

Original Goodness by Eknath Easwaran

Chapter One

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I have spoken at times of a light in the soul, a light that is uncreated and uncreatable to the extent that we can deny ourselves and turn away from created things, we shall find our unity and blessing in that little spark in the soul, which neither space nor time touches.

-Meister Eckhart

These words, addressed to ordinary people in a quiet German-speaking town almost seven hundred years ago, testify to a discovery about the nature of the human spirit as revolutionary as Einstein's theories about the nature of the universe. If truly understood, that discovery would transform the world we live in at least as radically as Einstein's theories changed the world of science. "We have grasped the mystery of the atom," General Omar Bradley once said, "and rejected the Sermon on the Mount...Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants." If we could grasp the mystery of Eckhart's "uncreated light in the soul" – surely no more abstruse than relativity! – the transformation in our thinking would set our world right side up.

Meister or "Master" Eckhart – the title attests to his scholarship, but seems to fit even better his spiritual authority – lived almost exactly at the same time and for the same span as Dante, and both seem born to those lofty regions of the spirit that do not belong to any particular culture, religion, or age but are universal. Yet, also like Dante, Eckhart expressed perfectly something essential about his times. The end of the thirteenth century was a period of intense turmoil in Europe, and the Rhine valley, where Eckhart was born, was the breeding ground of various popular religious societies which alarmed conventional Christians. Yet a God who could be known personally and a path by which to reach him were what an increasing number of people yearned for, and Eckhart's

passionate sermons, straining to convey the Absolute in the words of the street and marketplace, became immensely popular.

And what did he teach? Essentially, four principles that Spinoza would later call the Perennial Philosophy, because they have been taught from age to age in culture after culture:

First, there is a “light in the soul that is uncreated and uncreatable”: unconditioned, universal, deathless; in religious language, a divine core of personality which cannot be separated from God. Eckhart is precise: this is not what the English language calls the “soul,” but some essence in the soul that lies at the very center of consciousness. As Saint Catherine of Genoa put it, “My *me* is God: nor do I know my selfhood except in God.” In Indian mysticism this divine core is called simply *atman*, “the Self.”

Second, this divine essence can be *realized*. It is not an abstraction, and it need not – Eckhart would say *must* not – remain hidden under the covering of our everyday personality. It can and should be *discovered*, so that its presence becomes a reality in daily life.

Third, this discovery is life’s real and highest goal. Our supreme purpose in life is not to make a fortune, not to pursue pleasure, nor to write our name on history, but to discover this spark of the divine that is in our hearts.

Last, when we realize this goal, we discover simultaneously that the divinity within ourselves is one and the same in all – all individuals, all creatures, all of life.

Words can certainly be ambiguous with ideas such as these and “mysticism” is no exception. In this book, a mystic is one who not only espouses these principles of the

Perennial Philosophy but *lives* them, whose every action reflects the wisdom and selfless love that are the hallmark of one who has made this supreme discovery. Such a person has made the divine a reality in every moment of life and that reality shines through whatever he or she may do or say – and that is the real test. It is not occult fancies or visions or esoteric discourses that mark the mystic, but an unbroken awareness of the presence of God in all creatures. The signs are clear: unfailing compassion, fearlessness, equanimity, and the unshakable knowledge, based on direct, personal experience, that all the treasures and pleasures of this world together are worth nothing if one has not found the uncreated light at the center of the soul.

These are demanding criteria, and few people in the history of the world can be said to have met them. I shall often refer to these men and women collectively as “the great mystics,” not to obscure their differences, but to emphasize this tremendous undercurrent of the spirit that keeps resurfacing from age to age to remind us of our real legacy as human beings.

On this legacy the mystics are unanimous. We are made, the scriptures of all religions assure us, in the image of God. Nothing can change that original goodness. Whatever mistakes we have made in the past, whatever problems we may have in the present, in every one of us this “uncreated spark in the soul” remains untouched, ever pure, ever perfect. Even if we try with all our might to douse or hide it, it is always ready to set our personality ablaze with light.

When I was growing up in South India, just half an hour’s walk from my home was a lotus pond so thickly overlaid with glossy leaves and gleaming rose and white blossoms that you could scarcely see the water. One of the Sanskrit names for this most

exquisite of flowers is *pankaja*, “born of the mud.” In the murky depths of the pond a seed takes root. Then a long, wavering strand reaches upward, groping through the water toward the glimmer of light above. From the water a bud emerges. Warmed by the sun’s rays, it slowly opens out and forms a perfect chalice to catch and hold the dazzling light of the sun.

The lotus makes a beautiful symbol for the core of goodness in every human being. Though we are born of human clay, it reminds us, each of us has the latent capacity to reach and grow toward heaven until we shine with the reflected glory of our Maker.

Early in the third century, a Greek Father of the Church, Origen, referred to this core of goodness as both a spark and a divine seed – a seed that is sown deep in consciousness by the very fact of our being human, made in the image of our Creator. “Even though it is covered up,” Origen explains,

because it is God that has sowed this seed in us, pressed it in, begotten it, it cannot be extirpated or die out; it glows and sparkles, burning and giving light, and always it moves upward toward God.

Eckhart seized the metaphor and dared take it to the full limits it implies:

The seed of God is in us. Given an intelligent and hard-working farmer, it will thrive and grow up to God, whose seed it is, and accordingly its fruits will be God-nature. Pear seeds grown into pear trees, nut seeds into nut trees, and God-seed into God.

“Its fruits will be God-nature!” What promise could be more revolutionary? Yet Eckhart, like other great mystics of the Church before and after him, does no more than assure us of his personal experience. The seed *is* there, and the ground is fertile. Nothing is required but diligent gardening to bring into existence the God-tree: a life that proclaims the original goodness in all creation.

The implications of this statement are far-reaching. Rightly understood, they can lift the most oppressive burden of guilt, restore any loss of self-esteem. For if goodness is our real core, goodness that can be hidden but never taken away, then goodness is not something we have to *get*. We do not have to figure out how to make ourselves good; all we need do is remove what covers the goodness that is already there.

To be sure, removing these coverings is far from easy. Original goodness does not mean that you are already divine and just do not know it – much less that, as some New Age writers put it, “you yourself are God.” Having a core of goodness does not prevent the rest of personality from being a monumental nuisance.

But the very concept of original goodness can transform our lives. It does not deny what traditional religion calls sin; it simply reminds us that before original sin was original innocence. *That* is our real nature. Everything else – all our habits, our conditioning, our past mistakes – is a mask. A mask can hide a face completely; like that frightful iron contraption in Dumas’s novel, it can be excruciating to wear and nearly impossible to remove. But the very nature of a mask is that it *can* be removed. This is the promise and the purpose of all spiritual disciplines: to take off the mask that hides our real face.

It is said that the English astronomer Sir Arthur Eddington, when he announced to a bewildered world the first experiments vindicating Einstein’s theories, was asked by journalists, “Is it true that only three people in the world understand the theory of relativity?” Eddington took his time, then replied in carefully puzzled tones, “Who is the third?”

That is roughly where we stand today with this discovery of original goodness. I began by saying that if Eckhart’s words were truly understood, they could turn our world

right side up. Yet the same has rightly been said of the Sermon on the Mount, which has never been in danger of enjoying sweeping acceptance. Mystics speak boldly and call us all to follow; but the price is high, and few want to listen.

But from time to time mysticism does flourish, often in response to some deep need in a troubled age. The late Middle Ages must have been such a period in Western Christendom, for it fostered one of the most remarkable flowerings of the Perennial Philosophy the world has known. The amazing popularity of Eckhart's sermons, delivered with the ardor and humanity of a Saint Francis but about as accessible to the average person as a talk on quantum mechanics, is just one piece of the evidence. From roughly 1200 to 1400, from Saint Francis himself to Thomas a Kempis, there arose not only some two dozen of Christianity's greatest mystics but also a wave of popular response among the common people.

What has this to do with us at the end of the twentieth century? A great deal, I think. The fourteenth century was a time of turbulence not unlike that of our own age- "a distant mirror," to use the historian Barbara Tuchman's phrase. The popular appeal of a man like Eckhart, a quiet friar who did no more to rouse a following than preach in church about things the intellect can scarcely grasp, is evidence that however abstract the concept of original goodness may seem, ordinary people do need and respond to the idea of a spark of the divine in their own soul. The reason is simple: nothing else can fill the hunger in the human heart. Even today, with abundance within reach for more people than ever, we need something more than the physical world can offer.

Last Christmastime I sat in a café inside a fashionable department store, watching the shoppers come and go. Most of them, I thought, had not come to buy things they

already wanted. It was as if they had come looking for something to want – something that might fill a nameless need, even if only for a moment. Above the glittering displays a poster bearing the name of the mall promised proudly, “The Fantasy Is Real.”

To me, it is a comment on the nobility of human nature that even in the midst of such a smorgasbord of things and activities and sensations, we still feel a need for something real. For although modern civilization has made remarkable progress in many fields, it has neglected others that are vital for well-being. “Progress is a good thing,” said Ogden Nash, “but it has been going on too long.” Material progress does improve well-being up to a point; but beyond that point, instead of lifting us upward, it only leads us around in circles. Making things, buying and selling them, piling them up, repairing them, trying to figure out how to get rid of them permanently: for sensitive people, boredom with this carnival cycle began some time ago. A consumer culture is not the goal of life.

None of us need feel guilty if we have been caught in the games of profit and pleasure that industrial civilization holds up for us as life’s goal. These are stages that a society goes through, just as a child plays and then discards what he or she outgrows. What matters is not that we may have made mistakes in the pursuit of physical satisfactions; what is important is to learn from these mistakes as quickly as we can that wealth, possessions, power, and pleasure have never brought lasting satisfaction to any human being. Our needs go too deep to be satisfied by anything that comes and goes. Nothing but spiritual fulfillment can fill the void in our hearts.

Today, I think, millions of people find themselves at a crossroads, forced to ask penetrating questions that in simpler times were the province only of philosophers; *What*

is life for? Why am I here? Is there more to me than this body? Is happiness a foolish dream; can it actually be found without closing my eyes to what I see? New Age philosophies, and new sciences too, search for answers. But do we really need new answers to enter a new age? The questions are frankly old, and human nature has not changed. Are the answers of religion out of date? Have we forgotten the daring pioneers of the spirit who discovered and tapped a reservoir of joy, wisdom, and healing within – and who insist that we can tap it too?

We *have* forgotten, is the delicate answer, and it is not entirely our fault. The reason why we do not learn of these discoveries is that they are so rarely understood – cannot be understood, in fact, except by those who try to live them; and if understanding Einstein was difficult when relativity was new, shall we expect to learn in school about things “uncreated and uncreatable?” Among the disturbing trends of our age is the tendency to identify the human being as nothing more than a biochemical entity and then argue, “There is no such thing as spirit. How can the center of personality be something that ‘time and space cannot touch.’?”

Yet even this skepticism is not new; in a sense, it is nothing more than the modern echo of an age-old doubt. As Hans Denk, a German mystic of the sixteenth century, exclaimed to God, “Men flee from thee and say they cannot find thee. They turn their backs and say they cannot see thee. They stop their ears and say they cannot hear thee.”

Centuries before, Eckhart had urged:

You need not seek God here or there; he is no farther off than the door of the heart. There he stands and waits and waits until he finds you ready to open and let him in. You need not call him from a distance; to wait until you open for him is harder for him than for you. He needs you a thousand times more than you can need him. *Your opening and his entering are but one moment.*

One of my deepest desires is to convey this simple truth to the millions of people today who seem at a loss for what to live for, and especially to the young. The president of the American Association of Suicidology estimated in 1986 that half a million of our teenagers attempt suicide each year. In a free and affluent society such as ours, why would so many of our children come to the conclusion that their lives are not worth pursuing? It is tempting to point a finger at specific causes like drugs, but the president of the Youth Suicide National Center in Washington looks deeper. Our young people are profoundly troubled, she says, because “their sense of future is gone.”

Global threats like environmental disaster and nuclear war are enough to undermine anyone’s sense of future. Yet even more damaging, in my opinion, is the lack of a sustaining purpose. With a higher goal, human beings can face any challenge. But without a goal, the spirit withers, and when the natural idealism of the young is blocked, their energy eventually breaks through into uncontrolled and often self-destructive channels. Most young people I know do not really want an easy life. They long for *challenge*: real challenges, all the bigger because their capacities are so huge. All they ask is something to live for. But we have become a culture without large goals, with nothing but material abundance to offer the hunger in their hearts.

In almost every country and every age, there are a few men and women who see through the game of personal satisfaction and ask themselves, “Is this all? I want something much bigger to live for, something much loftier to desire.” Nothing transient can appease this hunger. It touches something very deep in us, caught as we are in our predicament as human beings: partly physical, partly spiritual, trying to feel at home in the world into which we have been born. What is the reason for this gnawing

dissatisfaction? The world's great spiritual traditions all give the same answer: we are not wholly at home in this world of change and death. The body may belong, but the spirit is in exile here, a wanderer, a stranger in a strange land. And we long for home.

In Western symbols it is Eden that stands for "the soul's true home" from which we have somehow been banished. In this sense, Eden is not so much a place as a state of consciousness. We may conceive of the Creation in time and space, but it is essentially our separation from our native state of original goodness which marks our advent into the world as seemingly separate individuals – in traditional language, the Fall.

Yet although we feel exiled from this state, our exile is only apparent. Like the rabbi in the Hasidic tale who walks back and forth over buried treasure every day without ever guessing what is beneath his feet, every moment we pass unaware over the core goodness in our hearts.

The scientific account of the creation of the universe suggests a modern metaphor for Eden and the Fall. Before the Big Bang, physicists tell us, all the matter in the universe must have been compressed in an incomprehensible point, before time and outside space. Matter and energy were one in that primal state. Even in the first few seconds of creation, the universe was mostly light. Ordinary matter, in the infinite variety we experience today, developed from pure energy flung into space and time by the explosion of creation.

In the same way we might speak of Eden as a state of pure, unitary consciousness, logically prior to differentiation between matter and mind. Just as there was a point before time when all matter and energy in the universe was one, there is a state of awareness in which all creation is one. The Fall is then the Big Bang: the process of

individuation, which seems to scatter this unitary consciousness into fragments, leaving each of us with a shard of Eden in our hearts.

Physicists tell us that the elements created in the Big Bang are present throughout the universe, from the soil in our gardens to the gas clouds of the farthest galaxy. Many years ago, when people were lining up in San Francisco to see a rock our astronauts had brought from the moon, I picked up a rock from the road and thought to myself, “This too is a moon rock. There’s no difference.” Fragments from the Big Bang lie all around us, just as in distant stars. In the same way, the mystics say, a trace of our original divinity is present in every creature. In some, like Saint Francis of Assisi, it is highly revealed, in others it is more heavily veiled; but that divinity is present throughout creation.

Jewish mysticism puts this idea into haunting imagery. Shekinah, the Presence of God, is dispersed throughout creation in every creature, like sparks scattered from the pure flame of spirit that is the Lord. And each spark, seemingly alone in the darkness of blind matter, wanders this world in exile, seeking to return to its divine source.

Yet the Fall is not just an event that took place in 4004 B.C. It is still going on. Just as radio telescopes can pick up faint echoes of the Big Bang, we hear echoes of our fall into separateness every day. Superjets may have brought New York and Paris closer than ever, but I doubt that individuals have ever been more distant. And like island universes, we seem to be rushing apart at an accelerating speed. We are increasingly alienated from others and from ourselves.

In this interpretation, when Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge, what they tasted is what the Sanskrit language calls *ahamkara*: literally, “I-maker,” the

sense of being “an island unto oneself” – something separate from the rest of life, with unique needs and peremptory claims.

This is a highly tempting fruit. If I were a playwright, I could write an entertaining play in which the serpent comes and sells the apple of separateness to Adam and Eve. “Hey, try this! Nothing could be more natural: just be yourself and take care of number one. You can have your food just the way you like it. You can decorate your apartment any old way you choose. You can play only the music you like, at any hour of the day or night. You can wear any kind of clothes you like. You can make any amount of money, by any means, and spend it on anything under the sun. Avoid people you don’t like; you can even keep them off your block. Go to sleep when you want, get up when you want...you don’t have to care for anybody!” This is the serpent’s message, and among other things it makes us ideal, insatiable consumers. My sympathies are all with Adam and Eve when they fell for this. Don’t we twentieth-century men and women, sophisticated as they come, go on falling all too easily for the same old apple?

To me, the serpent is not a villainous figure. He is simply an effective salesman. The serpent was only doing his job; he *had* to sell. “Don’t blame me,” he might well protest. “They didn’t have to buy. I was able to tempt them because they were temptable.” Talk about smooth! The word *serpent* comes from a Sanskrit word which means to slither about, to be smooth in one’s movements: so smooth that nobody suspected there was a price to pay for what he offered, and exorbitant finance charges too.

For what seems such tempting fruit at the beginning slowly begins to cause stomachache. Separateness becomes a habit and finally a compulsive state of mind. This

is a tragic development, for a person who can think only of himself, someone who explodes when things do not go her way, is a fragile, alienated, and very lonely individual. And the tragedy does not stop there; that is why I said that the Fall is still continuing. In the end, it is this driving sense of separateness – *I, I, I*; *my* needs, *my* wants, apart from all the rest of life – that is responsible for all the wars in history, all the violence, all the exploitation of other human beings, and even the exploitation of the planet that threatens our future today.

Yet what we seek when we fall for the serpent's pitch is very natural. What *do* we want from life, judging not by our words but by our actions? Very simple, basic things, common to all. We want to love and to be loved. We want happiness and fulfillment, though we may have differing ideas of what that means. We want a place in life, a way of belonging, a sense of purpose, the achievement of worthy goals – whatever it takes; otherwise life is an empty show. And, of course, we want never to die.

These are natural desires, and no amount of experience can erase them from our hearts. Why? Because these are the demands of Eckhart's "little spark" of the spirit, and that spark is real and inalienable: "nearer to us than our very body," as the Sufis say, "dearer than our very life."

These yearnings are not wrong, then. What happens is that we interpret them wrongly. They are messages from the spirit which have somehow got scrambled by the world of matter, and we lack the decoder by which to understand. That scrambling is what Hindu mysticism means by the much-misunderstood word *maya*: the wishful, willful illusion that the thirst in our hearts is physical and can somehow be slaked by

physical experience. We wander searching for the right things in the wrong places, seeking Eden in the world of the senses, and life itself seems to delight in frustrating us.

“The soul is a pilgrim,” said John Ruysbroeck, one of the great Rhineland mystics who succeeded Eckhart, “for it sees its country.” But until we glimpse our “soul’s true home,” we are not so much pilgrims as tourists. Being a traveler is one thing, but no one really likes to be a tourist. Nothing is ever quite right: the food, the beds, the chairs, the customs. We shake our heads and mutter under our breath the universal tourist’s complaint: “Back home...”

Deep below the level of conscious awareness, the world’s mystical traditions tell us, that refrain goes on constantly in every heart. *Back home...* And a brilliant contemporary of Eckhart’s, Mechthild of Magdeburg, gives us the reason. “The soul is made of love,” she exclaims – made of love, just as the body is made of flesh – “and must ever strive to return to love. Therefore, it can never find rest nor happiness in other things. It must lose itself in love. By its very nature it must seek God, who is love.”

In everyone there is this inward tug, this call to return. But because we are turned outward, our hearing gets confused. The call seems to be coming from outside. What we seek is always just around the corner...and when we reach the corner, it has ducked out of sight down the block. Yet human nature is so strong that even after turning corners a thousand times, we still say, “The thousand and first – that’s going to be the one!” Life becomes a pilgrimage around corners.

But there comes a time when corners no longer beckon. We know from bitter experience that they only hide blind alleys. This juncture is critical; for once one reaches it, nothing on earth can satisfy for long. Those with drive may plunge into restless

activity. The more frustrated they feel, the more things they try – globe-trotting, solo climbing, cars, clothes, casinos, commodities futures. But the desire to wrest meaning from life only grows more urgent as frustration mounts.

Later, looking back, this utter restlessness may prove to be the first touch of what traditional religion calls grace. It means that a person has grown too big to be satisfied with petty satisfactions that come and go. But the crisis is real. If we do not understand the message, frustration can turn desperate or self-destructive – not only for an individual, but for a whole society. Each age has its own kind of suffering, the natural consequences of mistaken values it pursues, and the suffering of our industrial age is loneliness, alienation, and despair. Alienation can cause terrible harm; for it is when we feel isolated and alone that we lose sensitivity to others, and obsession with private desires and fears fills up our world. Walk the streets of any inner city today and you will see the fruits of separateness all around you, the anguish of a society in which even children and the aged are cut adrift and left on their own.

There comes a time in the growth of civilizations, as with individuals, when the life-and-death questions of material existence have been answered, yet the soul still thirsts and physical challenges cease to satisfy. Then we stand at a crossroads: for without meaningful aspiration, the human being turns destructive. Spiritual fulfillment is an evolutionary imperative. Like a snake that must shed its skin to grow, our industrial civilization must shed its material outlook or strangle in outgrown ideals whose constructive potential has been spent.

In the end, then, life itself turns us inward – “away from created things,” as Eckhart says, to “find our unity and blessing in that little spark in the soul.” The end of

the Fall is the Return. Alienation is the heartache of feeling out of place in a senseless universe. Its purpose is to turn us homeward, and all experience ultimately conspires to that end.” Whether you like it or not, whether you know it or not,” Eckhart assures us, “secretly Nature seeks and hunts and tries to ferret out the track in which God may be found.”

This is a most compassionate view of human nature. Even when we are busy accumulating possessions with which to feather our little nest, planning a hilltop castle with garage space for half a dozen new cars, Eckhart would say we are really looking for God. We think, “If I can fix up my place just right, with a little bar and sauna in my room and my own entertainment center at my fingertips, *then* I’ll feel at home!” But we will never be at home except in Eden.

“The man of God never rejoices,” Eckhart declares. We think, “Just what I suspected! Every saint is really a sourpuss.” But then he explains himself: “The man of God never rejoices, because he is joy itself.”

When all hostility, all resentment, all greed and fear and insecurity are erased from your mind, the state that remains is pure joy. When we become established in that state, we live in joy always. The state of joy, hidden at the very center of consciousness, is the Eden to which the long journey of spiritual seeking leads. There, the mystics of all religions agree, we uncover our original goodness. We don’t have to buy it; we don’t have to create it; we don’t have to pour it in; we don’t even have to be worthy of it. This native goodness is the essential core of human nature.

The purpose of all valid spiritual disciplines, whatever the religion from which they spring, is to enable us to return to this native state of being – not after death but here

and now, in unbroken awareness of the divinity within us and throughout creation. Theologians may quarrel, but the mystics of the world speak the same language, and the practices they follow lead to the same goal.

It is in this light that this book presents the Beatitudes – the series of eight verses from the Sermon on the Mount which begins, in Matthew’s version, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Each chapter takes one of the Beatitudes as a spiritual law which has the power to uncover the “uncreated light” in the depths of personality when we allow it to shape our thoughts and actions.

I want to make it clear, however, that this is not an attempt at Biblical commentary. I am content to leave explication and exegesis to scholars. In these chapters I simply comment on some of what the Beatitudes mean to me after decades of effort in trying to translate them into my life. I have chosen Matthew over Luke not for any theological reason, but because these are the words written on my memory half a century ago by a man I revered: the principal of a small Catholic college in Kerala, South India, who taught me through his personal example what Christ’s teachings mean in daily living.