

*Rainbow Bodhisattva*

painting by Vijali on the wall of a cave in Tibet

## CHAPTER TWO

### STEPS TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF CONTINUING INCARNATION

In this essay I invite you to join me as I explore two kinds of new thinking in relation to the spiritual dimension of life. First I want to push beyond the boundaries of thing-related thinking (tree, moon, spoon) and think about God as flow, movement and pattern. Although this may sound impersonal, these flows and movements can be quite intimate: life-giving, energizing, connecting, forgiving, awareness-expanding, insight-awakening, and more. One ongoing problem in theology is that the word for “person” is a noun in European languages, so that God as a person gets placed in the same part of our brains as pots, pans and planets: separate objects in space and time.

Second, I want to explore some possibilities of living prayerfully, as distinct from praying. Now I am a person who both prays and encourages others to pray. But my experience is that the Divine Presence always leads us deeper, and that every prayer is a point on a pilgrimage of endless unfolding. So in the second part of this essay I share some of my experience of praying as if God were a verb.

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## BEYOND DIVINE STUFF

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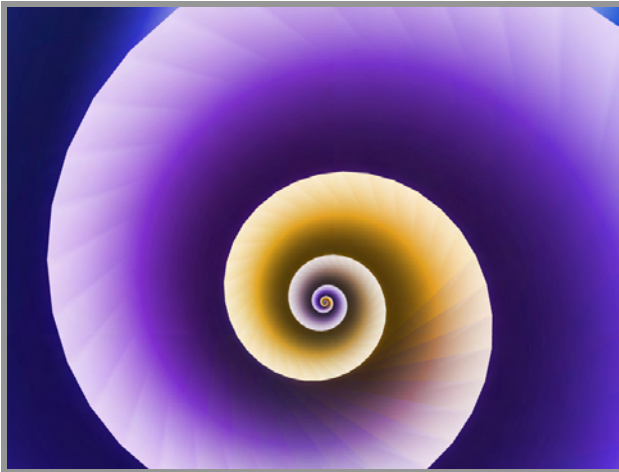
In every age and every culture, people use ideas from everyday life in order to make sense about God and the spiritual life. European-based cultures have for centuries used the idea of substance, *real stuff*, as a way of understanding the reality of God. Ideas of substance, substantial, and enduring being have been the glue that has held most Western theologies together. And along with them, commonsense notions about *quantity*: how a big pile of stuff, gold coins for example, is more significant than a small pile.

Since people do have the experience of the apparent solidity of people and things in everyday life, they will probably continue to think of God as *really there*, the way your best friend is *really there* across the room. In the past century, however, scientists have discovered that everything in the universe is based on real movement and real energy flow rather than real stuff. Atoms are mostly empty space but full of energy and movement. At this very moment, millions of neutrinos, energy bundles from outer space, are passing all the way through your body as if it were not there.

Centuries before any challenges came from science, theologians themselves worked out many of the limitations involved in thinking of God as a separate, substantial being who is “over there.” *Ground of Being* replaced *separate being* as the deepest thought people could think about God. This idea

allowed people to think of God as still substantial but not separate; *really there* because God is *every where*.

For many thoughtful people today, twentieth century physics has made more and more unworkable those spiritual analogies and understandings based on the idea of substance. If there are no true substances in the universe, only *repeatable experiences* of specific energy flows, then it makes less and less sense to praise God as the most sublime and substantial separate being there ever was. But the same twentieth century physics that dissolved our idea of substantiality has provided us with a rich set of ideas about energy flow, resonance, order underlying chaos, and fractal patterns of organization (like the branching of a tree limb) that repeat again and again at different levels of scale.



The Shape of Forever  
Fractal painting by Vicky Brago-Mitchell

Far from making spiritual thoughts unthinkable, I have found that these ideas from science can allow us to look at ancient truths with new eyes, and understand them in new and amazing ways.

In a substance-oriented way of thinking, for example, what sense can be made out of the teaching that human beings are made “in the image and likeness of God?” Thing-thinking must lead us inevitably toward images of a God who has arms and legs! Or to search inside of ourselves for some invisible God-stuff.

But “fractal-flow”-oriented thinking would lead us in a very different direction, Fractals are patterns in nature and mathematics that repeat at many levels of size. The arteries that leave your heart branch and branch again, down to the smallest capillary. Thus do rivers merge from the smallest streams and tree limbs branch to the smallest twig. “Branching” is a repeating pattern of activity. And the turning of the spiral turns the same, from its center to its widest rim.

When you start to observe how there are repeating patterns of activity all through nature, patterns wherein small and large move in similar ways, it is no longer so outlandish to think that when we move through a day mercifully, kindly and awarely, that the qualities of our actions may be deeply related to some Larger Pattern of Movement which is flowing Mercifully, Kindly and Awarely through us. The fractal forms that are everywhere around us suggest a universal theology of incarnating adverbs.

Adverbs, through which we express such qualities of action as “generously” and “forgivingly,” are the most ethereal forms of speech, lighter than an angel’s wing. It is a beautiful paradox to me that these least substantial words in our lives might open doorways to life’s deepest meanings.

I urge you to study how the large and the small are related all around you through the process of “branching”: in

ferns, in broccoli florets, in the veins of a maple leaf and your own hands, in the roots of every plant on the planet. Then go back and meditate on the teaching that human beings are made “in the image and likeness of God.” Instead of encountering a static image, you may find yourself feeling deeply connected to something much larger than yourself, a flow of energy and activity that invites you deeper into the heart of life.

In a tree, the smallest twig branches in exactly the same way as the largest limb. By analogy, you may think of yourself as “not much” spiritually, merely a twig. But the fractal similarity of the large and the small suggests that you may have inner resources of which you are unaware, which can not be measured in terms of quantity, but only of quality. When Mother Teresa said that we are not given to do great things in this life, but to do small things with great love, she was giving a fractal teaching in which the quality matters but the size does not.

These ideas about fractal patterns of activity would be at the heart of a new theology of Incarnating Adverbs. If life and people and the entire universe are patterned flows of activity rather than substantial things, then the qualities we want in our lives are best represented by adverbs, words like lovingly, forgivingly, awarely, delightedly. When we speak of these qualities in the noun forms of love, forgiveness, awareness, etc., we use a language of separate objects (house, tree, brick) that unconsciously holds these qualities at some distance from ourselves. When we speak and think and pray using the adverbial forms we invite these qualities to enter into us more fully, because these adverbial qualities can attach themselves to, and merge with, almost all of our actions, thoughts, feelings and intentions.

Stated somewhat more systematically, this Theology of Incarnating Adverbs seems to me to propose the following web of ideas:

**It is helpful to think of God as flowing energy and activity**, imbued with an infinite number of infinitely beautiful qualities, rather than as a static object. More like an amazingly beautiful chord of music, rather than a ball of sublime stuff.

**It is helpful to think of ourselves as flowing energy and activity**, endlessly changing and therefore always capable of growing more fully into the expression of the Divine qualities, rather than as static objects. This is true even if the language of movement and flow sounds cumbersome to the ear when we first use it.

**The very small is capable of expressing the very large**, in a way that is similar to process by which the smallest strings on a harp hum with the tones played on the largest strings. There is a real transfer of energy and information between the large strings and the small ones, and in a similar way, people often experience themselves as energized when they encounter others who are animated by great compassion and/or profound understanding.

**God continues to incarnate in us** as we shape the qualities of our moment to moment activity to be in resonance with the Divine qualities as best we understand them. (Or, alternately, one might see this relationship as that we continue to give birth to God as we express ever more fully the beautiful qualities hidden in the as yet unmanifest God-flow.)

**Our knowledge and embodiment of the Divine qualities will probably never be final and do not need to be final**, because part of the perfection of the Divine is an inexhaustible power to give birth to something new, and an inexhaustible yearning to be made ever more manifest. Endlessly new chords of beauty and meaning can emerge as the qualities of the Divine Flowing are woven together again and again in our lives. Our assignment from the universe is to love with a new and greater love, to see with a new and greater vision, to create with a new and deeper creativity, and so on.

Like seeds cast upon the wind, our assignment is to plant ourselves somewhere and cast new seeds of compassion and delight upon future winds. Knowing this we can hold all our ideas about the spiritual life as working approximations, necessarily open to endless refinement as the process toward which our ideas point, evolves. The reward for adopting this attitude of approximation and reverential non-finality is the freedom to grow.

And, finally, **the fundamental unit of human experiencing** does not have to be the day or even the minute, but instead **could be understood as a single breathing in and breathing out**. There are approximately twelve to eighteen thousand breathings in a person's waking day. Each breathing can express all of the qualities of the God-flow. We can breathe gratefully, forgivingly, awarely, compassionately, delightedly, energizingly, nurturingly, creatively, and so on as the infinitely giving presence sings through our living.

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## FRACTAL MANTRAS OF INCARNATION

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I hope these thoughts will invite you to see each present moment with new eyes, and to feel your own moment-to-moment actions as openings through which the Divine Breathing can be ever more fully born into this world... deeply peacefully, endlessly compassionately, creatively expressively, gratefully delightedly, and more!

Here is a meditation that I have been doing for several years on these themes: Sit or lay quietly, focus on your breathing and gently repeat in your mind any two of the adverbs in the paragraphs above or on the list below. Feel your way into the qualities. Play some slow, rhythmic music if it

helps. You can also think of the saints or exemplars whose lives have embodied these qualities.



The rainbow can be understood as an archetypal symbol of incarnation: the beauty of heaven comes to Earth

What would it feel like to breathe more courageously, more generously? Could you do it for just one breath? Because if you can do it for just one breath, then you can do it ever more deeply for a lifetime. You can breathe more creatively and compassionately in, through and under all you're your various activities in living. Fractal imagery suggests that what is most beautiful in you could be expressed in your smallest, plainest moments. Each of what you may see as your "ordinary" moments is really like a flower, waiting to open up. What it needs is some sunlight from your heart.

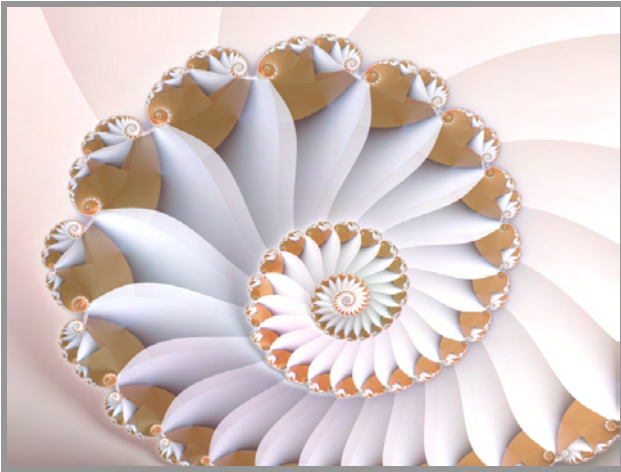
Well, that is the expanding world of exploration into which I invite you. And the qualities of what one might call the Heart of God turn out to be in many respects the qualities of a fully developing person, the many-sided fractal, I believe, of a continuing incarnation participated in by Jesus, Buddha, the saints of all religions and every compassionate and aware person who has ever lived (as well as all animal species in which compassion, awareness and creativity are emerging!).

I thought about this for many years and finally decided to try to write down as many of the qualities as I could. The following list is drawn from my own experience and my encounters with many wisdom traditions, ancient and modern, (among which there is actually a lot of agreement). You will recognize the influence of Jesus, St. Paul and St. Francis on this list, along with Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, Martin Buber, Erik Erikson, and Gautama Buddha. In compiling this synthesis, I have translated all the fixed qualities of character described by these various teachers into ways of action, consistent with the idea that the universe is a flow rather than a thing, and we also are a moving stream.

Thus translated into adverbs (and grouped into related clusters), we can say that at every stage along life's way we are challenged to think, act, dream, and interact with one another in the following ways...

- ... more awarely (of self, other and context)
- ... more skillfully, competently and wisely
- ... more honestly, sincerely, genuinely, congruently  
(inner matches outer)
- ... more caringly, compassionately, acceptingly,  
respectfully, warmly, forgivingly
- ... more creatively and "exploratorily" (with more  
creative openness to new experience)
- ... more courageously, hopefully and faithfully
- ... more generously and nurturingly, delighting in the  
happiness of others

- ... more meaningfully and expressively, organizing and expressing our experiences in coherent patterns of words, music, movement and imagery
- ... more gratefully and appreciatively, open to delight
- ... more engagingly, energetically and responsively
- ... more gracefully and beautifully (in the Navajo sense of beauty as cosmic harmony)



Infinite Stairway      Fractal painting by Vicky Brago-Mitchell

As you walk through each day, you can let your breathing remind you of the beautiful qualities wanting to be expressed this moment. Just as practice and improvisation go hand in hand in piano playing, a structured, almost rosary-like focus on the Incarnating Adverbs can go hand in hand with a spontaneous opening of oneself to bring into each new situation just that chord of qualities needed. I find that the two-adverb combinations continue to inspire and startle me with new possibilities: creatively forgivingly, courageously responsively, and so on. There are hundreds of combinations and taken together they represent a kind of evolving map of God-as-flowing, God-as-love-incarnating. For me, the idea of Incarnation is profoundly dynamic and cannot be contained or limited. When Jesus taught his followers to pray “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” it seems to me that he was, and is, inviting us all into a life of continuous incarnational development. “On earth” includes me, here, now. And many beautiful saints, sages and mystics of many religions have expressed this same extraordinary invitation, an invitation made suddenly new by our evolving understanding that the very small can express the very large.

The prayerful meditation on the Incarnating Adverbs that I have shared with you in this essay is my way of opening up this moment, again and again, as the doorway into which eternity can enter. To me it is the lost half of the process of prayer. For just as much as we need to have distinct moments of prayer and meditation that are in contrast to our everyday activity, we also need ways to bring the energy and awareness of prayer into each moment of our everyday activity,

creatively... and delightfully.