

understanding

The Simplicity of Life

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I met Ramesh Balsekar in the autumn of 1990 at Hermosa Beach, California. That meeting changed my life. I'd gone to India in January of that year in search of "someone who knew," someone who could answer my questions.

After that initial meeting I traveled to India for the next twenty years. Ramesh was my guru and you will meet him in the pages that follow. I mention this only so that you, the reader, will have some idea of whom it is I speak when mentioning his name.

Ramesh died in September 2009.

Colin Mallard.

*Note: Throughout this book the masculine
tense is used but refers to all
human beings both male and female.*

INTRODUCTION

I first read Colin's book, *The Examined Life*, partly out of intellectual curiosity and partly out of a desire not to be as cynical about religion and all things spiritual. I've started so many books which promised a great deal only to be disappointed. This book, however, gave me more than I expected, guiding me through the complexities of a totally different way of thinking, and therefore, living.

Although I loved the ideas I felt I was moving away from life, a kind of withdrawal to a serene almost self centered space. Then my circumstances changed drastically and I discovered this serene space was in fact a place of strength giving me power to adapt to and enjoy life despite the difficulties. I found I could look at problems directly without apportioning praise or blame as I used to. I was able to deal with the difficulties as they arose, and to stop worrying about what might happen, or what, given the benefit of hindsight, I should have done. I was introduced to the gift of living in the present!

Colin answered my questions with incredible patience and one day I realized he'd become my teacher. After all I was far too old, middle class and respectable to have a guru. Besides, that would have made me a disciple. I finally worked it out—the difference between a guru and a teacher, that is—A teacher helps his pupil acquire knowledge while a guru does the opposite. A guru helps strip away the accumulated conditioning from both cultural and personal sources and thus enables one to awaken to life as it is.

Colin has been helping people for a number of years, answering their questions and mine. The book you are now reading emerged from this process. *Understanding*, is a replacement, not a sequel to the earlier book, *The Examined Life*.

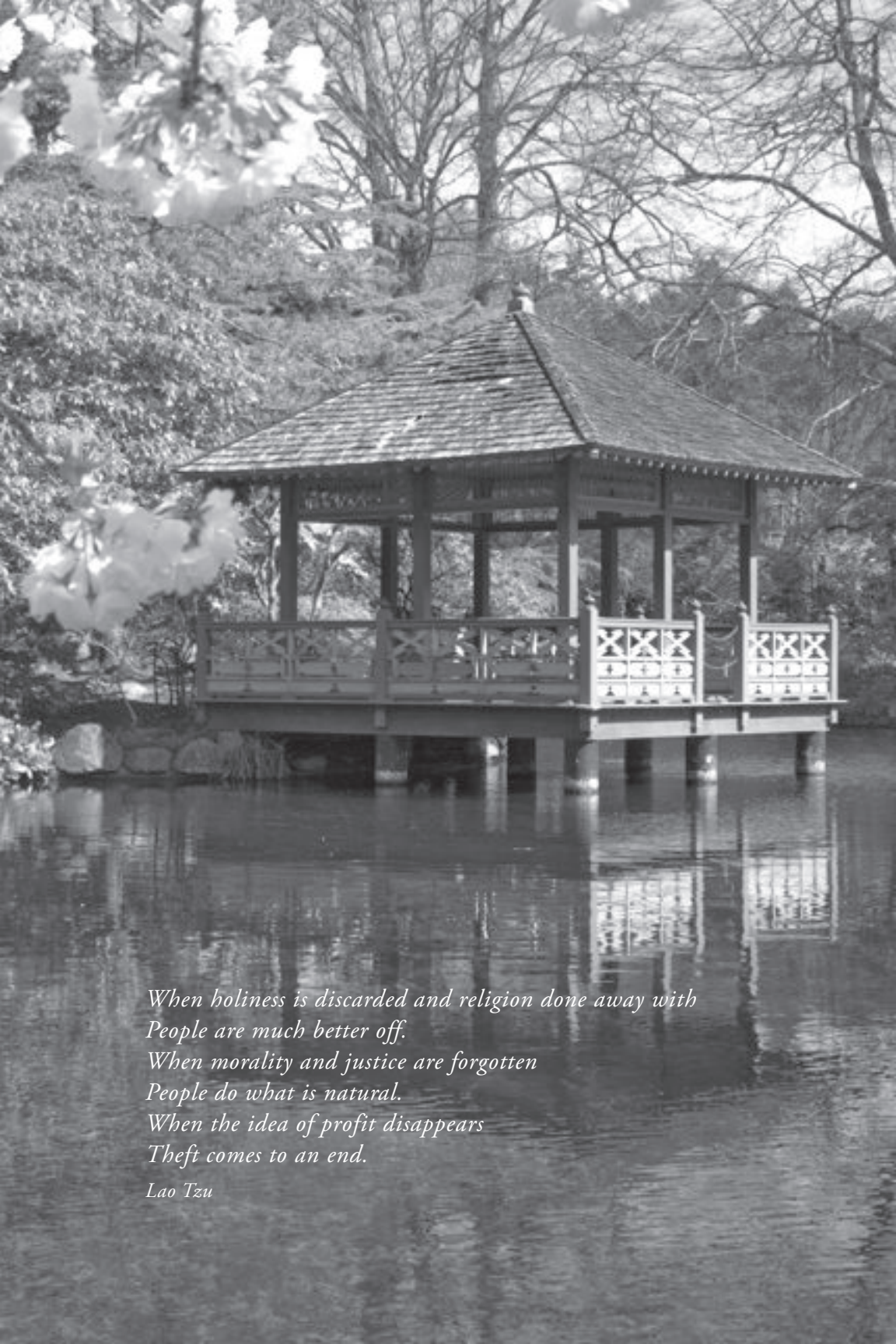
I am pleased to have the opportunity to publish *Understanding*, and hope you find it as helpful as I have.

Val Walton

Publisher

*The Great Way is not difficult
for those who have no preferences.
When love and hate are both absent
everything becomes clear and undisguised.
Make the smallest distinction, however,
and heaven and earth are set infinitely apart.*

Sengtan (3rd Zen Patriarch)



*When holiness is discarded and religion done away with
People are much better off.
When morality and justice are forgotten
People do what is natural.
When the idea of profit disappears
Theft comes to an end.*

Lao Tzu



1

CHAPTER

TO BEGIN WITH

EMPTY YOUR CUP

Professor Daniel Robertson taught Eastern Religion at Harvard University. His specialty was Zen, and after thirty years and twelve books the professor was considered an expert in the field. He'd never been to Japan, however, so with a sabbatical coming, he decided to go and visit the well-known Zen Master Hakuin. Shortly after arriving in Japan he made his way to Hakuin's temple. He rang the bell and a small elderly monk appeared. Dr. Robertson explained the nature of his visit and said he had an appointment to see Master Hakuin. The monk took him through the garden to a gazebo where he was told to wait. A few minutes later Master Hakuin came through

the garden and, entering the gazebo, bowed to his guest. In perfect English he welcomed the professor. They sat opposite each other, a small table between them. Hakuin asked the guest if he would like tea. "I would," said Dr. Robertson. The master rang a bell, and when the elderly monk appeared, he was asked to bring tea.

"Tell me what brings you here and how can I help," Hakuin said in a clear and quiet voice. Dr. Robertson described in detail the start of his career—how, as a student at Harvard, he had been approached to come on staff once he graduated; and how very pleased he was to have been invited at such a young age.

The professor told Hakuin about the books he'd written, the many students he'd taught, and the numerous awards he'd been given. He then went on to tell Hakuin about a series of guest lectures he'd recently completed and how well received they'd been. As the tea arrived and was placed on the table between them, the professor continued to describe his achievements. Hakuin took the pot of tea and started pouring into the cup which sat on a delicate saucer on a black lacquered tray. Dr. Robertson noticed that Hakuin continued to pour the tea until it was overflowing the cup and the saucer and beginning to spill onto the tray. "Stop, stop," he shouted, "the cup is too full!" Hakuin put the teapot down and, looking at the eminent professor, said, "You have come to see me, but, like this cup, you are too full. Until you empty your cup how can you receive what I have to offer?" (*Zen story*)

• • • James

James, a clerk in a local shoe store, earned just enough to get by. He enjoyed the people he worked for and the customers he served. He lived at the end of a long lane lined with a hedge of dense cedars a couple of miles from town. At the end was a cottage, his home for the past fifty years. It was a small cottage with only one large room. The inside was clean and cared for by someone with simple tastes and few needs.

James rode a bicycle to work in the morning and home again in the evening. On weekends he could be found in the garden that surrounded the cottage on three sides. The back of the cottage was attached to an old brick wall some thirty feet tall and covered with wisteria. The cottage itself was set at the back of a large open landscaped area covering about ten acres.

Every so often James liked to walk along a trail that led through a dense forest, where it intersected a path running at right angles. On one side of the path was a canal that stretched in both directions as far as the eye could see. On the other side of the path was a four-foot wall that surrounded a beautiful estate. By turning to his right he could walk between the canal and the wall. About a mile along the wall, two widely separated stone pillars marked the entrance to a long driveway that wound its way through gently sloping fields to a large and secluded mansion visible through a stand of tall beech trees. The setting was exquisite and James often wondered who

lived there. Over the years he'd never met his reclusive neighbor. He had, from time to time, however, seen a gardener who attended the shrubs, pruned the trees and obviously took care of the grounds.

James had lived in the cottage since he was a young man. Following the death of his parents he inherited the property on condition that he was never to open the door at the back of the cottage. He never had.

Viewed from the inside, the back door was no different from the front door. At times he found himself wondering just where the door might lead and what was behind it. Being an obedient and somewhat timid man, James had never opened it.

One evening after supper James sat alone, feet propped in front of the fireplace where flames flickered around a large log. He found himself looking at the door and wondering what was on the other side. A couple of evenings later, when he returned from the garden, he thought he heard a noise coming from the other side of the door. He held his breath and listened intently. He must have been mistaken; all was quiet. Throughout this particular week he found himself wondering more and more about the door and what was on the other side. As the weekend approached, his curiosity got the better of him. He'd wait until his day off on Saturday, then he would open the door and explore what was on the other side.

Saturday morning arrived, and after breakfast James approached the door. He turned the handle and slowly

pushed it open. With an initial creak, the heavy door opened smoothly. He found himself in a beautiful hallway lined with small colonnades that supported flowers and delicate marble statues. His attention was drawn to a number of paintings which hung on the walls along the hall. He'd never seen such beauty before. The floor, of ebony parquet, shone with a warm and inviting glow. Halfway down the hall James turned into a large and elegantly appointed living room. A fresh fire burned in a large fireplace. Hearing a sound behind him, James spun around as a butler entered the room. Surprise and recognition spread across the old man's face and his dancing eyes were warm and friendly.


Before James could say a word he heard the butler saying, "Welcome home, Master. I've been waiting for you. How wonderful to see you again." Surprised by the man's words, James replied, "There must be some mistake; I'm not the master of anything and this is certainly not my home."

"Ah, yes, I understand. You must have forgotten, but this is your home. You are, indeed, the master of this house and I am your servant. It's been a long time since you were last here, but I would know you anywhere."

After showing James around the house the butler took him outside to see the grounds. As they walked through the gardens James noticed an old man pruning a tree. There was something familiar about him. As they approached, the gardener looked up and a lovely

smile spread over his face. “You’ve come at last,” he said, and his blue eyes sparkled with delight. Suddenly, as if waking from a dream, James realized the gardener was the man he’d seen on his walks along the canal. Then it struck him: where he now stood was in front of that same mansion, and his cottage was simply another entrance.

The butler put a hand on James’ shoulder. “Yes,” he said with a smile on his face, “you live here; the mansion is yours! Welcome home.” It was then that James remembered everything.



*True words are not necessarily eloquent
Eloquent words are not necessarily true.
Lao Tzu*



CHAPTER

WORDS ARE NOT THE TRUTH

SOME THOUGHTS ON LANGUAGE

Traps are to catch rabbits

And when that is done

Traps are forgotten

Nets are to catch fish

And when that is done

Nets are forgotten

Words are to convey

That which lies behind them

And when that is done

Words are forgotten.

Chiang Tzu

The Advaita master Ramesh Balsekar was fond of saying, “My words are not the truth.” What he meant was that words are nothing more than concepts that point to

the truth. Truth is truth; the concepts about truth are still just concepts and therefore not the truth. Many are familiar with the image of the Zen master pointing at the moon and his students standing looking at his finger. What the master wanted was for them to look beyond his finger and see the moon.

Language by its nature is subjective. What someone understands by the words I use may not be what I mean, because their understanding of key words is different from mine. In the material that follows I will attempt to define words clearly to make it easier for the reader to understand exactly what is being said.

And, hopefully, by the end of the book the words will no longer have any significance because that to which they point will be understood; the reader will understand the truth for himself.

• • • Metaphors

Metaphors are guideposts, pointers, ways of looking—glimpses through a fence, so to speak. They're helpful but ought not to be taken too literally. This book is full of metaphors, stories and anecdotes, so keep this qualification in mind.

• • • The concept of God

When the term God is used in this book, it is simply a convenience of language. It is just a concept, as nothing

really can be said about God. In mathematics “X” is a symbol used to represent the unknown. Despite the fact that X is unknown, it is possible to use it in an equation in such a way as to obtain a sense of that which is unknown. God is really just a symbol for the unknown, much as X is a symbol in mathematics.

Lao Tzu uses the term, “the Tao,” and goes on to say that:

*The Tao that is spoken
Is not the eternal Tao.
The named
Is not the eternal name.
The nameless is the source of all names
And the named the source of the ten thousand things.*

*Mystery wrapped in mystery
The Great Tao dreams
And life takes form.*

In Judaism the name for God has the vowels removed in order to render it unspeakable, whereas in Buddhism there is no direct name for God and “the Void” is used instead. It can also be referred to as the Great Mystery, the Totality of Consciousness, Potential Energy and the Source. When reading the word “God” in this book it is helpful to keep these concepts in mind.

• • • The nature of understanding

*To understand life it is not necessary
To know a great deal
No need to look at the world through a microscope
Or the heavens through a telescope
Much learning gets in the way
And the more one knows the less one understands.
Lao Tzu*

• • • • •

When the European mariners understood that the world was not flat, their behavior changed simply as a result of their understanding. Despite their fear they began to sail out of sight of land and not one of them fell over the edge.

In learning, something is added. We actively engage in learning in order to acquire something that will give us a benefit or advantage in life, or simply because we're curious. Understanding is something completely different. Nothing can be done to bring it about. Understanding has its own time frame, and simply happens when the right conditions prevail. Understanding is something that comes upon us at the most unexpected of times. We experience it usually with the exclamation, "Of course!" Archimedes ran through the streets of Athens shouting, "Eureka, I have found it!" after sitting in a bath and realizing how he could determine the volume of an

object. Einstein had worked on the theory of relativity for a long time when the understanding dawned on him. He was gracious enough to recognize that the insight “came from outside” himself. Fritz Perls referred to these spontaneous occurrences with the German word Gestalt, which means to see as a whole.

Spiritual awakening is direct understanding of a spiritual nature. Sometimes it comes in small increments that take place over extended periods of time which, in the end, contribute to a much larger, all-encompassing realization, known as enlightenment. In other instances the understanding can be immense and profound—one sudden cataclysmic realization—with the same result. It is for this reason that the experience of awakening appears, on the surface, to differ so much from person to person.

When understanding does take place, however, it is preceded by a peculiar kind of attitude. This attitude is one where the mind is open, and is accompanied by a willingness to surrender preconceived notions and abandon beliefs in the interest of truth. This openness is often accompanied by the acceptance that neither the activity of the mind nor spiritual discipline can bring about the understanding the seeker wants. It could be said that to know God requires the abandonment of any belief in God. This state of mind, this attitude, is variously referred to in Zen as the “beginner’s mind,” the “fasting mind,” or the “vacant mind.”

To read what follows, it is helpful to approach it with a beginner's mind. What this means is to understand as clearly as possible what is being said. It is not helpful to argue with what is presented because to do so demonstrates attachment to one's ideas, one's preconceived notions or beliefs. It is not being suggested, however, that you believe what is being said, but rather read with the idea of fully comprehending it. Once an intellectual understanding takes place the mind will come up with plenty of questions—"Yes, but . . ." or, "If this is the case then what about . . .?" Such a response is to be expected and welcomed; this is the "right use of the mind," a term used in Zen.

Having travelled this way myself, I was able to ask all the questions that arose in my mind and to hear the same and other questions that arose in other minds. As it turns out, all minds are the same in their underlying structure and function, although the content and conditioning is different from person to person. As a result the spectrum of questions arising is also more or less the same. Consequently an attempt will be made in this book to address all the typical questions that arise. It is suggested, however, that you do not settle for accepting what is said without first testing these things in your own life. Do not believe what I have to say, as it will prove useless for you. To reiterate: If you can approach the reading of this book with an open mind, prepared to surrender your preconceived notions and beliefs; when

you have fully comprehended what is being said, and examine closely what you've understood against your life experiences, then you may come to know the truth for yourself.

• • • Description and prescription

Ramesh makes an important distinction between description and prescription. Christ is reported to have said, "Love your enemies, do good to those who despitefully use you..." This sounds very much like a command to do something, a prescription for behavior. A prescription is an appeal for action, an appeal to the ego. All spiritual disciplines are prescriptions.

A description is quite different. If we take Christ's statement and turn it into a description, which I think is the correct way to take it, it would read as follows: "When you love your enemies, when you do good to those who despitefully use you . . ."

Description fosters understanding; it brings spontaneous changes in behavior and does not expand the ego. A prescription is found in the statement, "Don't step over the balcony," which sounds like an order, challenge or threat. It is this reactive tendency that is the basis for reverse psychology. To describe gravity is much more beneficial, as no one feels threatened or challenged. "If you step over the balcony you will fall fifty feet," is a description and so it doesn't provoke the ego to defend itself or to prove it is an exception to natural law.

In the story of the Garden of Eden, God is reputed to have forbidden Adam and Eve from eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The original reverse psychology! A direct challenge to the ego brings predictable results. Adam couldn't help himself; his curiosity, and the forbidden nature of what he wanted to do, guaranteed what happened.

Throughout this book you'll find considerable use of the passive voice, since the passive voice is a description. The active voice suggests a command and is usually perceived as a challenge to the ego. What is said in this book is not a prescription for anything. What is presented is a description based on observation.

• • • The difference between belief and truth

Let's come back to the word truth. There's a definition of truth found in both science and philosophy which states that truth is self-evident. That is, we recognize it as fact, simply so. When the word "truth" is used in this book, this is what is being talked about. Truth is not something learned; it is not abstract and something that must be believed; it is simply a fact. So for instance, the fact that two Canada geese just swooped low between the trees and landed in the pond is a fact. There's nothing esoteric about it. Anyone present could testify to the obvious. What then is the difference between belief and truth? The answer provides an important distinction. What is central to

all belief? This concept can be illustrated by the following story. Pay attention to what happens in your mind with this scenario.

A man, who was an intense spiritual seeker, was troubled by the issue of suffering, the resolution of which became an obsession. He needed clarification on the issue; it was driving him nuts. In conversation with a friend he mentions his concern and lack of resolution. His friend tells him he's just heard that Zen master Po is in town and happens to be speaking on the topic of suffering. He shows him a flier, which he reads carefully. There's a number to call to reserve a place. He calls and gives his name to the woman who answers. She tells him the session will be held at ten o'clock the following morning at the meditation house of a nearby retreat centre. The next morning he arrives in town early and stops at a local coffee shop. While sitting at the table reading a newspaper, he meets a friend who asks why he's in town. He explains he's come to hear Master Po. The friend looks at him doubtfully and tells him there's no such person and there's no session being held at the retreat centre. This man is someone he's known for many years, a fellow seeker, a person known for his truthfulness.

Now, let's take a slightly different scenario. It starts the same as the first one. A man calls to confirm a place at the retreat centre. The next morning he arrives in town in just enough time to make it to the centre before

the meeting with Master Po. He spends two hours with Master Po and is able to ask questions and get some guidance on the topic of suffering. What a relief! After the session he thanks the Master and leaves. Stopping at the coffee shop he thinks about the conversation with Master Po. A good friend comes in and asks what brings him to town. When he tells him, the friend looks at him in a strange manner and says there's no such person as Master Po. Look carefully . . . what happens? What is the difference between what takes place in the mind with the first scenario and this one?

In the first one when his friend tells him that Master Po doesn't exist, doubt enters because he really didn't know, having never met him, and his friend is known for his honesty. In the second instance he's already met Master Po, so he knows he exists. This time when his friend says Master Po doesn't exist, he looks at his friend quizzically but there's no doubt in his mind concerning Master Po. There may be doubt as to his friend's sanity but certainly not about the existence of Master Po.

What is central to all belief is doubt, not knowing, uncertainty, ignorance. When it comes to truth, however, there's no uncertainty; something is simply recognized as being true. Now this is not to say that what is believed may not be true also; but the believer will never know that what he believes is true. In addition, one of the characteristics of belief is that it

seems to take on weight by numbers. Among those who believe there's the idea that if enough people believe it, it must be true. This is why those who believe, such as those who attend a church, temple or mosque, often try to convert others to their set of beliefs. Since they don't really know, since doubt exists, there's an attempt to obscure the doubt with the idea that if enough people believe it, it must be true; they couldn't all be wrong. However, that is not the case. For a long time there was a belief that black people were inferior to white people. It didn't make it true. Hitler tried to get the German people to believe the Jews were not really human. Some sects of Judaism believe that about the Gentiles. Many Muslims and Christians believe they have the final, exclusive, and true revelation of God. None of these beliefs make them true. The fact there are so many conflicting beliefs in the world should produce skepticism as to their truthfulness.

When belief is challenged, those who believe may become frightened, consider themselves under attack, and in extreme cases become violent. Who they take themselves to be has become deeply entwined with their beliefs. In fact who they are is largely defined by those beliefs. But belief is essentially empty and not a place for certainty. When I enter a restaurant and look at a menu with pictures of the food, it helps me select what I want. I believe the pictures accurately represent

the food I will receive. They may or may not. But, I'm not satisfied with the menu itself. I know it's not real and I want the real thing, I want the food. Belief is the menu, truth the meal; and for the spiritual seeker simply to believe in God is insufficient.