

*Light was all* and all was Light—glorious, eternal, unwavering Light. From within the Light a growing force arose that held me in its current, yet I was not apart from it, or it apart from me. In a flash, the force enlivened a physical body, which was also composed solely of Light, and filled it with the Light of pure awareness.

I drew no distinction between the body and those bodies that touched it. Neither did I touch nor was I being touched. I was simply awareness of touch. Every appearance, every movement mirrored me—the Light that could not be seen for Its brightness. The movements of the body were not distinct from the movement of the things around it. All that was changing moved in a singular, continuous dance that emanated from the Light of pure awareness.

The body's senses interpreted its surroundings as a vacillating array of form, color, texture,

*smell, sound and taste. Sounds were heard, yet I, pure awareness, was not separate from them.*

*Sensations arose as external and internal circumstances changed. The hint of a specific scent as the lips were touched incited the mouth to begin suckling. Learning in this way was instantaneous and spontaneous. Amid the ever-changing reactions of the senses, I remained the glorious, eternal, unwavering Light of awareness from which everything sprang forth.*

*Other bodies made audible sounds, giving distinction to things. Hearing a particular sound time and again, the voice in the body mimicked it and I, pure awareness, associated it with form. The bodies gave each form a name, distinguishing it as independent from other forms. Names gave rise to thought. Thoughts proliferated and formed perceptions. And thus, the thinking mind came into existence.*

*Other minds taught the mind that it was its body and gave it a personal identity. They also taught the mind-body that everything seen, tasted, heard, touched and smelled was distinct and separate from it. Assuming this individualization to be true, the mind-body limited its view from the glorious, eternal, unwavering Light to the light of day.*

A young, blind beggar was squatting at the end of a row of other mendicants when a man approached them and handed out coins. The others leaned toward the man, whereas the young beggar's posture did not change as he extended his long arm upward. Before reaching him, the almsgiver had given all of his coins and walked away. The young beggar's arm was still extended while the other beggars fingered their money and amused themselves in conversation. All of a sudden, his free hand grabbed hold of his begging hand, as though reprimanding it, and forcibly placed it on his lap. Within moments his composure changed from expectant to complacent.

Across the street, a young woman stood watching. She stared at the young beggar, becoming as motionless as he was. After a while, she turned to a fruit vendor and purchased an apple. Timidly, she crossed the street and stood in front of the beggar. Though her form blocked the searing morning sun from his face, he showed no sign of relief. As the other beggars began ambling toward her, she nervously concealed several coins beneath the apple and extended her hands.

“Please take this,” she said in a whisper.

As though woken from a dream, the young beggar flinched, sat upright and accepted the offering. The young woman ran back to where she had been standing alongside the fruit stand. She continued watching the young beggar as he felt every curve of the apple. Then he began eating it with undivided attention, one bite at a time, in unbroken rhythm. When only the bare core of the apple remained, he paused for a moment and then tossed it into his mouth, swallowing it in a single gulp. Then he took a water pouch from the bag beside him and drank from it. With the acumen characteristic of nobility, he filled his cupped palm with water and rinsed his hands. From across the street, the

young woman stood transfixed by his every movement. When he became motionless once again, she too appeared to have drifted into a timeless realm.

A week later, the young woman was standing beside the fruit stall when she noticed the young beggar's eyes glistening. She rushed across the street to find out what caused his sudden change of expression.

Standing before him, her face brightened and she said in a soft voice, "Like rain falling from a cloudless sky, tears flow from your sightless eyes and trickle over your serene smile. What pleasure could bring you such happiness?"

"It's not pleasure, Miss. It's who I am."

Confounded, she said, "You're a blind beggar boy."

"That's who you see," he replied calmly, "but that's not who I am."

With a quiver in her voice, she said, "I've noticed you squatting here in the same place, day after day, extending your open hand to each passerby. But when alone, you appear to ascend to a faraway place, the likes of which I've never experienced. Where do you go?"

"I don't go away. I come yet closer to where I am," he said. "Why have you been watching me?"

"Curiosity." She hesitated. "You are a contradiction to my brother, who is also blind. He is withdrawn and has anger toward our mother, who attends to his every need. Where is your mother?"

"I don't have one," he said dispassionately.

"What do you mean? Did she die? Who looks after you?"

"Other beggars feed me," he replied. "They also give me the things they no longer want and take what people give me."

"If I may be so bold as to say, you seem to have a keen intellect. But I don't imagine you've had any schooling. Who taught you?"

"I was born with an appetite for learning. People like you often talk to me about their beliefs, concerns or whatever is on their minds. They tell me I'm a good listener," he said.

“They have been my teachers.”

“How old are you?” she asked, unabashed.

“I don’t know for certain. But those who claim to have known me since I was a child tell me I’m either twenty-one or twenty-two years old.”

“Twenty-one?” she questioned. “Why, I’m almost twenty-one.” She was so surprised by his response that her words began muddling. “I’ve taken you to be . . . well, to be a boy.”

Amused by her befuddlement, he laughed. “In your eyes, I am a boy who is blind . . . and in my eyes, you are a girl who wishes to see.”

She touched his hand softly before whisking away.

Two days later, the girl returned and placed an apple on the boy’s outstretched palm. As he ate, she told him that she’d pleaded with her brother to come with her, but he refused.

“I didn’t expect anything different, since he is afraid to go outside, or even venture from his room.” Her eyes widened, and her expression brightened. “Would you consider coming to our home?”

He shrugged his shoulders and replied, “The other beggars would be upset if I left here, even for a moment. They depend on the alms I receive.”

When he finished eating, she knelt beside him and asked, “Have you always been happy?”

“I thought so, until a few years ago when I learned that I had not been in my previous lives.”

“Previous lives?” she said, curious. “How did you learn about them?”

“One day while I was sitting here, I sensed something approach me, though I could not detect its breath. ‘Who are you?’ I asked.

“A voice that seemed to come from within me as well as from outside responded, ‘I have come to answer the question that often confounds your serenity.’

“Surprised that this ‘Seer’ knew my innermost concern, I said, ‘I was born into a formless world, yet I have been blessed

by its boundlessness. I have no kindred, yet I am not separate from anyone. I have no material possessions, yet I have no desires. I find no pleasure in gratifying my senses, yet I am always happy. I have no faith in what can be defined, yet I trust all that is unknown. What purpose has this existence?"

"The Seer replied, 'To gain this knowledge, you will need to revisit several of your previous lives, though collectively they will amount to less than a drop of water in the ocean of your incarnations.'

"In the next moment, I left my body along with everything I had known. The world of form, of which I had no prior conception, suddenly appeared before me as though I had always known it."

In a tizzy, the girl interrupted him. "Just now as you were speaking, I had the most incredible premonition that if you tell me your past lives, I will be always happy, as you are!" She paused before asserting, "I yearn for nothing more."

"If your yearning is true, it will be so," he assured her. "That is certain. Nothing can prevent you from having lasting happiness."

Returning the next day, the girl saw a well-dressed elderly woman sitting on a wooden crate beside the blind boy. Sometimes the woman moaned, while other times she cried and her hands trembled. From time to time, the boy nodded or interjected a few words, but for the most part, he remained still. While he listened to her with unwavering attention, his begging hand extended to each passerby, as if it were detached from him.

When the woman's monologue subsided, her body relaxed. She sat motionless beside the boy for a few minutes before standing up. Then she bowed her head and hobbled away with the aid of a cane.

Without making a sound, the girl sat down on the crate in the woman's place.

"You have returned," said the boy.

"Yes!" she exclaimed. "Can you see me?"

He smiled but did not respond.

“I’m hoping you will tell me the first of your previous lives that you experienced,” she said anxiously.

He nodded and began, “This is how it was . . .”

“My son was born on the Crest!” my father often boasted. The Crest was the auspicious day when the constellation depicting the god Phaetius positioned itself in the exact center of the night sky. Of all the gods, Phaetius was the most venerated, as he controlled the destiny of all creation. His strength, agility and candor were unsurpassable, though according to legend, he often defeated his opponents merely with his steady gaze.

For generations, Phaetius had been the deity of many in my clan. They believed I was sent directly from him as a boon for their devotion and treated me, his namesake, as if I were the god himself.

My relationships with my fellow clansmen were established long before I could comprehend them or learn what would be expected of me. Many of them shuddered and became weak with fear when I looked directly into their eyes. From their reactions, I learned the power of my gaze at an early age. I was still a child when my relatives began asking me for counsel and begging favors. Without knowing how to satisfy their requests, I stared at them, causing them to tremble. Moments later, they would thank me for transmitting an insight or granting a boon, though I had done nothing.

When I was eighteen years old, the patriarch of the clan died and a rift developed between those who held Phaetius as their god and those who did not. Their feud divided them into two groups—the disbelievers, who took control of the clan, and the believers, who were ousted. My father and two of my brothers were among those who fled while my uncle became the ruling patriarch of the victors. I remained with him because he had been my mentor during my adolescence. He always treated me as if I were his son,

and I turned to him for guidance rather than my father, who treated me as if I were his father.

In the period that followed the upheaval, I learned that the renegades joined forces with a neighboring clan and were plotting to destroy us.

One day while I was riding through the countryside, I came upon one of my estranged brothers. He was so gaunt I barely recognized him.

“What brings you here?” he asked, as he cowered away from me.

“I have come this way by chance,” I replied, dismounting from my horse and standing in front of him. “How have you come to be destitute? I was told that you and the other renegades had increased your forces and are planning to overthrow us.”

“Renegades?” he said with a feeble laugh. “We were exiled because we disagreed with our uncle, your patriarch! How could we overthrow you? He’s starving us to death.”

“That can’t be true,” I mumbled, dumfounded by his accusations.

“How could *you*, our cherished godsend, not know this?” he scoffed, before turning to run off into the thicket.

I yelled, “How is our father?”

He stopped and looked back at me with contempt in his eyes. “He refuses to speak your name.”

“Take me to him at once!” I demanded.

Intimidated by my gaze, my brother yelled, “Kill me! Kill me now. For if I take you there, you will kill them all.”

I caught up to him and grabbed hold of his arm. “You have nothing to fear,” I said. “I will not betray you.”

Trembling, he consented to my request. I followed behind him while leading my horse. When we approached his encampment, it appeared deserted.

I stood in the center of the clearing and cried out, “I am

your son, your brother, your fellow clansman. I have come to serve you! Phaetius has not forsaken you.”

“Don’t taunt us with your words,” said an angry voice from within the thicket. “You are one of them, not us.”

I yelled back, “I was led to believe that you would betray us.”

My father suddenly appeared, standing as still as the trees that surrounded him. I went before his emaciated form, which had diminished even in height. My eyes welled as I knelt at his feet. “Please forgive me, father.”

I felt his hand on my head as he said, “It is those heathens who tricked you. We must destroy their evil seed, once and for all.”

He touched my shoulder, prompting me to stand up, while my fellow clansmen gathered around us.

“Why have you not sought aid from the neighboring clans?” I asked.

“They won’t let us near their territories,” replied one of my cousins. “Your patriarch has threatened to kill them if they help us.”

I lifted my father onto my horse and instructed the others to follow behind us. As I began walking, the others formed an asymmetrical column of stragglers who were attempting to support one another.

“This neighboring clan will offer us refuge,” I assured them as we entered their territory. But while I was speaking, we were bombarded with stones. I told my clansmen to take refuge in the underbrush and wait while I proceeded alone to the clan’s stronghold. As I made my way forward, I caught the stones that were hurled at me and threw them back at my assailants. Once inside the fortress, I spotted the patriarch of the clan and ran up to him before his guards could catch me.

“You must feed and tend to the needs of my people!” I ordered, staring into his eyes. He attempted to speak but stammered and nodded, acquiescing to my demand.

During the days that my clansmen were convalescing under the care of our neighbors, a relationship developed between the two clans that melded them into one. With great devotion, our hosting clan took Phaetius as their patron god and turned to me for counsel, while my clansmen pledged their allegiance to their patriarch.

The united clan was celebrating the annual Crest when word came that my uncle was preparing to attack us. The governing patriarch and my father came to me and pleaded. “You must organize us into an army and lead us into battle.”

“We can’t fight them!” I exclaimed. “They are our fellow clansmen . . . our family. I will go to them at once and put an end to this madness.”

“If you go, they will capture you,” said my father, “and we will be slaughtered.”

“Have you forgotten who I am?” I asked, looking intently into his eyes. He shuddered when I said, “Trust that I will return.”

Upon entering the fortress of my uncle, I was seized by his guards. When my uncle saw me, he yelled, “Release him at once!”

Pulling away from the guards, I went before him. “You lied to me,” I said. “Our clansmen did not flee. They were exiled, and now you intend to kill them!”

We glared at each other. My uncle was one of the few clansmen who was unaffected by my gaze.

“How can you initiate a battle against your own uncles, brothers, nephews . . . even one of your sons?” I questioned.

“Had our clan fallen to their rule, we would have been forced to take Phaetius as our god,” he said. “They will always be a threat to our freedom because of their prejudice.”

“Surely, you can reason with them and reach a resolution,” I responded.

“It’s too late for that,” he said. “The trust between us