What we “see” in others, particularly if we are annoyed by what we see, gives us important information about our own husk. This is also an important teaching of the Edgar Cayce readings, A Course in Miracles and other sources of spiritual wisdom.

Our husk dramatically colors what we “see” in the outside world. When our husk is transparent, we see people and events through the eyes of the divine spark. We see everything in its true, constructive context. To the extent that we carry a coarser husk, our vision is filtered by the negativity (like colored glasses). Much of the constructive context is filtered out. The otherwise negative aspects are accentuated. As a result, the negativity we carry in our husk translates into a negative experience of the outer world (the people we meet and the things that happen to us). This is true even though we may be unaware of the negativity of our husk (like the body odor analogy discussed above).

This mechanism also works in reverse. Although we are usually unaware of our contribution to the negative experiences we encounter, we cannot truly forgive the conduct that offends us without overriding and releasing that portion of our own negativity (the “husk builder”) that is coloring our view of the experience. Disarm a “husk-builder” and the portions of the husk dependent on it begin to dissolve. Thus, each experience in the outside world that provokes an inner annoyance, judgment, resentment, fear or other negativity on our part, even if our reaction is very subtle and even if the provocation seems extreme, becomes an opportunity to glimpse a part of our husk as well as an opportunity to heal.

As in the “deep dive,” the first step of the “surface melt” is to begin observing ourselves as if we were detached observers rather than active participants. Notice when we delve into negativity, anger or the like. Observe the dynamic that is happening when our anger, judgment or criticism is triggered and the types of situations that trigger it. Notice how often this happens in a given day and what types of situations (e.g., gripe sessions with co-workers at the coffee maker) facilitate the negativity and what types discourage it. Notice whether we feel compelled to contribute to the negativity (or steer away from it). By observing the stimuli that tend to trigger an effect in us, we are really beginning to learn about our inner selves.

The second step is to acknowledge that what is really happening is not some conflict with another person. It is an interaction between us (as individuals) and God and therefore needs to be better understood. Whatever the other person has done, God has constructive purposes for allowing it to happen, even though we, with our limited view of God’s plan, may be unable to see it at the time. Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, makes this point very well in the following meditation entitled “Advice on Anger:”

Prepare yourself with this meditation, and when you feel anger overcoming you, run through it in your mind:

Know that all that befalls you comes from a single Source, that there is nothing outside of that Oneness to be blamed for any event in the universe.

And although this person who insulted you, or hurt you, or damaged your property, is granted free choice and is held culpable for his decision to do wrong -- that is his problem. That it had to happen to you -- that is between you and the One Above.

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All of your world is G-d speaking to you. Listen carefully.⁷

This is an important concept to grasp. Every situation we encounter has a constructive potential and a potential for negativity. Throughout these experiences, the “still, small voice” within is “talking” to us and always trying to direct our attention to the constructive so that it may become part of our consciousness and lead to further blessings. We have to get used to tapping into this meaning as it is revealed to us because the constructive meaning is the truth of the situation and it leads to more truth. The potential for negativity in the situation, like our husk, is an illusion. It feels and appears real but only the constructive part lives on “for it is a part of the eternal oneness – or at-onement with the purpose of the Creative Forces.”⁸ Like the husk, the potential for negativity in an experience can distract our attention and energies from the divine spark that is present.

Even if we cannot “see” anything constructive at a given moment in what we are experiencing, we will nonetheless be well-served by keeping an open mind and moving forward on the assumption that there is one. As one Rabbi noted:

I've seen so much suffering, and it seems to me that the key is attitude. How people deal with suffering depends on what attitude they have. I have seen people whose attitude was of anger or hurt to such an extent that they never got beyond a particular event – which then became the defining moment of their lives. In a certain sense, life stopped at that particular moment. On the other hand, I have seen people who have gone through the most horrendous things, but their attitude was a positive one of believing that there is an ultimate good, of asking, “How can I learn and grow from this?” It was incredible to see their sense of dignity and the inspiration they gave to others, how they moved on with their lives. The contrast is so unbelievable between these two attitudes. Living with the concept of a good God is so much more uplifting and gives a person the ability to remain joyful and hopeful and have the strength to go on and fight.⁹

The third step of this “surface melt” is where the heavy lifting is done. As we feel the resentments and judgments arise, we have to “forgive” the perceived faults of the other person and release our negativity towards him. This requires true forgiveness rather than the type of forgiveness that has a hidden judgmental element – (i.e. “you are an awful person or you have done a morally reprehensible thing, but I will do you a favor and overlook it”). If a moral condemnation component remains in our thoughts toward the person, then the forgiveness is not complete. The existence of the moral condemnation is our problem, not his.

There are many ways to work on forgiveness. It may help to develop a further understanding of the situation, particularly seeing it from the other person's perspective. A person who cuts you off in traffic could be dealing with an emergency or you may simply have been in his blind spot. If that does not help, we could try a mental exercise to see how much our interpretation of the other person's motives and background has contributed to our angst. We could substitute the Dalai Lama, the Baal Shem Tov, Jesus, our mother or anyone whom we love and respect in the place of the person perceived to have offended us. It is likely that our harshness will lessen because we have a different predisposition and patience level for these substitute “offenders.”

The Cayce readings teach that there “is so much good in the worst of us, and so much bad in the best of us, it doesn't behoove any of us to speak evil of the rest of us.”¹⁰ The reality is that we are all divine sparks encumbered with husks that are in varying degrees of refinement. Our individual husk may feature prominently in one situation, but not another. The same is true for those we perceive to have offended us.

There needs to be a margin for error for all of us as we go through this process of refining the husk. The process is usually slow and painful because we unknowingly fight the process rather than work with it. Whenever we encounter an event or conduct that offends us, we can simply use our experience of the event to enlarge what we view as the allowable margin for error for a human being who is a work in progress. Stripped of the moral judgment component, the other person could be likened to a toddler who stumbles while learning to walk. A certain amount of stumbling is expected. He'll learn to walk eventually.

The point of this exercise is the healing of the judging, resentment, anger and negativity that is filtering our perception of reality. It does not require an “ostrich-in-the-sand” approach to objective facts. We wouldn’t leave our toddler who is learning to walk in a room by himself with power tools. Nor would we leave him alone in a room where he might easily break valuable crystal. Even without the moral judgment, precautions often need to be taken. If we encounter someone who steals for a living, we need not ignore the propensity for theft (and leave property exposed). We should take reasonable precautions, but stay connected to the divine spark in that person even though its manifestation is being distorted at the moment by the husk. The divine spark, not the husk, is his true nature.

Is it really possible to focus on the divine spark in someone when we are being hurt by him? Yes, and we need look no further than the life of Mohandas Gandhi to find a good example. Gandhi confronted prejudice and injustice time and again in South Africa and India. He did not passively accept this conduct; rather, he challenged it aggressively – but using non-violent means. Millions were inspired to follow his lead.

No matter what Gandhi thought of the laws, attitudes and conduct he confronted, he never based his challenges on hatred or demonizing the people who indulged in them. He addressed his appeals to the best in these adversaries – the divine spark – and his nonviolence took away the excuse for the harsh measures used by his adversaries to perpetuate the old ways and perceptions. Ultimately it was the adversaries’ divine sparks that prevailed, as they relented to moral persuasion despite having the military and governmental power to continue the past practices indefinitely. In this way, Gandhi elevated all of those around him, even his adversaries.

We may feel that it is unrealistic to expect “normal people” to act in the same way that Gandhi acted when faced with perceived hurt or injustice. However, that is the way of the divine spark – our true selves. Even if we are not there at this point in our journey, it is good to have an idea of where we are going.

A Clearer View

The more we work with our thoughts to forgive the inner and outer worlds, the better we become at it. The opportunities will continue to arise as long as we have negativity inside to be triggered. As the big issues are addressed, the subtler ones will pop up for attention.

It is not only verbal thought – thought that takes the form of words – that needs our attention. The same logic applies to the more subtle “fruits” of our “tree” – our feelings and other non-verbal reactions. A tensing up in response to a thought or comment by another person is a sign that there is something deeper to be understood. The same is true, for example, with puffs of anger, annoyance or jealousy that may arise in the course of the day. Many times these either go unnoticed or are quickly forgotten

by our conscious mind. By beginning to note them, we discover the opportunities for self-healing.

The people, things, and events we encounter will look different when viewed through a lens that is less burdened by husk builders. We are better able to see (and follow up on) the constructive implications of the people and experiences we encounter. A rabbi friend of mine teaches this point using a hypothetical involving a newspaper report of a bombing at a refinery in Saudi Arabia. To most people, this would be nothing more than another account of violence in a far off part of the world. To a global economist who is familiar with the oil market and the various industries that are affected by its fluctuations, this story reveals much more. He might recognize that it will cause a shortage in oil supply and be able to trace the ripple effect around the globe and through industry. This additional insight might enable him to capitalize in the stock market by anticipating the effect before the rest of the investors catch up.

In the same way, when we take off the lens of judgment and negativity and become more skilled at seeing the bigger picture, including the divine spark, we become better at understanding the meaning of the experiences in our lives. We are better positioned to recognize the wonderful opportunities for a more meaningful life that God is continually making available to us.

We will notice patterns over time. We may find that several of the difficulties that have recurred in life (for example, a pattern of failed marriages or job situations) stem back to the same root cause, perhaps a problem with low self-esteem, need for control, fear of death or the ultimate root cause – the belief that we are separate from God and each other. When we take one of our “sick fruit” thoughts and heal the condition in the tree that caused it, we weaken all strands of the husk that spring from that root cause. Thus work on seemingly minor issues, such as subtle feelings of resentment that arise in the course of dealing with a parent or sibling, can help knock down a bigger issue, such as a pronounced addiction, codependency or self-destructive tendencies.

The refinement of the husk clears away noise and distractions that hinder our ability to recognize God in our lives and fulfill our life purpose. Our health, quality of life, mental outlook and sense of spiritual connection will improve. We will attract more friends and constructive relationships – like attracts like. More importantly, this use of our thought as a window on the soul enables us to better understand who we truly are. As a result, our “divine spark” (the I AM conscience) -- and not our husk -- becomes the primary driver of our lives. According to the answer given in the Cayce reading to the 49-year old widow, at some point our awareness of this I AM conscience develops to the point where we “finish [our] purpose in this incarnation” and a return to earth for education through future incarnations becomes unnecessary.

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- ¹ **A Course in Miracles: Workbook for Students, Lesson 139 (Foundation for Inner Peace 1992).**
- ² **Cayce Reading 1037-1.**
- ³ B. Ernest Frejer, compiler, The Edgar Cayce Companion: A Comprehensive Treatise of the Edgar Cayce Readings (ARE Press 1995), pp. V – IX.
- ⁴ **Cayce Reading 1786-1.**
- ⁵ **Cayce Reading 165-24.**
- ⁶ **Toward a Meaningful Life: The Wisdom of The Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson**, adapted by Simon Jacobson (Morrow 1995), pp. 202-203.
- ⁷ **Bringing Heaven Down to Earth: 365 Meditations of the Rebbe**, compiled and edited by Tzvi Freeman (Class One Press 1996), pg. 87.
- ⁸ **Cayce Reading 1007-3.**
- ⁹ Rabbi Ahron Hoch, “Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?” http://www.simpletoremember.com/vitals/WhyDoBadThings_HappentoGoodPeople.htm (accessed 2 September 2008).
- ¹⁰ **Cayce Reading 3063-1.**