

CHAPTER 1 - MANY TRUTHS AND UNIVERSAL TRUTH

Chapter 1 of 'The Whole Elephant Revealed'

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The sacred teachings of the Indigenous way, the Buddhist way, the Christian way, the Jewish way, the Islamic way, ultimately trace their form to direct experience of the Mystery. The Pale One, the Buddha, Christ, Moses, Muhammad – each directly experienced truths, and their teachings met the evolving consciousness of the societies in which they grew.

Dhyani Ywahoo – Cherokee wisdom keeper – 1987 ¹

WISDOM TRADITIONS AND SCIENCE

Civilization is about to undergo the greatest change in two thousand years.

Walter Russell - painter, sculptor, architect and mystic - 1935 ²

One of the unique aspects of the present time is that we have access to insights relating to the nature, meaning and operation of the universe from three entirely different perspectives. First of all, there is an expansion of consciousness taking place, enabling more and more people to tune into their own inner knowing. More and more people are now able to experience for themselves the ageless truths that for a long time were only known to mystics.

Secondly, a wealth of ancient knowledge of wisdom traditions long hidden or kept secret has in recent times become available to everyone. These insights turn out to closely resemble the insights of a growing number of people throughout the world based on their own experiences during non-ordinary states of consciousness. This leads to a radically new perspective on the ancient knowledge of the different wisdom traditions. We are now increasingly capable of comprehending this ancient knowledge and assess it at its true value. It is becoming increasingly apparent that this wealth of information may be of great use in these same processes of growth and development.

The third aspect is that recent, cutting-edge scientific discoveries show a high degree of correspondence with these ancient insights from the wisdom traditions as well as with certain perceptions based on our personal experiences. The insights of mystics, which we now understand more and more, in turn clarify a number of our personal experiences and some seemingly contradictory scientific findings. The special situation at this moment in time makes it possible to place all these seemingly divergent perceptions alongside each other like parts of a puzzle, revealing a picture of the 'whole elephant'.

Wisdom traditions

My use of the expression “wisdom traditions” encompasses the multitude of different faiths, mystical teachings and belief systems. Wisdom traditions have existed all through the ages and in many

different cultures and many of these traditions are still in existence today. However, knowledge of these matters in our Western society has been veiled during a long period, and much of this information was often kept secret. The long history of secrecy of mystic knowledge was partly due to the fact that in many cultures such knowledge was not available to everyone, but to only a few individuals. Another factor was the influence of Christianity, for much of this old knowledge was declared by the church to be 'heathen' or 'heretical'. Consequently many of these traditions were forbidden, many sources destroyed and many of the people who were in possession of this knowledge were put to death. The only remaining option, then, was to pass down these insights from generation to generation in secret.

Recently it has become apparent that not all of this knowledge has actually been lost. On the contrary, much of this has become widely available in many different ways at this time. For example, ancient wisdom texts banned at some point in history and since presumed lost have reappeared, like the Nag Hammadi writings and the Dead Sea Scrolls. In addition, ancient texts are retranslated, thus becoming more accessible to a wider public. Even more importantly though, representatives of secret societies and spiritual leaders of indigenous people recently decided to make their knowledge, long kept in secret, available to everyone.

Disclosing this previously secret knowledge was a conscious choice. It was the mission of many indigenous spiritual leaders to pass down the knowledge of their traditions in secret from generation to generation as long as was necessary. In this way, it could be kept safe and released to the world as soon as the time was ripe. According to many of these keepers of ancient knowledge, this time has arrived now. During the course of the past fifty years many have decided to share their precious insights with anyone who is interested. At first, this was not without risks. In the United States of America, for example, it was not until 1979 that the prohibition on publicly sharing indigenous wisdom with others was officially lifted. After 1979, a great deal of knowledge, that had up to that moment been passed down by word of mouth, could then for the first time be written down and published.

Since 1995, the spiritual leaders of various indigenous people from the whole of Northern, Central and Southern America meet on a regular basis. Although the many different indigenous people have widely differing traditions, it turns out that similar insights have evolved regarding their relationship with their natural environment. In their view, it is now time to reveal these perceptions, so that we can use this knowledge to restore balance and harmony throughout the world. Added to that is the fact that the knowledge held by the more spiritual and mystical movements in the different world religions, often kept secret until recent times, has also become much more accessible.

Because the wisdom and mystical knowledge of many cultures and traditions from so many different sources is now in principle available to everyone, we presently have the unique situation that the teachings from all these different sources can be compared with each other. Although each tradition has its own words and terminology, it is however surprising to discover how much the essence of the teachings of all of these wisdom traditions correspond. It turns out that, hidden beneath the dust of all the seeming differences in cultures and dogmas, a golden thread of fundamental Universal Wisdom is woven through all the sources of ancient wisdom. The essence of this knowledge is a wisdom that is not bound to times and cultures. It is a wisdom that is universal and that lies at the foundation of all religions, spiritual movements and belief systems.

Our idea about reality is changing

These developments coincide with the fact that for many of us, our ideas on what we believe to be true – and therefore also our ideas about reality – are in a process of change. On the one hand, what we hold to be true and our idea about reality is formed by the world view of the culture in which we live. Reality for us is therefore colored by what we think reality to be. In other words, how we observe reality is determined by this perspective. On the other hand, we also form an idea for ourselves about reality and truth on the basis of our own experiences and inner knowing. Because of this, we may then realize that things are intrinsically different from what we had first thought on the basis of the world view of the culture in which we live.

The present time is marked by the fact that more and more people are searching for their own views about truth, for example based on the experiences they themselves have had. One of the consequences is a change nowadays in the value that is attached to the findings of Western science. While Western science was long regarded by many as the absolute authority on truth, an ever-growing number of people no longer regard it as the only true authority. The world view derived from traditional, reductionist science in fact restricts our scope to perceive and for many people is no longer satisfactory.

Great changes within Western science

At the same time, extensive and radical changes are also taking place within the field of the present-day Western science. In its search for the truth, Western science bases itself not only on observations and repeatable experiments, but also on axioms, that is to say on unproven assumptions about the nature of the world. Some new findings appear so radical that a number of these axioms on which Western science has long been based upon, may well need to be reconsidered. Many new revolutionary scientific findings have since demonstrated the restrictions of the so-called mechanistic thinking in science.³ Furthermore, because results from quantum physics suggest that the observer has an influence on what is observed, even the ideas on objective observation have begun to falter.

Within the scientific world, the idea has now emerged that instead of one objective truth, there may be several truths, depending on the perspective of the observer. Furthermore, there is a growing perception among scientists that overemphasizing the intellect is starving their own hearts and souls. They too, are feeling an increasing need for an integration of their own experiences on the one hand with scientific reality on the other. At the present time, we are therefore seeing that scientists are endeavoring to unite their scientific understandings with spiritual insights on a much wider scale than was previously the case.

These profound changes, for example in circles of pioneers in physics, biology and psychology, which lead to radical new understandings, is referred to as a paradigm shift, following philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn.⁴ Based on this an entirely new world view is now emerging, which is shaking everything that we use to believe about the nature of our world and how we see ourselves. In fact, there is a revolution taking place from the analytical, reductionist science of the last three hundred years toward a holistic science. This new science is revealing the deep interconnectedness and harmony of the universe, spoken of in the wisdom traditions and suspected to exist by quantum physicists. The

confirmation of ancient knowledge by the latest scientific findings is of great importance. It allows us to use this knowledge to help restore the balance and harmony in ourselves as well as worldwide.

INNER KNOWING

The Truth itself...can only be self-realized within one's own deepest consciousness.

Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha – 500 BC⁵

How, though, do we know for ourselves what is true? How can we, each for ourselves, know what is true at a time in which everything is in the process of change, and when what Western science holds to be true today, may very well be obsolete tomorrow? How can we know what our own truth is in a world in which more and more different truths seem to exist? In the present time, when all the truths and certainties are seemingly unsettled, each of us is challenged day by day to determine for ourselves what we do and don't actually regard as truth. It is therefore becoming increasingly more important to develop our own powers of discernment and confidence in our own inner knowing. The great sages have always pointed to the importance of this inner knowing, advising against believing their words as the truth unquestioningly. The Buddha gave this advice 2500 years ago already:

Do not believe what you have heard.

Do not believe in tradition because it is handed down many generations.

Do not believe in anything that has been spoken of many times.

Do not believe because the written statements come from some old sage.

Do not believe in conjecture.

Do not believe in authority or teachers or elders.

*But after careful observation and analysis, when it agrees with reason and it will benefit one and all, then accept it and live by it.*⁶

For mystics this is nothing new. They have always known that the truth is to be found somewhere deep within ourselves which, through practice, one may learn to tune into more clearly. However, this is something virtually ignored by our Western culture for a long time and completely so by Western science. The Indian-Canadian Ravi Ravindra – former professor in comparative religious studies and former physicist - points out in his book *Science and the Sacred, Eternal Wisdom in a Changing World* (2002) that in its enthusiasm modern Western science has unfortunately gone one step too far. In seeking to attain objective results by excluding all personal impressions and feelings, science has thrown out the baby with the bath water.

He states that it is indeed the case that the history of Western science has demonstrated that our everyday common sense is not a reliable guide to help us arrive at the truth. However, he adds that it is a unanimous understanding in all spiritual disciplines that the feelings themselves are a path to knowledge and that they are the instruments for the highest form of knowledge. However, he explains that all these spiritual traditions emphasize that "...a cleansing or a deepening of these feelings is

required so that one can come to objective knowledge through feeling.”⁷ In other words, once we learn to cleanse our feelings, then they may become an objective instrument for observing inner knowing.

What is completely new in history at the present time is that not only mystics, but *all* of us are facing this. All of us are thrown back on our own resources to determine our truth for ourselves and the existence or not of a Universal Truth. In our quest for the truth, we can test the validity of possible truths for ourselves either from our own experience or with the help of contemplation and meditation. In this way, we can determine whether they are merely opinions or real truths.

EXPERIENCES OF ONENESS

Whether it is this religion, or that religion, or Tao, or Zen, or yoga, whatever – it all comes from the same source of an inner experience – when a person experiences the unity within himself.

Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev – Yoga mystic from South India – 2004⁸

It seems paradoxical that in the myriad of the many possible truths, something of the nature of a Universal Truth should exist. And yet, the great wisdom traditions all speak of Truth with a capital T. None of these traditions, however, has the sole right to this Truth. As they tell us, insight into the Truth is what lies at the culmination of each development in consciousness, regardless of the differences in the path that has led there. This Truth is independent of time, culture and religion. Consequently we can say that, apart from the multitude of our own different relative truths, there is only one universal and timeless truth, which is therefore also referred to as Universal Truth or Ageless Truth.

True knowledge or Truth with a capital T is not simply the collection of actual or conceptual information, but distinguishes itself from rational thinking through the integration of the heart. The wisdom traditions teach that we can make contact with our soul through our heart and many mystics have emphasized the important function of the soul as the key to the Truth. Insight into Truth is based on the ability to make inner contact with a multidimensional world via our soul. This enables us to distinguish between Truth on the one hand, and theories, concepts and opinions on the other.

Many centuries ago, the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart (1260 – 1328) had already advised developing the heart into an organ capable of being used, like he did, to perceive the Truth: “If you could see *with my heart* you would understand my words: for it is true, and the truth itself says it.”⁹ [* this is not the original quote] Ravi Ravindra formulates this as follows: “Love is required to know Truth, and knowledge of Truth is expressed by Love. (...) Whenever truth and love are separated from each other, the result is either sentimentality or dry intellectualism, in which power is divorced from compassion.”¹⁰ He indicates that many of our modern predicaments are due to our dedication to truth as an exclusively mental attribute, while both of these attributes, truth and love, in fact are the most essential aspects of the human soul.

The direct mystical experience

How can knowledge of Universal Truth be acquired? The most direct way of acquiring this knowledge is via the direct experience of the ‘Oneness-with-everything’. Such a direct experience transcends our ego and our rational, logical mind, as well as transcending time and space. The British authority on

mysticism, Andrew Harvey, writes in the preface to the collection *Essential Mystics, the Soul's Journey into Truth* (1996) that such an authentic mystic opening first and foremost brings a sense of wonder and a freedom from time's anxiety. But more than this, it is, as he puts it: "...a growing revelation of a far larger and more marvelous universe and a far vaster identity than anything we could begin to intuit with our ordinary senses and consciousness." ¹¹

It is therefore understandable that mystics tell us that such an experience can scarcely be put into words. It is experiencing a sense of oneness, of merging, of becoming All That Is. And because we 'become' everything during such a direct mystical experience we are also able to 'know' everything. Through such an experience of Oneness, it is no longer necessary to believe, because we 'know', based on that direct experience. Through this kind of direct experiencing of Oneness-with-Everything, highly developed individuals who lived in widely differing times and cultures gained insight into this Universal Truth. True knowledge of this Universal Truth is therefore completely universal and of all times and all cultures. The different stages achieved essentially the same insights into the supreme truth. And time and again, individuals who are developed far enough are able to gain an understanding of this Universal Truth through direct experience.

A great example of the description of such a direct experience can be found in the Hermetic texts known as the *Corpus Hermeticum*. In the tale *Poimandres*, Hermes Trismegistus - known in ancient Egypt as Thoth – describes his experience of Becoming-One-with-Everything.¹² Thoth is said to have revealed all knowledge on astronomy, architecture, geometry and medicine to the ancient Egyptians.

Walter Russell's experience of Oneness

A more recent example of such an experience of Oneness is that of Walter Russell, documented during the first half of the 20th century by North American Glenn Clark. An inner voice asked him to go in search of a contemporary person who had gained insight into the Universal Truth from his own experience. He was looking for someone who knew the hidden secrets of the universe and applied this knowledge lovingly and with full awareness in his everyday life. Such a person should preferably be outside all religious traditions, because such a person could be an inspiration for everyone, regardless of religious, spiritual or cultural background.¹³ In his book *The Man Who Tapped The Secrets Of The Universe* (1946), Glenn Clark describes how he finally found such a man in the person of the painter, sculptor, architect and mystic Walter Russell (1871- 1963). When he asks Walter Russell how he came to his far-reaching insights, Walter Russell then tells him what happened to him in May 1921. Everyone who is familiar with the Hermetic tale of *Poimandres* will find striking similarities with this account by Walter Russell:

"A brilliant flash like lightning severed my bodily sensation from my consciousness and I found myself freed from my body and wholly in the Mind universe of Light, which is God," recounts Walter Russell. "And the secrets of the universe were unfolded to me in their great simplicity as the doors to the Light opened fully to my consciousness. In less time than it takes to put it into words, I knew all there was to know of the Cause of all effect, for there was very little to know." ¹⁴ Walter Russell continues to recount that it was as though the infinity of complexity within the moving kaleidoscope were suddenly taken apart and the underlying simplicity was shown to him in such a way that he "...at once had the key to all the sciences, mathematics, chemistry, astronomy and mechanics, likewise all

the underlying principles of creation; of life and the healing principle; of continuity in a universe in which there is no death; of energy which is not what man thinks it to be; and of matter which is not substance as man supposes it to be; and of the forces which act upon it which man has learned how to use somewhat but knows not the why of that which he uses. And likewise the mystery of the soul was mine to know; and of growth; and the patterns of things in the seeds of things; and the manner of their unfolding, and their repetition and their evolution.”

Above all, he gained insight into the operation of the universal principles governing all things that extend from the Source. “Thus I was made to see the universe as a whole and its simple principle of creation as one unit...”, as Walter Russell tells Glenn Clark. “And so it happened that I, who had never had any school or university training above the primary grade, thus knew instantly, while in the Light, what all the universities in the world could never teach. (...) No greater proof than my experience is needed to prove to the doubting world that all knowledge exists in the Mind universe of Light – which is God - that all Mind is One Mind, that men do not have separate minds, and that all knowledge can be obtained from the Universal Source of All-Knowledge by becoming One with that Source.”¹⁵

THE GOLDEN THREAD OF UNIVERSAL TRUTH

The essence of all authentic religions, spiritual movements and mystic teachings can be traced back to similar mystical, direct experiences of Becoming-One-with-Everything. Yet the various different traditions of wisdom are just as diverse as the colors of the rainbow. Any difference that there may be, however, lies not so much in the insights that are obtained during the experience of Oneness, but in the manner in which the different traditions present these insights. The yogi mystic Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev says on this subject: “The reason Gautama, the Buddha, chose to teach in a particular way, the reason Jesus chose to teach in a different way, and somebody else in a different way is simply because of the kinds of situations around them. What was most understandable for the people around them, they proceeded accordingly. Depending on the quality of minds around them – the level of receptivity available to them, accordingly they chose their teachings. Even now, it’s the same thing, so we are presenting it in a certain way, as it will be most appealing to the modern mind.”¹⁶

Once we understand that a golden thread of fundamental Universal Truth has been woven through all the ancient wisdom traditions in the world and their present-day equivalents, we can again go in search of all those original similarities in order that we may obtain an ever more precise perception of that Universal Truth.

Esoteric and exoteric teaching

It is important that we realize that all the major religions not only have an outer but also an inner teaching. The outer teaching has always been public and is what is taught in temples, churches, synagogues, mosques and schools. This outer teaching appears to differ considerably according to the particular belief system. Nonetheless, every religion and spiritual tradition is characterized by some variant of the Golden Rule: “Do not unto others what you would not have them do unto you.” However, with this exception, at first sight there seem to be few similarities.

The inner teaching, which was often kept secret from the outside world, is generally about the deeper knowledge of the great prophets or mystics who were the founders, keepers or disseminators of these religions. At the present time, in which many ancient writings have come to light and many of these secret teachings have been brought into the open, we are able to determine that in particular these inner, esoteric teachings display a great resemblance to each other. In some cases, it even appears that the similarities between these different inner teachings are greater than the similarities between the inner and the outer teachings of the same religious or spiritual tradition.

This is hardly surprising when we consider that the goal of all authentic mystical disciplines, and therefore also the goal of all esoteric initiates, was purely to gain insight into the Universal Truth. While one cannot go so far as to say that all mystics totally agree with each other, all these differences are of marginal importance. This explains why over the ages the esoteric movements have had no difficulty drawing on the wisdom of other traditions there where they add something to their own teachings. We come across the knowledge of Universal Truth for example among indigenous peoples, in Hinduism (Veda), in the teachings of the Chinese sage Lao Tse (Tao Te Ching), in Hermetic philosophy, and among the ancient Greek philosophers. We also come across it in the esoteric teachings of Jewish mysticism (the Kabbalah), Islamic Gnosticism (Sufism) as well as in the 'inner' teachings of Christianity.

Esoteric knowledge within Christianity

This mystic knowledge is also present in the Bible, though often disguised. Because it was regarded as heresy by the early Christian church fathers, in Christianity – as in many other religions – quite a considerable difference developed between the outer teachings of the church and the often secret inner teachings. More is now known about the existence of these hidden Christian teachings, particularly following the unearthing of ancient writings, such as the discoveries at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt in 1945 and the Dead Sea Scrolls in the caves near Qumran on the Western bank of the Jordan River in 1946. Dutch pastor and author Hans Stolp wrote in his article *De Nag Hammadi-geschriften voor het leven van alledag (The Nag Hammadi scriptures for everyday life)* (2005) that one of the important admonitions in the Nag Hammadi-texts is the plea to once and for all let go of all authorities outside ourselves and to go in search of our own inner knowing.¹⁷

In addition, more recently the wise insights of Christian mystics, like Hildegard von Bingen (1098 – 1179) and Meister Eckhart have achieved a wider recognition and their insights have been reappraised. In his book *Essential Mystics*, Andrew Harvey describes in his wonderful, poetic language his recent recognition of mystical knowledge within Christianity in the following way: “Many Western seekers, like myself, have been on long, complex journeys into the depths and disciplines of Eastern mysticism to find at the end of them a renewed wonder at the Christian inheritance. (...) The Christian revelation at its richest contains and reflects the Kogi and Hopi knowledge of the interconnection of all life, the Taoist sense of organic balance and the mysterious conjunction of opposites, the Hindu awareness of the grandeur of the soul, the Buddhist devotion to compassion and clear ethical living, the Jewish awe at the unutterable holiness of God and the sacredness of ordinary life, the Greek adoration of divine beauty, and the Islamic passion for God as the Beloved.”¹⁸

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1. Dhyani Ywahoo, *Voices of our Ancestors*, 1987. p. 88.
 2. Walter Russell, *The Science of Thinking and Action*, 1935; on the website: <http://www.philosophy.org/articles>
 3. The mechanistic world view is based on the premise that everything in the universe works like a machine, made up of separate parts.
 4. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1962.
 5. Cited in Thomas J. McFarlane, *Einstein and Buddha: The Parallel Sayings*, 2002; p. 36; quoted from Goddard, Dwight, ed. *A Buddhist Bible*, Boston: Beacon Press: 1970. p. 293.
 6. Cited in Valerie Hunt, *Infinite Mind*, 1996. p. 105; quoted from Shakyamuni Buddha, *The Dhammapada*, Berkeley, CA: Dharma Pub.; 1985.
 7. Ravi Ravindra, *Science and the Sacred, Eternal Wisdom in a Changing World*, 2002. p. 37, p. 29 and p. 37/38 resp.
 8. In an interview with Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev for the magazine *Evolve* following the publication of the book *Mystic Musings: Sadhguru, a profound Mystic of our times*, 2003, Wisdom Tree, New Delhi, India.
 9. G. Wehr, *Uit Stilte Geboren: Meester Eckhart*, 1992, p. 21-22.
 10. Ravi Ravindra, in his article 'Truth and Love' in the reader for the conference *Paths to Peace – Soul in Education*, Budapest, October 2004, p. 47-51.
 11. Andrew Harvey, *Essential Mystics*, 1996, p. xi.
 12. R. van den Broek & G. Quispel, *Corpus Hermeticum*, 1990/2003, p. 27-35.
 13. Glenn Clark, *The Man Who Tapped The Secrets Of The Universe*, 1946, complete texts at <http://www.philosophy.org/mwt/>
 14. idem
 15. idem
 16. In an interview with Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev for the magazine *Evolve* following the publication of the book *Mystic Musings: Sadhguru, a profound Mystic of our times*, 2003, Wisdom Tree, New Delhi, India.
 17. Hans Stolp in his article 'De Nag Hammadi-geschriften voor het leven van alledag' in the magazine *Prana*, No. 147, Feb/March 2005, p. 36. In this article, Hans Stolp points out that the Nag Hammadi writings herald a revolution in the Christianity preached in the present-day churches and that they bring us an entirely new view of the human condition. "In the traditional church tradition, we have become accustomed to the fact that there are four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. We have also grown accustomed to the fact that these gospels contain a description of the life of Jesus: his birth, his suffering, his death and his resurrection. But then, in 1945, the fifth gospel was found: the *Gospel of Thomas*. And in that gospel we do not find a single word about the birth, suffering and death of Jesus. Here we read something entirely different. What we find are 114 sayings, or in other words 114 directions showing us how a person should live who wishes to seek the inward path. The true gospel, or the original gospel, is therefore nothing other than a set of helpful directions on how we – nowadays too – can find the inward path."
 18. Andrew Harvey, *Essential Mystics*, 1996, p. 169.