The Paradox of Self-Denial

From Alan Watts, “Become what you are”

While living, be a dead man, thoroughly dead; Then,
whatever you do, just as you will, will be right.

A BUDDHIST POEM, WRITTEN IN CHINA SEVERAL centuries ago, tries to find words for an intuition which is common to almost every culture in the world. When translated into the familiar language of the Christian tradition, it is so well-known as to be almost a platitude: "He that loseth his soul shall find it." But what always preserves this thought from banality— from the mere tiresomeness of those precepts which everyone knows he ought to observe but doesn't—is that this is a saying which no one *can* observe. For so long as there is something which I can do about it, I am not yet dead; I have not yet completely lost my life. Yet this is not the simple absurdity of a command impossible to obey. It is a real communication, a description of something which happens to people—like the rain, or the touch of the wind. It is simply the expression of the universal discovery that a man does not really begin to be alive until he has lost himself, until he has released the anxious grasp which he normally holds upon his life, his property, his reputation and position. It is the irreducible truth in the monkish idea of "holy poverty," of the way of life to which there are no strings attached, in which—because all is lost—there is nothing to lose, in which there is the exhilaration of a kind of freedom which is poetically likened to the birds and the wind, or to clouds drifting in the boundless sky. It is the life which Saint Paul described as "poor but making many rich, as having nothing but possessing all things."

What an unrealistic nostalgia we have for it! Marie Antoinette playing shepherdess in the gardens of Versailles ... presidents of great corporations retreating to lonely fishing shacks in the High Sierra .. . the insurance clerk walking alone on the interminable ocean sands, wondering if he would have the courage to be a beachcomber . . . or the moral idealist, reproaching himself because he does not have quite the strength to abandon a comfortable salary and plunge into the slums, like Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day, or the great exemplars Saint Francis and Saint Vincent de Paul. But most of us know that we will not, and probably cannot do it—that we shall continue to cling to our habitual ways of life with all the helplessness of addicts to a destroying passion. If this begins to sound like a sermon, I do not mean it that way, for I said at the beginning that the words about finding one's life through losing it were not really a precept that could simply be practiced and obeyed. This is what makes all the talk about the necessity of selflessness or the task of transcending the ego so fantastically misunderstood. Treated as a precept, it

makes for every kind of moral and spiritual phoniness. Always have a large pinch of salt handy when you meet the fellow who talks about trying to renounce himself, to overcome his ego. I am reminded of the appcryphal conversation between Confucius and Lao-tzu, when the former had been prating of universal love without the element of self.

"What stuff!" cried Lao-tzu. "Does not universal love contradict itself? Is not your elimination of self a positive manifestation of Self? Sir, if you would cause the world not to lose its source of nourishment: there is the universe, its regularity is unceasing; there are the sun and moon, their brightness is unceasing; there are the stars, their groupings never change; there are the birds and beasts, they flock together without varying; there are trees and shrubs, they grow upward without exception. Like these, accord with the Tao—with the way of things—and be perfect. Why, then, these vain struggles after charity and duty to one's neighbor, as though beating a drum in search of a fugitive. Alas, sir, you have brought much confusion into the mind of man!"

As I said, the truth about finding life through losing it is not a precept but a report of something which happens—and happens in many different ways. It is not given to everyone to be an obvious moral hero or a notorious saint. It is not everyone's way to be a rolling stone without the responsibilities of wife and children. Nor, I should add, is it everyone's privilege to be a self-sacrificing wife or model husband. And still more—it is not everyone's gift to be the contented fatalist, accepting himself and his limitations just as they are, knowing that he is a weed and not trying to be a rose. Some of us will always be trying—with an exasperating degree of relative success—to improve ourselves in one way or another, and no amount of self-acceptance will stop it. Self-renunciation, self-acceptance—these are all names for the same thing, for the ideal to which there is no road, the art for which there is no technique.

Why, then, does this whole idea so commonly wear the form of a precept, of advice to be followed, of a method to be applied? For obviously there is a vital contradiction in the very notion of self-renunciation, and just as much is self-acceptance. People try to accept themselves in order to be different, and try to surrender themselves in order to have more self-respect in their own eyes—or to attain some spiritual experience, some exaltation of consciousness the desire for which is the very form of their self-interest. We *are* really stuck with ourselves, and our attempts to reject or to accept are equally fruitless, for they fail to reach that inaccessible center of our selfhood which is trying to do the accepting or the rejecting. The part of our self that wants to change our *self* is the very one that needs to be changed; but it is as inaccessible as a needle to the prick of its own point.

But the reason why the idea of self-renunciation appears in the impossible form of a precept is that it is a form of what Buddhists would call *upaya*—a Sanskrit term meaning "skillful means," and

more particularly the skillful means employed by a teacher to awaken his student to some truth which can only be reached in a roundabout way. For the selfishness of the self thrives on the notion that it can command itself, that it is the lord and master of its own processes, of its own motives and desires. Thus the one important result of any really serious attempt at self-renunciation or self-acceptance is the humiliating discovery that it is impossible. And this precisely is that death to oneself which is the improbable source of a way of life so new and so alive that it feels like having been born again. In this metaphorical sense, the ego dies on finding out its own incapacity, its inability to make any difference to itself that is really important. That is why, in Zen Buddhism, the task of self-transcendence is likened to a mosquito trying to bite an iron bull, and, in the words of one of the old masters, the transforming death comes about at the very moment when the iron hide of the bull finally and absolutely rejects the mosquito's frail proboscis.

There is, of course, still some refuge for our illusion of self-importance in the idea that we must first make a very resolute effort to bite the bull. Every "in-group" distinguishes itself from the "out-group," the initiates from the hoi polloi, by some process of "going through the mill," of enduring sufferings which are subsequently worn as the proud badge of graduation. Thus one of the more sickening aspects of spiritual phoniness is the usually rather subtly hinted implication that one has, after all, "suffered so much." So, too, in the person who is still a mere aspirant to the state of grace, the same kind of humbug wears the form of resolutions to bite the bull to the utmost—in order to have oneself finally and effectively convinced that it cannot be done.

I have always found that the people who have quite genuinely died to themselves make no claims of any kind to their own part in the process. They think of themselves as lazy and lucky. If they did anything at all, it was so simple that anyone else could do the same—for all that they have done is to recognize a universal fact of life, something as true of the weak and foolish as of the wise and strong. They would even say that in this respect there is some advantage in being weak and foolish, for the possession of a strong will and a clever head makes some things very difficult to see. A successful merchant will perhaps be less ready than a mere tramp to see that the same oblivion engulfs both of them. To the genuine dead-man-come-alive, sage, mystic, buddha, *jivanmukta,* or what you will, the notion that he attained this state by some effort or by some special capacity of his own is always absurd and impossible.

You may almost be sure, then, that some kind of clericalism, some kind of highly refined spiritual racket, is at work when stress is laid upon the suffering and the discipline, the endurance and the willpower, which are said to be the essential prerequisites of an entry to the kingdom of heaven. Such talk is sometimes just making the best of a bad job—trying to pretend to oneself that a life of constant self-frustration was in fact a great spiritual attainment. Sometimes it may simply be an honest mistake, for

there are people who discover what was always close at hand only after a long and painful journey, and they remain under the impression that the most awkward road was the only road. Sometimes, however, talk of this kind is the really nasty kind of preaching affected by people who presume to be schoolmasters to their fellow man but their sermons never have the slightest creative effect since the only motives for action which they supply are shame or fear or guilt, and when we respond to such motives we find only a balm for the ego's injured pride—a balm upon which our egocentricity flourishes with special gusto.

With such misunderstandings out of the way, perhaps we can consider more intimately what it means to find life by losing it. The main point is, I think, that the state metaphorically called death or self-surrender is not a future condition to be acquired. It is rather a present fact. In small matters, our ego shows some signs of life. But fundamentally, in the presence of great space and time, as of great love and great fear, we are leaves on the wind. When we begin to think about this clearly, we evoke very disturbing emotions, which we would like to be able to control. Our resistance to these emotions is as natural as the emotions themselves. Indeed, they are really the same as the emotions, since emotions appear only as manifestations of a state of tension and resistance. If I did not dislike fear, it would not be fear. Nevertheless, there is, I think, no difficulty in discovering that our resentment of those emotions, our unwillingness to experience them, is totally ineffectual. It is the mosquito biting the iron bull again. The fragility and frailty of our human bodies within the merciless and marvelous torrent of life evokes every emotion of this agonizingly sensitive organism—love, anger, sadness, terror, and the fear of terror. And our attempts to stand above these emotions and control them are the emotions themselves at play, since love is also to be in love with love, and sadness to be sorry that one is sad. Our unwillingness to feel is the very measure of our ability to feel, for the more sensitive the instrument, the greater its capacity for pain, and so for reluctance to be hurt.

Now, there are some psychologists who have struck, rather clumsily perhaps, upon an important truth—namely that there is a serious mistake in not responding to our feelings, or in trying to feel in some other way than we feel actually. They are speaking here, it should be noted, of inward feelings, and not of overt action. In other words, if you, as a mother, hate your child, don't try to pretend to yourself that you love him. But—put in this rather oversimplified way—this insight degenerates into another precept: "Accept your feelings: go along with your emotions." It is not that simple, because our feelings conflict with one another—as for example, when we are too proud to cry, or too frightened to fall in love. In this case, which feeling do we accept—the sorrow or the pride, the fear or the love?

Now, this is a most instructive example of the difficulty of self-acceptance, for in such a situation we find that we can accept neither. The conflict will not allow itself to be resolved by a decision for one of the two sides—and we are stuck, helplessly, with the conflict.

But the real importance of what these psychologists are trying to say is that there is an almost

uncanny wisdom in the spontaneous and natural reactions of our organism to the course of events. The extraordinary capacity to feel an event inwardly, as distinct from bursting into precipitate action to avoid the tension of feeling—this capacity is in fact a wonderful power of adaptation to life, not unlike the instant responses of flowing water to the contours of the ground over which it flows. I hope this is clear. I am not talking at the moment of responses in terms of action, but only of our inward, subjective responses of feeling. The point is that our feelings are not really a kind of resistance, a kind of fight with the course of events. They are a harmonious and intelligent response. A person who did not feel frightened at the threat of danger would be like a tall building with no "give" to the wind. A mind which will not melt—with sorrow or love—is a mind which will all too easily break

Now, the reason why I am talking of feeling rather than outward action is that I am considering the predicament of man in the face of events about which nothing can be done—events toward which our sole response is a response of feeling. I am thinking of the ultimate certainty of death, the overall helplessness of man within the vast tide of life, and, finally, of the very special feelings which arise when we are faced with a conflict of feelings which cannot be resolved. All these situations evoke feelings which, in the long run, are as irresistible as the situations themselves are insoluble. They are the ultimate feelings—and much of what is called philosophy is the fruitless attempt to talk oneself out of them.

Thus what I have called the death of the ego transpires in the moment when it is discovered and admitted that these ultimate feelings are irresistible. They are ultimate in two senses: one, that they sometimes have to do with very fundamental and cataclysmic events, and, two, that they are sometimes our deepest, most radical feeling with respect to a given situation—such as the basic frustration provoked by a conflict between sorrow and shame. The point is that these ultimate feelings are as wise as all the rest, and their wisdom emerges when we give up resisting them— through the realization that we are simply unable to do so. When, for example, life compels us at last to give in, to surrender to the full play of what is ordinarily called the terror of the unknown, the suppressed feeling suddenly shoots upward as a fountain of the purest joy. What was formerly felt as the horror of our inevitable mortality becomes transformed by an inner alchemy into an almost ecstatic sense of freedom from the bonds of individuality. But ordinarily we do not discover the wisdom of our feelings because we do not let them complete their work; we try to suppress them or discharge them in premature action, not realizing that they are a process of creation which, like birth, begins as a pain and turns into a child.

I hope it is possible to say all this without tying it up with the atmosphere of "ought-ness," without giving anyone the notion that this kind of self-surrender is something which one should or can do. This willful, compulsive, moralistic approach to man's transformation always obstructs it—for it still implies that very illusion of self-mastery which stands in the way. But it is just when I discover that I *cannot* surrender myself that I am surrendered; just when I find that I cannot accept myself that I am accepted. For in reaching this hard rock of the impossible one reaches sincerity, where there can no longer

be the masked hide-and-seek of I and Me, "good I" trying to change "bad Me," who is really the same fellow as "good I." In the expressive imagery of Zen, all this striving for self-surrender is like trying to put legs on a snake—or, shall I say, like a naked man trying to lose his shirt. To quote from that genial Taoist, Chuang-tzu: From the standpoint of the sage, "the joined is not united, nor the separated apart, nor the long in excess, nor the short wanting. For just as a duck's legs, though short, cannot be lengthened without pain to the duck, and a crane's legs, though long, cannot be shortened without misery to the crane—so that which is long in man's moral nature cannot be cut off, nor that which is short be lengthened."