

This is a description of the cosmic consciousness experience I had in Berkeley in March 1969, at age nineteen. I wrote this story, except for the last two paragraphs, in 1992. While I was writing, I tried to put myself back into the mind-space I was in when it happened, though my understanding has evolved and deepened over time.

The air in the dorms was sizzling with the static of collective stress over finals and term papers. The percussion beat of the keys of twenty typewriters syncopated with the rhythm of the Beatles song escaping from under someone's doorway to spread a subversive message to all of us hard-working, upwardly-mobile freshmen —“All you need is love! Love. Love is all you need!”

All quarter long, The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, The Jefferson Airplane and The Grateful Dead, Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix had filled these hallways, a kind of tribal call-and-response between dorm rooms. Encoded in the music was certain information about the political persuasion and social orientation of the residents of each room, like whether they might turn you on to a joint or know where you could find some bennies for finals time.

During finals week, even the hippest students were scared straight by the prospect of flunking out. We may have dressed the same way as the street people and “outside agitators,” but the lines were drawn at finals time. Even the demonstrations were put on hold. Being a radical Berkeley student in March 1969, was fraught with contradictions.

My roommate, Jill, and I were trying to condense a whole quarter's worth of reading and paper-writing into a week and a half, having considered it our moral duty to go out on strike to demand an Ethnic Studies Department at UC Berkeley. Along with the Third World Strike

and the ongoing Vietnam War protests, there were marches, rallies, teach-ins, and picket lines to walk. An insurrection was going on in Berkeley and the real learning was taking place in the streets. Jill and I came home in the evenings, or eyes still burning with tear gas, to watch the "riots" on Marie's TV and berate the bias of the news media. Our parents would have been horrified if they had realized that their middle-class values were being carelessly tossed aside like those crumpled-up wads of typewriter paper strewn all over the dorm room floor that night.

I leaned back from my typewriter and the poly-sci paper rolled into its carriage and groaned loudly, "This is *such* bullshit!" My protest had been aimed at both the paper and the "elitist bourgeois" professor who had assigned it. I hadn't really expected an answer from Jill, but she seemed grateful for the interruption. "Do you want to go down to Telegraph to get more coffee?" Her eyebrows rose quizzically above her wire-rimmed, John Lennon granny glasses. Along with the glasses, Jill's trench coat, long red scarf, and well-worn jeans, her halo of electric hair and the slight slouch to her shoulders as she strode across campus gave her an air of radical, countercultural sophistication.

"I'm pretty buzzed. Maybe later." It was about ten o'clock. I had gulped down a huge cup of coffee after dinner, along with a Benzedrine tablet, and I was wide-awake and fidgety. Jill and I were both looking for a way out of studying, but neither of us wanted to lead the other astray. I moved over to my bed, propped a pillow against the wall, and collapsed into it with a sigh, letting her know I was officially on break. Her profile lit up with a smile, and she rolled her desk chair around to face me.

We started talking about the six months we had been at Berkeley, how glad we were that we got along so well. "Thank God for that stupid philosophy major!" Jill chuckled. "That's why they put us together in this dorm room!"

"Yeah! What a joke!" We had both dropped our philosophy classes when we realized that they had nothing to do with spirituality. Jill had written a paper on Taoism in high school, and she found that the more research she did for the project, the happier she felt. Why not major in something that would bring her happiness? I guess you could call Jill a pragmatic idealist.

I started reading about Hinduism and Buddhism at sixteen, totally fed up with that dour brand of Christianity that bleaches all the color out of life, not to mention the chronic guilt. I taught myself yoga from a book and started meditating using the *OM MANI PADME HUM* mantra. By the time I was a senior in high school, the Beatles had introduced the Maharishi and Ravi Shankar to the flower children, and Eastern religions began another upsurge of popularity, reminiscent of how our Beat predecessors had embraced Zen.

When I came to Berkeley, I started meditating at the Student International Meditation Society on Channing Way, Maharishi's group. Jill and I saw no contradiction between our spiritual pursuits and radical politics. After all, you saw the poet Allen Ginsberg at every demonstration, leading a swaying group of interlocking, at least half naked bodies in the OM chant. You could always count on the urban holy man to make his own political statement at every be-in, love-in, teach-in, and march by taking off all his clothes. Was the message free love? A return to innocence? A protest against the hypocrisy of middle class values? Who knew? It didn't seem to matter much, though. We all marched together under the same banner of love, peace, equality, and freedom from the stifling status quo, and it stretched wide enough to encompass even the most eccentric marchers in the parade.

"Tell me more about Taoism." I had this overwhelming urge to fly above the dense fog of all these opinionated textbooks with their proud

pretenses to objectivity. This whole scholastic head-game felt unbearably oppressive! I had to get some fresh air! Flinging the curtain aside, I opened the sliding, aluminum window, and stuck my head out. I couldn't see many stars because of the urban glow in the sky. Two other dorm buildings, monolithic slabs of concrete and glass, blocked the view of the San Francisco Bay, but it didn't really matter since our room was facing east. We could see College Avenue, a few apartment buildings, a parking lot, and if we leaned way out our windows, the Campanile and the Berkeley Hills beyond it. I inhaled the cool night air until my breathing grew slow and deep.

Jill left her desk and positioned herself on the floor underneath the wall phone next to the door, further widening the gap between herself and her studies. Sitting cross-legged, she seemed strangely unperturbed by the daunting stacks of books and notes that covered her side of the room. There, in the less-cluttered doorway alcove, she looked almost relaxed. It was as if she had to put some physical distance between herself and her schoolwork and reposition her body in the appropriate posture to provide an adequate response to my query on Taoism.

She sat quietly for a few moments, putting her mind in the right place. "I remember learning how the Taoists exalt nature. For them, God is in nature. Well, actually, God *is* nature. They call God the Tao, which is like a river that flows through everything. The Tao is life force. It's always moving, always changing, and that's how the world really is. There's no separation between one thing and another. It's all one big river of God."

"Siddhartha understood the unity of everything by watching the river," I remembered Hermann Hesse's book, modeled loosely on the life of the Buddha, that was passed around by the newly-converted flower children at my high school. "He looked into the river and saw all of

humanity, including himself, and everything in the universe as One. The One was constantly changing form and flowing into the many, but still it was always the One. Anyway, go ahead."

"The Tao is called the Way. By this, the Taoists don't mean the right way or the only way like a lot of Christians claim about Christianity. The Tao is the way things are—It's what you see when you look at life without labels or concepts. Lao Tsu, who wrote the most famous book about it, says that the Way that can be spoken of is not the Tao. When you have words, you have preconceived ideas, so you can't really describe what the Tao is. You have to see It for yourself. And nature is the place where you can see It most clearly."

"If it's really the Tao, shouldn't you be able to see It anywhere, even here in Berkeley?"

"I guess that must be true," Jill conceded. She was quiet for a moment, pondering, looking at me over the top of her wire rims. "The Tao is both the goal and the way to reach it."

"Hinduism also says that everything is God. They call the material world *maya*, which is like a fantasy or a dream, and they say that God loses Himself in *maya* and finds Himself again in a cosmic game of hide-and-seek. At least, that's how Alan Watts describes it. God breathes out and the universe is created. When He inhales, it disappears back inside of Him again. God forgets Himself with the out-breath and remembers Himself with the in-breath, and I think each breath takes eons."

I paused to consider. "Wait a minute! That can't be right because according to Alan Watts and Aldous Huxley, who also wrote about this, there *is* no time but the Eternal Now."

"The Eternal Now. I like that," said Jill.

She added, "The Taoists say you can't understand truth with your logical mind."

"So do the Buddhists and the Hindus. I guess all religions say that. The Zen Buddhists claim you can attain enlightenment by trying to figure out truth logically until you finally blow your own mind, and then you get it. Zen masters use a kind of riddle called a *koan*. The most famous one is, 'What is the sound of one hand clapping?' Another one is, 'What did your face look like before your parents were born?'"

My own face felt hot, and my mind was racing. "Trying to solve the koan confronts the mind with its own limitations," I continued, picking up speed, "so you get catapulted out of the intellect, and you can see reality in a brand-new way!"

"I've heard about that." Jill was nodding and I noticed a slightly feverish glint in her eyes.

"Do the Taoists believe in reincarnation?"

"They don't really talk about it. At least, I didn't run across any mention of it in the books I read. What do you think?"

"The Hindus and the Buddhists believe in it. I think I do, too. One afternoon, about a year ago, I was lying on my bed. I'd just gotten home from school, my books were spread out all over the place, and I had this weird feeling. I just knew that I'd been alive much longer than eighteen years, that I'd existed before I was in my mother's womb. I couldn't remember any lifetimes in particular, but I sensed that I'd experienced a whole lot more than what had happened so far in this life. I wasn't afraid to die anymore, because if I'd lived before this body, then I would probably live on after it, too."

"I think I know what you mean, but I understand it differently. I've never been afraid to die. I have no doubt that there's life after death, because I believe everything is mind. I identify with my mind more than I do with my body, so I don't feel that I *need* a body for my mind to live on."

"I've heard God referred to as the Universal Mind. Maybe all of our individual minds are contained in one Big Mind."

As I was trying to put a visual image with this idea—which was no easy task—I was suddenly aware that everything was starting to look very strange in that dorm room. Colors were getting brighter by the minute until they were almost pulsating. The air was alive with colorful, blinking speckles that danced like playful sprites. Then it was the walls. They started expanding and contracting, and just outside their mutable perimeters was a deep blackness. Surprisingly, this darkness wasn't the least bit frightening. It was soft and comforting, even inviting. The longer I gazed into it, the more compelling it became. The whole room was vibrating now—between ordinary reality and some other extraordinarily exciting dimension.

Inexplicably, I heard myself think, "I'm going to make the right decision this time."

I felt an inward shift. I saw what looked like movie reels of possibilities—realities I could have chosen but didn't—all dropping away.

"Something very weird is going on—do you feel it?" I asked Jill. It couldn't be the bennie because benzadrine wasn't a psychedelic. I wondered briefly if this could be an acid flashback. I had dropped LSD once, but it fell far short of the glistening-eyed claims of its self-proclaimed prophets—at least, my experience did.

My LSD trip took me into a sometimes cartoon-like, sometimes surreal realm where I laughed a lot and witnessed strange mental movies that were occasionally accompanied by popping, bubbling, and "whooshing" sounds. Images appeared in brilliant, electric, technicolor patterns that splashed, bled, flowed, and grew into bizarre tubular forms. When I waved my arm, I saw the streaming tendrils of afterimages that the acid devotees called "trails." I watched a parade of elaborate paisleys and

fluorescent figures worthy of reproduction on psychedelic posters to advertise bands at the Fillmore and the Avalon Ballroom. But I had certainly not seen God like Timothy Leary, Aldous Huxley, and Alan Watts apparently had. My acid trip was not at all profound. Whatever was going on in this dorm room was something altogether different. This was huge!

"I feel it too," Jill answered, "and it feels really good!"

Jill's round, dilated eyes looked magnified through her granny glasses. Her smile spread slowly, puffing up her already full cheeks until the surprise on her face unfurled into an expression of pure joy. She made me want to laugh and when I did, I realized that my cheeks were already tight from smiling. My face seemed to appear equally hilarious to her, and she rolled back against the door squealing with delight. Something incredibly wonderful was happening! I had no idea what it was, but I felt tingly and flushed with anticipation. The gales of laughter slowed to sporadic giggles, and I waited for Jill to say something that would throw me an anchor. Here it came. . .

"It's starting to seem like writing papers and taking finals don't really matter."

I felt a sinking sensation as the anchor dissolved between my fingers. I had wanted to navigate a more deliberate course, but it was already too late. The moorings were gone, and the current had taken us. I gasped and then spoke over the rushing sound in my head, "Getting a degree doesn't matter." As soon as I dared say it, I knew it was true.

Jill was right there. "Getting a good job doesn't even matter!"

"The whole future doesn't matter!"

"Because there *is* no future! And no past either! Only now! And nothing matters!"

I felt more quietly and profoundly *awake* than I had ever been before. I glanced around the room in astonishment—it was like discovering the sense of sight for the first time. How had I never before noticed these interesting, corrugated grooves in the tan wallpaper? The grainy texture of the glowing lampshade looked like luminous sandpaper. And what innovative designer had chosen such delightful tiles for the dorm room floor? It looked as if a lively band of free-spirited elves had dribbled sugar glaze all over the cocoa-brown tiles in a delicious pattern of nearly imperceptible order. I gazed in rapt appreciation at the canvas of the floor with its inspired flourishes like those fortunate accidents so close to a painter's heart.

What was going on? Jill and I hadn't taken any drugs—we had just been drinking coffee and studying. Yet it was as if, for some inexplicable reason, the whole world had shifted; it had now completely turned itself around and was looking back at me! The world had never before revealed itself in such breathtaking relief! All these so-called inanimate objects in the room were veritably bubbling over with personality, so completely endearing, so undeniably themselves. The pencil on my desk was my dear little friend—so bright, so sunny yellow! How whimsical the lamp looked perched there with its illuminated headdress setting off its delicate curves just so! In fact, our whole, institutional dorm room was as adorable as a dollhouse!

I stretched my eyelids until my eyes bulged. I didn't want to miss anything, now that I was finally *seeing*! I was also beginning to realize what was underneath this amazing extravaganza of the everyday.

"I'm really starting to see how everything is God." My eyes darted around the room, sampling one object and then moving quickly, voraciously, on to the next. "How the lamp is God, the desk is God, the telephone is God. . ."

She chimed in as if we were playing a children's game. "The bed is God! The coffee cup is God! The ceiling, the floor, the walls are God!"

"The whole dorm is God! And everyone in it!"

"The whole university is God! The whole world is God!"

"Even the racists and the politicians are God! There's nothing that isn't God!"

I paused for a moment to catch my breath. "And you're God." I was overcome with awe, staring into her eyes, seeing so clearly that it was God looking back at me.

"And you're God, too." Her eyes studied mine, flickering surprise, fascination, bewilderment, relief, amazement, amusement, beatitude, and then all of them again.

We stared at each other openmouthed and unabashed. All rules of etiquette and propriety had vanished along with our everyday egos. The more we watched one another, the more obvious it was that we were looking at ourselves.

"There's no separation," she said.

"I know."

Not only were Jill and I the same Being, we were contiguous with everything in the room. There was no dividing-line indicating where I stopped, and the bed underneath me or the wall behind me began. There was no point where I ended and Jill began. It was all the same "I."

I struggled to put words with my sensations. "When I step back inside myself, it's like I'm behind my little, usual identity, and I'm suddenly enormous. The real 'I' in here is God. And when I look at you, I see the same 'I' that I feel inside myself. It's really hard to explain."

"I know what you mean though. It seems silly to even say 'I' and 'you' anymore."

We were silent for a time, waiting to see what would happen next. My gaze gravitated back to Jill's face. She was spinning a lock of hair around her index finger, winding and unwinding the ringlet. Her eyes darted around the room—watchful, intense.

It didn't take long for the next act to begin. It started with Jill's skin. First, it took on a rubbery look, and then it molded itself into a series of different faces in rapid succession. I watched fascinated as her granny glasses turned into square-lensed, rimless spectacles worn by a stout Englishman. Almost immediately, that image faded and a tawny-skinned monk in saffron robes with shining eyes appeared. Another shift and the monk's serene eyes were gazing out of the small, pink face of an infant. Then a moment later, these same eyes belonged to a young African woman. A boldly-printed fabric that matched her dress was cinched under her breasts to secure a tiny, brown baby in place. The figures of mother and child both dissolved, but her eyes remained, now glowing from underneath the metal war helmet of a young man. Proudly, arrogantly, he brandished a sword that curved like a sickle.

I watched the smooth-faced soldier join the ranks of his marching and hooting countrymen. They were off to meet their mirror image in another battalion of young heroes, to dance the initiatory rites of some spectacular war ritual. The sky darkened and the soldiers became indistinct against the dusky hillside. The next instant, the bare hills were covered with row after row of their tombstones. Night descended and everything went black. A second later, the sun rose to reveal a blond child picking wildflowers among the headstones. She looked up briefly and smiled. There were those eyes again!

On and on it went—a parade of personalities that spanned continents and centuries. Yet a common thread connected them all—they possessed

a shared lineage of interior genealogy that could only be traced through the eyes.

"You keep turning into all these different people." I drew myself back from my reverie and tried to halt the reeling crowd by willing Jill's features to stay put.

"Your face is doing that, too."

I realized that I was seeing Jill's past lives, but it didn't seem to matter much at that moment, because of the larger truth I now understood—Jill was every being who ever lived, and so was I!

Something remarkable was also happening to my experience of time. The flow of time was no longer following its expected progression from past to present to future. Its current had swollen and surged, and the dams made of minutes, hours, days, years, and even lifetimes had crumbled. The river, Time, was no longer simply flowing along a line, following a defined course. It was vertical, as well as horizontal; deep and wide, as well as long. I could plumb the depths of time, witnessing the past and the future, as well as their limitless possibilities, by simply gazing into the reflection of this unbelievably vast present moment.

Suddenly, I was jarred by a loud, snapping sound. Then I realized it had originated inside my own chest! A plaster cast was cracking away from my heart, and an inner sunshine was spreading like warm honey across my breast. The light intensified and continued to pour through the widening passageway in my heart in wave after wave of golden sweetness. It brought with it the most profound certainty of an underlying goodness at the core of everything in this universe.

I was overcome by a love so ineffably sweet and so awesomely powerful that I inhaled an astonished gasp that was at once a cry, a plea, and a "thank you!" The voice of my out-breath was an outpouring of

relief, of release from fear and pain, a sigh of homecoming after a long and harrowing journey.

This loving presence was so immense that it filled up every space in the whole universe. I laughed at all the scary stories of hell and the rantings of the fire and brimstone preachers. This God of Unimaginable Love could never hurt anyone!

This Being, Who was beyond male and female, or any description of form, knew me so intimately that I realized I was really just an extension of It. This was my Deepest Self—and everyone else's too—the Self of the Whole Universe. God was inside me, and my interior felt like limitless light; God was outside me, and everything around me was luminous and infinite, too!

I sank into the oversized, Indian-print pillows on my bed and closed my eyes. What kaleidoscopic wonders were taking place on the screen behind my eyelids! Soon the explosions of color began to assume more definite shapes, and a huge wheel emerged with all the masses of humanity entwined around it. This giant, living wreath was writhing with all the joys and pains of existence. Every possible drama was playing out on the gigantic wheel in a human chain of strung-together vignettes—lovemaking, child-birthing, war-fighting, peacemaking, poverty, opulence, chastity, decadence, laughing, crying, dying, marauding, masquerading, no ending, no beginning, self-enamored aliveness! The wheel turned, crushing wailing humanity beneath it, raising the lucky ones to the top in cheers of victory and celebration, then turning again until the down were up and the up were down. And none of it mattered one iota!

All the beings on this revolving theater of passion were totally entranced with the drama, completely engrossed in their parts. It didn't matter whether they were heroes or villains, haves or have-nots, slaves

or free, marrying or mourning—they were absolutely carried away by living and loving and losing themselves in this fantastic epic show!

I wish I knew how to tell of the love that was pouring through me as I watched this incredible cosmic charade. I loved every single person on that wheel with every ounce of my now-vast consciousness. I loved them all, and I loved them the same amount—and that was totally! At the same time, I *was* each one of them. Through some quirk of fate or warp in the lattice of cause and effect, I was seeing it all from another perspective than from behind the eyes of someone on the wheel. I was with God, watching it all as God.

Waves of love, increasing in magnitude, continued to sweep over me until they were like tsunamis. Oh, the poignancy of it all! Every soul on that wheel, even the most villainous, the most murderous, is so profoundly precious, so endearing, so lovable! Underneath it all, every one of us on that spinning stage knows that everything is really all right—no, not just all right—wonderful, blissful, ecstatic! We are all just pretending. Nothing on the wheel really matters. We are just playing, losing and finding ourselves again.

“It’s all so—cute!” I conceded defeat at ever finding the right word.

“I know!”

I raised myself up from the overstuffed pillows and pulled the curtain aside to look out the window again. The streetlights cast a neon glow on the last, dedicated stragglers making their way home from the library. I felt an almost unbearable compassion. How seriously they took their lives! How brave they were! How seriously we had taken ourselves until now! This recognition brought more side-splitting laughter.

The amplitude of the waves of bliss and love increased steadily until I was vibrating with a pleasure that was light years beyond any orgasm I had ever had. I was shivering with the intensity of spiraling, kundalini

rushes, and my body was riding exploding waves of ecstasy, along with my orgasming soul. I looked across the room at Jill, who hadn't left her station by the door, but was now lying blissed-out on the hard tile floor without the slightest evidence of discomfort.

"Hey!" I called over to her. "Now I know for sure that sex isn't sinful. It can be incredibly cosmic and sacred—it's like making love with God!"

Jill didn't answer but her smile told me that she knew exactly what I was talking about.

The shudders of pleasure and the orgasmic rushes of bliss lasted all night. They were accompanied by a light that was both blinding in its brightness and reassuringly tender. There was so much light in our room that we barely noticed when the sun came up.

Interspersed with the laughing and the sublime silences were questions. "What does all this mean in terms of living a life? How can we explain it to people? Can we really shrink our minds back down enough to fit into the academic world? Should we drop out of school?" Then immediately, the light would fade and the bliss, recede. Soon one of us would remember, "It doesn't matter! It doesn't mean anything! There's no future, and no past either! There's no time but now!" and the floodtides of rapture were back again.

When we worried about how we could keep the experience alive, it vanished. We couldn't hold on to it. When we were able to be in the present moment, it came back full-force. Eventually, Jill and I realized that it didn't actually matter if we forgot everything and returned to our prior somnolent state, because we were bound to wake up again someday.

As the night went on, the name *God* started to seem limiting. Even the sense of a shared Self dissolved around the edges into a boundless consciousness, an endless ocean that held all worlds, physical and non-

physical; the whole of time; and everything that could possibly be imagined. This luminous sea stretched out everywhere—there was only infinity to behold in any direction.

Over and over, Jill and I had bemoaned the inadequacy of language to describe what we were experiencing. Later, we simply referred to the events and realizations of that night as *That Thing That Happened to Us*, or *That Thing*, for short. *That Thing* lasted for three days at high intensity before it started to fade. Its radiance was so glaring to my physical eyes that when I went to classes, I wore sunglasses and covered my head with a shawl, as if I were crossing the Sahara instead of the Berkeley campus. During those three days, I often had to stop and sit down, overwhelmed by all that divinity parading by.

Gradually, over the period of a few months, I came back to a closer approximation of consensus reality, but I never took life as seriously again. I had no ambition to do anything but live in a way that was hospitable to the Truth I had glimpsed that night in the dorms, including being of service where I could. After *That Thing*, it was so easy to love everyone, having seen their True Radiance. I also noticed that although I still maintained many of the same, old hang-ups, it became much more entertaining to try and unravel them, almost like solving Zen koans.

Basically, even though I saw the world with new eyes, there was nothing to do after *That Thing* but carry on with my life, which is what I have been doing.

Now I'm aware that I alone am in the vast
openness
of the sea
And cause the sea to be the sea.

Just swim.
Just swim.
Go on with your story.

Dainin Katagiri Roshi