

The Long and Short Path by Jeff Cox

“...the Long Path leads to the Short Path, and the Short Path leads to the Grace of an unbroken egoless consciousness.” – Paul Brunton (1)

It has become obvious to me that God moves in strange ways. God undoubtedly moves in many ways, but it is often the more peculiar ones that the Divine uses to get our attention. As I have come to realize, it is our attention that It “wants.” Only by getting us to notice something beyond our small circle of self-concern can it intrigue us enough that our lives become re-oriented and consciously guided by divinity. Life-altering, “objective” events that oddly seem to be planned just for our benefit, that bring us into contact with significant people or move us to places where our spiritual potentials can manifest, help to make visible the formerly invisible hand of God. And to feel that hand in my life was something I deeply longed for.

Every life has these unusual threads interwoven with the seemingly ordinary. I have come to understand them as the working of grace. Before I knew more about spiritual life than what I had been exposed to at my church, and after I had become disillusioned with the goals I had been pursuing up to that time, I took a quarter off from Ohio State University in the late 60s—ostensibly to do research for a senior thesis in Europe, my first time on culturally unfamiliar ground. In Switzerland, a family friend introduced me to neighbors who lived in a haunted farmhouse. In response to my inquisitiveness about ghosts and life after death, they gave me a copy of *There is a River* by Edgar Cayce. It was an engrossing and eye-opening book—a lightning bolt in my young psyche. I spent all of the next day walking up the side of a small mountain reading it—unwittingly absorbed in a symbolic divine ascent. Cayce underscored how indeed God is actively present in our lives, but also that mystical communion is possible through the practice of yoga and meditation—a totally captivating idea for me. Returning to Ohio, I found a yoga class led by someone who soon introduced me to a meditation group that studied the books of the renowned teacher Paul Brunton. Odd thing was that this group had been established at my church years before by the former head minister and Paul Brunton himself. So apparently I had gone all the way to Europe to discover the treasure buried in my own backyard. God really had my attention now.

Now that the door had been opened, the hard work began—what I would later come to understand as the “long path” of discipline, purification, and examination of who and what we are. Living in long path consciousness we tend to be very involved in our development—primarily focusing on how well we are living up to our ideals. A lot of spring cleaning is necessary to clear out the cobwebs of the mind, heart, and will. A lot of meditation is necessary to tame the restless mental processes. We put our personality in the spiritual laboratory to learn what is required to succeed on our quest. For me, waking to the spiritual life reactivated what felt like past life karma, and I soon found that I was imitating the life style and practices of a monk—for a handful of years anyway.

On the long path, the effort we make is a type of spiritual athleticism—a trying to achieve. Our striving often yields moods of exaltation over small successes: a good meditation, a smile of

approval from the teacher. However, these are just as easily followed by frustration and depression in the face of new outer challenges and persistent personal shortcomings.

Sure, along the way we may have “glimpses” of reality, occasional breakthroughs to peace and freedom, but after these juicy moments, hours, or weeks, the egoic drama creeps or crashes back in to claim us. After years of this, we may realize—or have it pointed out to us—that a spiritually cultivated ego, however finely shaped and pleasant to be around, is still an ego. Our identity is still bound up with the processes of our personality. We have not shifted into the timeless, spacious awareness of the higher Self as being our primary reality.

It was during a 1975 visit with Paul Brunton in Switzerland that he conveyed to me a short path teaching. PB (as he referred to himself) saw a need for aspirants to be acquainted with both the long and short paths; that one without the other leads to imbalances and can only take a person so far.

In essence the short path is this. Rather than concerning oneself with the ego and its developments, the struggles with its ups and downs as taught on the long path, one should inwardly turn 180 degrees and attend to the light of awareness which is the Overself (our true identity in PB's language). As we turn away from egoic processes to the Overself as our refuge and reality, we invite the Overself to take its rightful place in our lives and we surrender that which we are not. The path is called “short” because it considers the goal to be present here and now, and the Overself to be the self we have always been instead of us being the person struggling to attain something bigger and better. This orientation acts as a catalyst and provides an opening for the Overself to reveal itself in a temporary glimpse or permanent awakening. It is a powerful act to remember its presence and surrender to it with loving attention as we go about the endless details of our daily living. Even the briefest glimpse of our true nature makes the short path easier to understand and more compelling because we actually taste something of what the goal is.

PB explained that the ego is perpetuated on the long path by the very act of seeking, which thereby keeps it in control. By design, the long path does the essential work of preparing our personalities to become suitable vehicles to express reality, since it reduces the power of obstructive complexes. But by itself it will not take us to enlightenment—no matter how “spiritual” the ego becomes it will not enter the light but stays in the gray. The ego is literally a whirlpool, a vortex of thoughts, feelings, impulses; and it is the non-recognition of our true self as distinct from this vortex that holds the masquerade together. Especially mesmerizing is the the “I am the body” thought.

Short path practices are different than long path practices, for the latter produce more predictable results. On the long path, if you do x, you can expect y. The long path changes your karma or patterns of action and reaction. By contrast, short path practices are an invocation of grace, and the results are in the Overself's hands, as it were, not ours. The grace which clears the attachment to the ego and reveals the ever-present Overself as one's true identity is not something that can be willed from within the limited personality, because what is gained by this grace is freedom from that which is willing.

That said, PB offers two exercises for short path practice: first is the practice of “remembrance,” and the second is the “as if.”

The remembrance exercise is, as one might guess, the simple act of remembering the Overself. It asks us to be like a lover who is constantly dwelling on the beloved. When you are engaged in activities, the remembrance should be held in the rear of the mind, and when less active, it should come to the fore. In the beginning, it requires effort like any other practice, but eventually it continues of its own accord. One danger of the remembrance exercise is that it can become automatic too soon and thus be merely mechanical and hollow. The remembrance must be a warm, felt, living thing. When we turn towards the Overself in this way, grace can operate more readily in all matters.

Remembrance can be practiced by anyone at any stage of the spiritual path, but is more approachable for someone who has had a glimpse of ego free consciousness—an actual taste, however brief, of what the goal is. Remembrance is a prerequisite for the “identification” or “as if” practice, which requires some background and maturity to be practiced well.

The “as if” or “identity” exercise requires that we should behave as we imagine the Overself would. It is a full immersion practice that utilizes thinking, feeling, physical activity, and imagination. Naturally, this exercise should be accompanied with study of the nature of the Overself—so that we can know something of what the Overself is like and what it is that we are trying to do.

In the beginning, the exercise is an imaginative one. We are like actors engaged in a role, but every so often we get short glimpses of the real thing. As these glimpses of the Overself come, we must open up to them, be passive and receptive to them. Surrender yourself to them and prolong them—attend to them as visitations of divinity.

The Overself “expresses” primarily through intuitive feeling but also through intuitive thoughts and action. Actions which are done uncalculatingly and which later prove to have been correct are actions which spring from a source other than the ego. On the short path, we come to recognize and open to the many threads of our higher being that are present in everyday life. The unchanging sense of “I am,” moments of inner stillness, inspired insights and creativity, equanimity, heartfelt joy, love and compassion, etc. are the “perfume” of the Overself in experience and do not originate from the separative consciousness of the ego. Practicing the short path is itself a joy for it orients us to our innate, ever-present being and opens us to the possibility of an immediate awakening.

Paul Brunton sums it up in *The Short Path to Enlightenment*: “This notion that we must wait and wait while we slowly progress out of enslavement into liberation, out of ignorance into knowledge, out of the present limitations into a future union with the Divine, is only true if we let it be so. But we need not. We can shift our identification from the ego to the Overself in our habitual thinking, in our daily reactions and attitudes, in our response to events and the world. We have thought our way into this unsatisfactory state; we can unthink our way out of it. By

incessantly remembering what we really are, here and now at this very moment, we set ourselves free. Why wait for what already is?" (2)

Jeff Cox was formerly the president of Snow Lion Publications which specializes in books by the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism. Since retiring, he now enjoys volunteering for the Paul Brunton Philosophic Foundation, and sharing more time with his wife and partner Christi. He co-compiled [The Short Path to Enlightenment: Instructions for Immediate Awakening by Paul Brunton, Larson Publications, 2014](#) (see www.PaulBrunton.org for more information).