

Dark Night of the Soul

"Dark night of the soul" sounds like a threatening and much to be avoided experience. Yet perhaps a quarter of the seekers on the road to higher consciousness will pass through the dark night. In fact, they may pass through several until they experience the profound joy of their true nature.

Many seekers would encourage the dark night experience if they knew what it was. However, to one engaged in the dark night, suffering seems unending.

The dark night occurs after considerable advancement toward higher consciousness. Indeed, the dark night usually occurs like an initiation before one of these special seekers is admitted into regular relationship with higher consciousness. The dark night also occurs to those who do not seek relationship but immersion or unity in the higher consciousness. While the term dark night of the soul is used broadly, its general meaning — in the field of higher consciousness — is a lengthy and profound absence of light and hope. In the dark night you feel profoundly alone.

You Can't Fit In

The dark night usually develops this way:

You, as a genuine seeker, have gone through many significant phases as you progress toward higher consciousness. Your faith is strong. You have kept loyal companionship with fellow seekers and perhaps you have already found a special teacher. You've experienced indications of the reality of higher consciousness and yearn to be more deeply in communion with it. You see the principles of a higher power at work in your life. Yet, all in all, you find yourself somehow painfully on the outside. You feel caught between your old way of living, your old tendencies and associations, and this nebulous, unreachable realm of higher consciousness.

You feel an exile in both places. You don't belong in the old pastimes. in the old empty or numbing way of life, yet you somehow can't fit in or feel at home in the fellowship of those who talk naturally of the higher consciousness and its reality. They are experienced, they are absorbed in it. They are loving, giving people. But you are unable to live, with full heart and mind, the way they do. They're able to apply the principles of higher consciousness easily, yet it's so hard for you. They have manifestations and proofs on a regular basis. You only stretch like a human mule after a receding corn cob while pulling the heavy weight of your old tendencies behind you.

You try to be good, and often you can't. You try to be loving and find at times your heart is hard like stone. Sometimes your projects fall down around your ears. You keep struggling and still you don't break through. You understand the path is one of joy and yet your life seems to have been barren for a month or two, perhaps longer. Where did that early joy and zest go?

Hanging On

Up to this particular time there was joy, there was delight. But now there is only a hanging on, a dogged hanging on. You persist because you can't conceive of going back to your old way of life. That seems impossible now. That would be like going to prison, living as if with a transorbital lobotomy.

You deeply want to have joy and fulfillment, easily manifest prosperity, but something's not working. You don't know what it is but something's awry, and your meditations have lost their luster. Sometimes, during rare meditations, you do experience brief moments of peace. Your agonizing mind and heart rest from their turbulence and even these fleeting times of calm are so deeply appreciated. Your light dance of life, which had gone on for some time, is now a trudging in what seems a devastated and alien land.

Your fellow seekers look at you and show their concern. Their words of kindness are valued but you feel you're somehow incapable of responding well. Your heart is numb. At these times your friends try to cheer you up. They invite you to dinner. You seem to perform fairly well, despite the emptiness you feel inside. What else is there to do? You wonder if you have any right to be in their fellowship at all. You think of leaving town, but where would you go? What good would diversion be?

A number of your friends in the fellowship of this great path know what you are going through for they have been through it themselves. They feel the main thing to do is encourage you to go on. They know if you keep it up and do not quit you will succeed. They know if you quit you will be a self-reject and will return to the old life, forever a foreigner, being neither at home with it nor at home anywhere else. They recognize that your own higher self, out of love, is lifting you up into its embrace. They see you are being drawn into your dark night because:

1. your inner potential has great stature
2. your crusty, old ego requires you go through the dark night in order to be transformed.

You Feel Totally Alone

Other seekers, for various reasons, do not have to pass through the dark night. However, the dark night is your way.

Your night is a very difficult time. While others may one day envy you for the marvelous growth you experienced in such a short, intensified period, you will, because of the pain of your experience, always feel profound compassion for those whom you one day see going through a similar night.

Being caught between the old way of life and the new possibilities, your sense of alienation intensifies. Your sense of inadequacy and not knowing what to do next becomes gnawingly constant. You feel you would do anything to get out of this state, yet it is only your ego which is keeping you in it. However, this insight is impossible for you to grasp while going through your long night.

And you feel so totally alone. Sure, you have friends and you appreciate them, but you are keenly aware they are not capable of feeling what you are feeling or knowing what you are going through. Sometimes they seem like clowns, sometimes they seem empty-headed, caught up in meaningless pursuits. They do not understand, you think, how much you are suffering or how you cry out and pray deep into each midnight. You try their advice but it doesn't seem to touch the heart of the matter.

You begin to enter the dark night in earnest when you feel completely stranded. In the fullness of the dark night you don't know where you are spiritually. You're separate from God and man. You do not know where to turn. Your friends love you and wish you well but your condition does not improve.

The dark night is a very private matter. The person in the dark night is generally able to function quite well despite inner suffering. Often your acquaintances never suspect that you are going through the dark night — they probably do not even know what it is. Only people close to you — especially friends along the path — can recognize your pain.

You feel like a hollow person doing the activities of life with no motivation except expediency. Your eyes seem deeper in your head. You are profoundly aware of the suffering of humanity and the cruelty of one person to another. You feel that cruelty and negativity far outweigh love and constructive action.

You Enter Midnight

Alone, and not wishing to be, unable even to express yourself to others, you enter midnight and the greatest intensity of the dark night. Here you have finally come to the time of sovereign solitude. In this precious time, which has no apparent prospects of love or happiness, you clearly perceive that nothing in the outer world has proven adequate to heal your condition. Nobody, not even your dearest friends and loved ones, can make you whole. Even if they have tried, and love you enough to try loving you forever, they can't give you peace.

You eye your books and consider all the benefit you have gained from these extremely wise vessels of truth. Yet not one book, not one thought, goes deep enough inside you to where the affliction abides.

You look at your possessions, your money container. No material thing has been able to help you. No material means have worked. Nothing, no one, in the outer world has enabled you to come out of this dark night.

In your loneliness, you next — in a seemingly random process — notice that none of your thoughts have proven adequate to your suffering. Not one — even repeated fifty thousand times — breaks the inner storm and lets in light. God and higher consciousness seem so far away that perhaps they are unreal. Neither one has, despite your protracted exposure of yourself, done anything to ease or remove your agony. Nothing appears efficacious. Nothing works.

Clearly, there is nowhere to turn. There is nothing to be done. All actions you considered have been tried. There is nothing to think, nothing to feel, nothing to do, nowhere to go. It seems you have to accept this defeat — or, you can persist in struggling against it. For awhile longer, you go about thinking, feeling, and doing other options that occur to you. But you realize in the midnight of your soul that you have tried every option you know of.

The Peace Comes

Helpless, totally helpless, as well as ever so alone, you abide in this condition. And you accept your predicament. You accept that there is really, except for a murmured prayer to a remote Lord and a remnant of a shredded faith, nothing else left.

Suicide would be absurd. Suicide would be an act of arrogance and vanity. You have grown far beyond such primitive responses to your private agony. No, nothing to do. Nothing remains in this lonely helplessness. There is, without question, nothing you can do.

You abide. You accept your state. How have you gotten to this place? That's insignificant. Musings and feelings aside, you wait. You feel you may have to stay this way forever, doing the regular day-to-day things, but in this mood of emptiness. Nothing. Nothing.

Then, it happens. A holy presence comes into your room — sweetly, softly. You feel it filling you. Your mind is filled with mellow or bright light. Your heart, your still heart, is permeated with peace. This peace moves through your body like a cold spring of mountain water. It flows in your spine, your brain, and under your skin. Everywhere.

Also, this presence, this comforter, moves like a breeze across your arid mind and numb heart. Then, or a few days later, the fire of joy begins to smoulder. Here, abiding with nothing more to do, your ego drops away! Your ignorant, arrogant, fearful sense of self falls away from you. You stand in light — a new being, a free being — transformed.

Your Ego Sense

Believe it or not, that's what the dark night is all about: transformation. Your ego, your limited sense of self, your inadequate complex of ideas about who you are had to be dissolved. Your ego was, you begin to see, eclipsing higher consciousness and your true nature. Your old sense of self was inadequate to your new hopes and proper state. Your suffering intensified because of a major misapprehension. You were too used to thinking of yourself based on inputs from your previous experiences in life. On and on through life, you gathered information and responses from the world which indicated to you what kind of person you were and are. These superficial units of related inputs became integrated in what is called the ego — your sense of self, your sense of who you are. As long as you allowed this inaccurate or only partial sense of who you are to dominate, you could not know or abide in your true nature.

Your ego sense is so powerful — you invest it with so much of your thought and feeling — that your attitudes of life become based on an egocentric perspective. The ego gains a progressively

greater foothold on your entire life because your basic attitudes about your existence and essential nature are strongly linked with ego.

Then, your ego sense, due to your suffering or your limitations in life, wants to have more power over circumstances and a more pleasant life. The ego sense often becomes motivated to seek higher consciousness and, thus, greater ability to dominate in life. Not always, but often, it is the ego sense which most eagerly pursues higher consciousness. It wants to be in charge; it wants to manipulate events and make life come out more to its satisfaction. But, as long as your ego dominates, it is on a collision course with your true nature and your higher consciousness. There's going to be a showdown. There has to be a confrontation sometime if your higher consciousness is ever to emerge, if you are ever to know truly who you are and what your human capabilities are.

Furthermore — and this is extremely important, especially in understanding the dark night of the soul — your ego, as it develops from childhood onward, has the conviction that it is the doer. Generally, your ego assumes that it chooses what your mind will think, and chooses what your heart will feel. It feels it selects the various actions and activities you are going to undertake. Your sense of self, being convinced it is the doer, feels it accomplishes anything and everything in your life. Do you see, then, how the dark night develops? A false sense of self has been ignorantly and manipulatively standing in the way of enlightenment.

Additionally, until you are consolidated in higher consciousness, your ego can return and reestablish control if you let it. Sometimes when you're fatigued or when you have special, new opportunities in life, you are vulnerable to the reestablishment of your ego and its opinion that it is in charge of doing everything. It will again eclipse the higher consciousness until you recognize what has happened. Then you must courageously and consciously reaffirm your true nature, and deal with the upstart, old ego. Otherwise, another dark night phase will again develop.

Attempts of the Ego

A person seeking higher consciousness is, in effect, and with intensity, seeking the transformation of his own ego. He is seeking to end the tyranny of the ego and abide in his true nature, instead of a false nature concocted through experiences and emotional inputs during the process of life. While it is true these inputs have a value in subjecting you to new experiences and so offer unique learning situations, they often give you a delusory sense of self. You are not your mistake. Even a murderer can change and become a new being.

Still, as you progress toward higher consciousness, your ego may not be humbling and daily transforming itself. You may, instead, have a highly developed ego which is sure that it is causing the events of higher consciousness to unfold bit by bit. Your ego, after all, can be very interested in the attributes of higher consciousness, in meditation and association with enlightened beings. Your ego feels gratification and satisfaction in moving on down the road toward higher consciousness.

Your ego may also have the opinion that, because of its grasp of matters, it will one day establish or — by its thought process and feelings —bring about enlightenment and awakening. It is convinced that it will achieve higher consciousness. This is ironic because by the time of the dark night, the ego is the main obstacle; it is the obstruction of the light of consciousness. It stands between you and your fulfillment. In fact, the length of your dark night is based on the truculence and cunning of your ego. It can fight a very lengthy battle if it fears it's going to be destroyed or will have to give in to something so much greater than it knows itself to be.

Incredibly, your ego wants to be in on the act of enlightenment. Ego wants to bring about higher consciousness by its own dramatic means. Certainly, it doesn't want to be granted fulfillment by a power outside of itself. Convinced that it is the doer, your ego holds on for dear life — until that event called the dark night of the soul, when your ego awakens to the profound fact it cannot cause or bring about higher consciousness.

Ego cannot, by its will or any other skills whatever, create the wholeness of heart which will end your deep suffering. In a sense your ego recognizes itself — in the dark night — to be the disease. It recognizes that its foothold on your mind and heart has, at an advanced stage on your path, proven a great numbing agent and a high stone wall against the light. Ego stands against the fulfillment of your faith and the realization of your profoundest yearnings. Finally your ego has found something it cannot do and, in the dark night of the soul, it becomes totally convinced it is inadequate. It cannot deal with your suffering or the fulfillment of the heart's yearning. Nothing it can do, think, say, buy, or travel to, will in any way suffice.

Dawn of a New Life

Here in this dark night, the lifelong ego sense dies: impotent. Having fulfilled its part, now weak and incompetent, it is dissolved — transmuted. From a higher sense now awakening within you, you slough off your false sense of self. You now know yourself to be a different person than you thought you were. Your ego was merely experiencing some of the attributes, some of the qualities, of your true nature, while at the same time obstructing others.

You, in passing successfully through the dark night, enter the realms of higher consciousness. You've been cleansed of the most deep-rooted sickness: your ignorance of your true nature and your inadequate, often totally wrong opinion of who you are. You now cease your inner conflict and abide serenely in your true nature. The night is over. The dawn of a new life in higher consciousness transforms your bleak life of the past few months into one with a heavenly nature. You have been delivered of the intolerable bondage to ego.

Henceforth, you will walk the earth seeing others afresh, living a new life, and abiding in your true nature. You have become a son or daughter of higher consciousness. Now your words and actions will be attuned with your true self. Now you express inspiration and comfort.

The dark night has passed. It is over.

Shared from the Mystic