

THE HABITAT OF THE SOUL

DISCOVERING OUR INNER DEPTHS

by

Theodore J. Nottingham

Spiritual teachers have talked about their experience of the habitat of the soul as cosmic consciousness, peak experience, the peace that passes all understanding, the inner light, becoming transparent to the divine. Whatever words are used to describe it, the result of encountering this inner depth is always the same: *it allows us to enter a vaster identity and wisdom which enables right action to be manifested in the world.*

We are each meant to live with serenity, joy, and compassionate outreach to the world around us. We are meant to be masters of our selves, capable of overcoming all the difficulties of life. This is our birthright, but in order to experience it, we must recognize how far we are from living in this manner, why this is so, and what efforts we must make to live in such a way. This new awareness and these efforts are the process that leads us into the depths of our spiritual nature, our true habitat.

The first step along this path is to notice that we live in different states of consciousness. This is not as obvious as it sounds. I am not referring here to moments of happiness in contrast to times of depression but to a state of being that puts us in touch with a deeper reality. Perhaps you have had moments of experiencing such a liberation that comes from these higher states of being. Moments of great joy, or gratitude for being alive, or while standing before a scene of great beauty. Moments when our awareness is lifted beyond the knots and tensions of our worries and concerns and we are free to enjoy the experience of being here now and happy to be alive.

These are higher states of being. You may have had such experiences as children when we were less weighed down by the things that now preoccupy us. And maybe you think that those times of bliss and wonder are gone forever along with the other delights of childhood. But that is not the case. We are meant to dwell permanently in this habitat of the soul where higher consciousness dwells. It is possible to taste and live this joy and freedom, this inner awakening, even during rush hour, even at the office, even when circumstances around you are difficult.

In order to identify our true habitat, let's take a look at what it is not: our everyday state of consciousness. Teachings on this subject describe our usual condition of consciousness as a state of sleep. Though we all believe that we are fully conscious in every moment of our lives, the fact is that most of our existence is spent "on automatic." We are stimulus-response organisms: something happens to us and we react. We think we choose how we behave, but most often we are simply one giant knee-jerk reaction to whatever comes our way: -- your child disobeys you and you get angry -- you spill a drink on yourself and you're embarrassed -- the red light lasts too long and you're impatient the list is endless, from morning till night. It's the world of stress, of ups and downs, of good days and bad days, of insecurity, inconsistency, unreliability. It's the world we know so well.

If you think the word "sleep" is a strange way to describe our condition, just think back on the last time you observed someone watching television. The vacant stare, the loose jaw...we are virtually hypnotized by life around us, drawn out of ourselves and no more able to make choices than when we are in the middle of a dream. Things happen and we respond according to our programming. It's all consuming. Our first obstacle is therefore our wrong perspective on our lives. We take ourselves for granted.

We think we know who we are. We believe that we are one and the same person all the time. But take a closer look and dare to be honest with yourself. When you're really hungry, the you that is hungry is in charge in charge. When you're irritable, the you that's irritated is the boss. When you're tired, when you're excited, when you're mad, each mood and desire is in control. Where is the unity of one self in all that? Again, we function in a stimulus-response manner that takes away our capacity to be unified as individuals. We can't count on ourselves to be the same person from one moment to the next. The person who decides the night before to get up early in the morning is not the one who has to turn off the alarm and roll out of bed. That person has a very different idea of what he or she wants to do.

To make matters worse, each of these impulses that claims to be the whole person is separated by blinders. They do not know each other. When we are our happy-go-lucky selves, we don't remember the mean-tempered one. Our condition of multiplicity is further complicated by the fact that we live so much of our life in imagination. Consider how much time is spent worrying about the future, or fretting over the past. Think of all the daydreaming that goes on in your head. And look at how we bounce from

one thought to the next without any intentionality or purpose: someone mentions a word (like blue) and our mind takes us off on a tangent that gets more and more tangled until we no longer have any idea how we got to a certain mood or idea. So in our ordinary state of consciousness we are made of many disconnected selves, we are pulled to and fro by imagination and unintentional thoughts and yet we think we are in full control of ourselves.

Now we come to an even more fundamental problem: our essential nature, that which we truly are -- the sensitivities, the gifts, the inclinations we were born with -- is generally repressed at an early stage of our life. As we encounter the world around us, the essence of who we are becomes covered over by the development of our personality. Here again, we take for granted that our personality is who we genuinely are. But our personality is rarely related to our essence and our natural inclinations. Throughout our pre-teen, adolescent, and early adulthood years we have, both consciously and unconsciously, built up defense mechanisms to survive the pain of dealing with life. We have developed masks to protect ourselves or to manipulate others. Furthermore, we have absorbed into our idea of ourselves the images that our culture tells us are the acceptable way of being a man or a woman.

We have accumulated the imitations of our parents, our peers and our environment. In a word, we have covered over our essential nature to such an extent that we have to virtually undertake an archeological exploration in order to rediscover ourselves. In order to find the habitat of our soul, in order to live right, we have to be aligned with our real self. But there are powerful forces in the way. The greatest among them is negativity in all its forms: irritation, anger, impatience, depression, hatred, vengeance, jealousy, envy, and resentment. These are all poisons within us that cause us so much unnecessary suffering and use up so much of our energy, our life-force. We don't have to live like that! Even though it seems that everyone around us indulges in these negative forms of behavior, they are not the only way to live. Imagine how different your life would be without the constant stress of these wretched feelings.

But that entails dealing with our greatest foe: our vanity. Vanity is not merely primping in the mirror. It causes us to spend much of our life in self-interested activity, in thinking about ourselves, in having to be right, in asserting ourselves over others, in stubbing our pride over this or that. Vanity causes us to have a false idea of ourselves a false sense of self-

importance, along with a perverse distortion of our attention. Everything becomes me, me, me. So much grief and misery comes from this petty self-centeredness that disfigures our humanity. We are our own greatest source of suffering as long as we live in this state of sleep that is ruled by automatic behavior, a self-centered focus, negative emotions, multiple selves vying for control, and misperceptions of who we truly are.

So what is the true habitat of the soul? Clearly it is not merely a place. It is the life-force beyond our mistaken notion of ourselves that is seeking to come through us and accomplish its work of goodness in the world. It is that mysterious "presence" that can overcome solitude, meaninglessness, and despair. Moreover, not only is it always there -- deep within -- but it is seeking us more than we are seeking it. This habitat is common to us all.

We are not merely separate, disconnected life forms as the senses suggest. We are all connected and rooted in the deeper life that brought us into being. This habitat is our source of hope and sanity in a world of chaos. We are a part of the greater life form which all things come, and with that awareness, we discover our real importance and our role in the world. To become connected to inner spiritual home, which is so intimate to us and yet so much more than we are, is to come in contact with the very mystery of our existence. And the more we open ourselves to this power at the center of our being, the more we are made whole and capable of caring for others.