



THE WELL-ORDERED SOUL

FLOURISHING IN A CHAOTIC WORLD

INTRODUCTION

Whoever undertakes to set himself up as a judge of truth and knowledge is shipwrecked by the laughter of the gods. • Albert Einstein

Have you ever wondered why some days things go your way, while others seem set up to defeat you at every turn? Philosophers have been trying to make sense of the vicissitudes of life since the human race began pondering its existence and writing down its best ideas—which arguably no one did better than the ancient Greeks. They could tell you why in two words: “the gods.” In modern terms, the Greek view becomes a philosophic model for self-knowledge essential to living “the good life,” a mythos in which “the gods” are the unpredictable, chaotic forces operating behind the scenes in every situation. We are all familiar with these forces that lie beyond our control: the happy coincidences, unexpected results, sucker punches, and twist endings—the stuff no one can see coming. All of which is far more important than we may realize, because how we conduct ourselves in relation to these forces determines whether we flourish or spend our brief stay in this world resisting, reacting, and suffering. The key to happiness, within this wisdom model, lies not in overcoming these unpredictable forces, but in meeting them with what Plato calls a “well-ordered soul.”

In the sections that follow, you’ll find the theoretical foundation for the well-ordered soul laid down by the Greeks translated into the language of modern-day living, along with a series of chapters, each of which examines one of the five points of practice that define the conditions of true and abiding happiness. While the theory is beautiful in its own right, the true value of the approach shows itself only in putting the principles into practice each day. We hope that you’ll make this great experiment, and that you will realize its profound benefits, as many have.

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF THE STUDY

While this study is in many ways subtle and philosophically robust, it is also true that once one understands and appreciates the simple choice between humility and hubris, one has essentially understood the practice. It then becomes a matter of applying this principle to the various points of practice, connecting the dots of our experience, as it were, so that these points define a path for living in friendly cooperation with all that lies beyond our will, despite the chaotic nature of the world and the epidemic of human willfulness.

We urge you to bring a beginner's mind to the study. Set aside anything you know or think you know, and be willing to be pleasantly surprised by the discoveries that you'll make along the way. Avoid trying to map the principles presented in these pages to other models, as doing so may lead you to inadvertently translate the material into conclusions you already hold—in which case all you'll learn is what you already know—or think you know.

Go slowly. Take a full week for each lesson. After you've completed the material for the week, take a few days to absorb it, then go back and review it. The second time, you likely will catch something you may have missed the first time around, or may discern a deeper significance or relevance, perhaps one that speaks directly to a particular situation or concern with which you've been struggling.

A note on style: We've opted to use "he" or "she" throughout rather than the cumbersome "he or she" or other gender variants, as we agree with Fowler that grammatically iterating gender equality in this way quickly becomes tedious for the reader, and that the more politically correct construction isn't worth the toll it takes on style. The same applies to the use of words that might be accused of gender prejudice, e.g., *man*, *mankind*, and so on.

Best,
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SYLLABUS

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WEEK 1
THEORY



THE FIVE PILLARS

The five points of practice, each of which we'll examine closely in the following sections, are supported by five "pillars" or principles of the well-ordered soul. In this section, we'll look at these five pillars and how they support practice.

IT'S GREEK TO ME

The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato. • Alfred North Whitehead

At the heart of this study is a love for ancient Greek philosophy, but this is no mere infatuation. Classical Greek thought, art, and politics were so exquisitely woven into everyday life that we moderns may be hard pressed to imagine it. This is not only a cultural or historical difference. Forgetting what the Greeks knew and lived has thrown us into a world so entangled in hubris, greed, narrow thinking, banality, double standards, and the heartless amassing of wealth and power by the few at the expense of the many that we have set ourselves against greater forces we no longer understand, and taken up daily life at the brink of calamity. Nowhere is the contrast between the ancient and modern world view more evident than in language, a study of which soon shows us how much treasure has been buried beneath the dust of the centuries. The Greeks had words for things we hardly even recognize—words that were diluted in the translation from Greek to Latin, dispersed in subsequent secondary translations, e.g., through German into English, and all but entirely lost in the assumptions of modern life. Our word *nature*, for example, is hopelessly inert when placed beside the Greek word *physis* /fyoo'-sis/, which signified an activity of standing forth and resisting a falling-away into non-being. Experiencing nature not as a noun but as a verb requires a leap back to the ancient perspective and a requickening of a deeply intuitive and poetic way of grasping (or being grasped by) the world around us. For the Greeks, a tree was an activity; trees "treed" in a defiant and energetic refusal to be overtaken by nonexistence. Such a vision, implying mutuality and even dialogue

with the natural order, would render our modern inclination to tame and dissect and exploit nature unthinkable. Another example: The word *augury* acquired the relatively anemic meaning in Latin of “the practice of divination.” In the ancient Greek reality, it meant “reading the future in the flight of birds.” Here again, we have the tacit recognition that nature is personal; birds not only fly—they fly in secret formations that a seer (one who can see) can use to reach his or her innermost knowing. At every turn, ancient Greek language reveals a richly philosophic and poetic grounding in life rooted in awe, myth, a sense of belonging and place, and a passion for virtue, harmony, and excellence the Greeks called *arête* /ah’-ruh-tay/. This ideal played a central role in Greek life in a way that brought the individual into immediate and intimate relation to the divine, imbuing life with a richness that has been buried by centuries of “progress,” leaving us homesick and bereft, longing for something we no longer remember or understand.

IN THE HANDS OF FATE

Look death in the face with joyful hope, and consider this a lasting truth: the righteous man has nothing to fear, neither in life, nor in death, and the gods will not forsake him. • Socrates

Ask anyone what he or she thinks of the idea of fate, and as a rule, you’ll find that the idea is unpopular, even distasteful. *Destiny* is a far friendlier term, since it implies that the power and authority for our life is in our hands, but *fate*—that bothersome little four-letter word—seems to imply the opposite. If our life is fated, then the center of authority lies outside us. *Destiny* may be wrought from within, but *fate* is imposed from without. We can tempt fate, resist fate, try to escape our fate, risk a fate worse than death, and so on, but we can’t avoid fate. Like it or not, we are in the hands of fate, and for rugged individualists for whom free will and manifest destiny are absolute and utterly presumed, this is not an easy pill to swallow. This dark view of fate is captured in W. Somerset Maugham’s, *The Appointment in Samarra* (1933), a modern recounting of an ancient tale:

“There was a merchant in Bagdad who sent his servant to market to buy provisions and in a little while the servant came back, white and trembling, and said, ‘Master, just now when I was in the marketplace I was jostled by a woman in the crowd and when I turned I saw it was Death that jostled me. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture. Now, lend me your horse, and I will ride away from this city and avoid my fate. I will go to Samarra and there Death will not find me.’ The merchant lent him his horse, and the servant mounted it, and he dug his spurs in its flanks and as fast as the horse could gallop he went. Then the merchant went down to the marketplace and he saw Death standing in the crowd and he said, ‘Why did you make a threatening gesture to my servant when you saw him this morning?’ ‘That was not a threatening gesture, said Death, ‘it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Bagdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.’”

As with Sophocles’s fictional king Oedipus, the actions taken by the servant to evade his fate lead him to the very fate he tries to evade. Maugham goes so far as to personify fate as Death, which is hardly untrue to the usual sense of the word, for fate commonly implies ominous portent, and even appears as the root of the word *fatal*.

Given all this, is it any wonder that the idea that we’re in the hands of fate is so distasteful to our modern way of thinking? Yet this adversarial view of fate is not the only one, and not the best one, which the ancient Greek philosophers, particularly the Stoics, understood well. For them, fate was a feature of life that called us to excellence precisely because fate could not be controlled or avoided. They realized that having a well-ordered soul depends not on our will, but on how we meet the inevitable adversities that come to us as though with a will of their own. As we’ll see, fate becomes dark only when it is met with hubris and the refusal to acknowledge that there are forces beyond our will to which we are nonetheless subject. Learning to accept and move with these forces rather than against them, the ancients knew, is a precondition of the good life, and the key to true and abiding happiness.

GOING ON THREE LEGS

He who submits to fate without complaint is wise. • Euripides

The aim of our practice is not to imitate the Greeks, but to emulate them. So, for example, we are not looking to establish a notion of the gods in the sense that was central to the Greek world view, but we may use the term “the gods” as a shorthand for those forces beyond our will that operate in any situation, influencing and even determining outcomes.

The basis of the idea that such forces exist and that a complete model for living must acknowledge them comes from chaos theory, which tells us that subtle, distant, and seemingly unrelated causes may move through complex systems with dramatic, far-reaching, and surprising results. The classic example is the so-called butterfly effect: Given the complexity of weather systems, a butterfly flapping its wings in China can set up a series of intricate, amplifying causes and effects that produces a thunderstorm or hurricane thousands of miles away. In fact, no intellect has the resources to discern or map the “chaotic” factors that suddenly may alter the equation of possible causal elements in even relatively simple systems, yet such elements can be and often are decisive. The red traffic light that annoys the driver hurrying to get to work may, in a larger context, save his life five intersections down the road.

We understand fate, then, as the sum of chaotic forces at work in any situation, forces that are beyond our awareness and control. These forces may show up in benign or adverse ways depending on whether we cooperate with and defer to them, or assert our will over and against them. The one choice we have in any situation ultimately—and this choice plays a key role in whether the outcome is favorable or not—is self-knowledge and humility or presumption and hubris. Thus, our most excellent participation lies not in controlling or trying to control the conditions and circumstances around us, but in controlling how we meet them.

When the Sphinx poses its famous riddle to Oedipus—“What goes on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening?” Oedipus correctly answers, “Man.” In the morning of human life,

when we are infants, we crawl on all fours to get around—we “go on four legs.” In the “afternoon,” as children, adolescents, and adults, we travel on two legs, having learned to walk. And in old age, the “evening,” we must depend on a staff or cane for support as we make our way along, thus going “on three legs.” Practice teaches that “going on three legs,” or living in deliberate acceptance of our dependence on the forces beyond our will that move through the world and through our lives, is not something we have to wait for old age to learn. We don’t have to be old to acquire that particular bit of wisdom. We can acknowledge our dependence on the forces of fate and by doing so, come into friendly cooperation with them. Such an offering delivers us to a better fate than we invite through hubris, resistance, and living by exertion of the will, all of which are symptoms of a soul in disorder.

CREATIVE CHAOS

A small rock holds back a great wave. • Homer

Our practice, then, is based on chaos theory, which states that in any nonlinear, dynamic system, there are initial, random forces that cannot be identified or mapped, but that accumulate to the point that they determine eventual outcomes—a condition referred to in chaos theory as “sensitivity” or “sensitivity dependence” and commonly known as the “butterfly effect.” Thus small variations in the initial conditions of a chaotic system (e.g., the weather) build randomly but deterministically to produce wide variations in the long term behavior of the system. A geologic shift, for example, can produce a tsunami in which hundreds of thousands perish because a countless number of otherwise unrelated factors placed them on a beach in the deadly wave’s path, while others are spared by otherwise unrelated conditions that placed them elsewhere.

In the 1964 film based on Edward K. Gann’s book, *Fate is the Hunter*, a man investigating the crash of a jet airliner refuses to accept that the crash resulted from pilot error. His search uncovers a series of random factors that seem in hindsight practically to have conspired to cause the crash. At one point in the movie, Jack Savage, a commercial pilot (played by Rod

Taylor) is asked how he can be so cool in the face of the inevitability of death, and replies: “The way I figure it, if it’s your time go why fight it; if not, why worry about it?” This is the philosophy of the Stoic, of one who has made peace with chaotic forces and befriended fate. When we adopt such a stance, we not only lay aside the futility and frustration of trying to fight or control the chaotic forces of fate, but also change our fate itself for the better. There is no escape from the chaotic undertow of life. We live at intersections of unpredictable and often intractable forces that may erupt at any moment in ways that, as the Stoics put it, are “indifferent” to us. It has been the great error of humankind to ignore or underestimate these forces while exaggerating the reach and power of our will. Again and again, we see that “pride goeth before a fall.” This is why humility is the only safe path.

FREE WILL

Everywhere man blames nature and fate, yet his fate is mostly but the echo of his character and passions, his mistakes and weakness. • Democritus

A traditional argument holds that the principle of fate contradicts the principle of free will. Since our power to make choices is both experientially self-evident and intuitively convincing, the argument concludes that fate must not operate, or at least not operate fully in human experience.

On the face of it, this seems to hold water. To exercise our free will is to be self-determining, and how can we determine anything if fate already has determined it for us?

From a higher perspective, however, free will and fate—and this means fate as a deterministic principle—are not mutually exclusive. The seeming contradiction between them is resolved when we recognize that our free will is itself the deciding factor in determining our fate, though only generally. As it turns out, our fate is wrought through an existential choice—namely, how we meet those forces beyond our will that determine what happens

to us and what we make of it. In this way, free will is conserved within the deterministic model of fate, but at the level of structure or form rather than situational content. The specifics are determined by “the gods,” but we have something to say about it, because at the end of the day, how we meet an experience and the quality or character of the experience itself are inseparable.

This primal choice—and it is a choice that we make all the time wittingly or unwittingly—is to acknowledge the gods or deny them, to defer or to resist, to cooperate with life or set ourselves in willfulness against it. We are always free, then, to adopt a stand of humility or hubris. Practice casts its vote for humility, embodied in the five points of practice, covered in the pages that follow, which give us a simple and powerful way to translate the primal choice into action—through the willingness to live innocently rather than bound by opinions and assumptions, to show up rather than hide, and to take ourselves lightly rather than carry the self as a burden. These choices establish the nature of our fundamental stance toward fate, which in turn moves the unseen hand of the gods through the unpredictable efficiency of chaotic unfolding. It is at this intersection of choice and chaos that our fate is worked out and brought to light in everyday events. Thus, though we are, as Socrates tells us, “the chattel of the gods,” our fate lies in our hands, for its roots lie within our character.

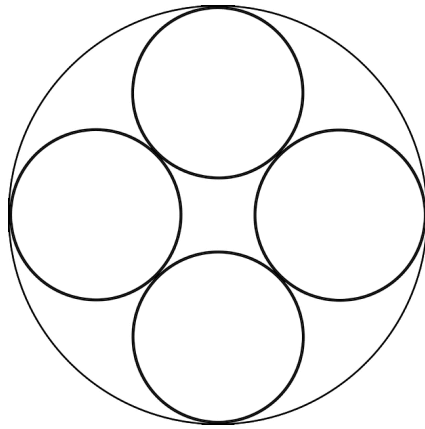
WEEK 2
TRUTHFULNESS



TRUTHFULNESS: THE MASTER PRINCIPLE

The unexamined life is not worth living. • Socrates

Truthfulness is the foundation of the well-ordered soul, such that if one were to practice it alone, the other points of practice would come along, as it were, and one would be able to avoid the pitfalls of hubris in all its forms, for the failure in any of the other points of practice ultimately involves a failure to be truthful—with oneself, with others, or with life. Consequently, we can represent truthfulness and the other points of practice as five circles, with the circle of truthfulness comprising the other four:



All untruth comes from hubris, from assuming, believing, or insisting that our will is greater than the truth, which means greater than the gods, for the gods alone establish what is true and what is not. Our reason for doing this matters not at all. No one who opposes the truth can be on friendly terms with life. Those who love the truth are favored by the gods. Because they place the truth ahead of self-interest, their interests are protected by their humility, and even adverse conditions are transformed into good fortune.

Living truthfully means practicing the great Delphic admonition taken up by Socrates, “Know thyself.” We do this by using the method he gave us—the disclosure of unexamined assumptions, beliefs, and opinions through dialectical scrutiny. Gradually, as we take part in Socratic dialogue, the things that we thought we knew fall away, and we see that we were only dreaming we knew them. The truth of how little we know is “recollected,”

as Socrates tells us, and in this recollection, we come home to the truth of our dependence on the gods and so, to humility.

Being truthful means deferring to things as they are, to bow before what is rather than asserting our will. The resolve to live truthfully imbues us with that quiet strength known by all who have nothing to hide, who meet life face-to-face, whose character has become a compass heading through the storms of the world.

TRUTHFULNESS AND EXCELLENCE: BEYOND SCIENCE

In practice, truthfulness goes beyond scientific truth, which is concerned primarily with correspondence to observable facts. The procedure that the scientist follows to determine whether or not something is true—the so-called scientific method—involves setting up an experiment through which the scientist can either verify or falsify a state of correspondence between the hypothesis and how the universe behaves. We all do this many times a day without thinking of as scientific testing. For example, if you're walking with a friend, and this friend suddenly declares, "There's a twenty dollar bill at your feet," determining whether or not the statement is true requires nothing more than looking down. If the bill is there, the statement is verified—that is, the fact corresponds to the hypothesis. In the new physics, this simple model becomes far more complex, for the act of observing changes the thing observed, and we find that we cannot stand apart from the universe with our observations and measurements as we once believed. Rather, we are participants, and how we participate affects the very truth we are seeking to verify or falsify in a set of shifting variables that, according to the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, it is not possible to isolate. Beyond Heisenberg, we have learned how profoundly our scientific manipulations of the world in turn affect us. As with knowledge in the quantum realm, control of the world through technology is a fiction, for we must live in the world we have manipulated. Splitting the atom is a good example. Unleashing the awesome power of nuclear energy has forever altered our sense of ourselves and placed all of humanity on a path of unprecedented peril. Once the technology is out, Pandora's Box is open,

and cannot be closed again. Clearly, the fact that we can do something in no way addresses whether or not we should do it—but given the woeful inadequacy of human judgment, sadly, this is a truth that it seems we recognize only in hindsight. When we engage the world with a merely scientific standard of truth, we participate, certainly, and our participation may be noteworthy, for good or ill, life changing or life threatening. But there is nothing in this sort of participation that addresses the issue of *arête*.

In the *Phaedo*, the dialogue in which Plato gives us his account of the last hours and death of Socrates, the idea of participation is presented with a particularly poignant significance, for the matter is very much at hand of how and how well we have participated in our lives. One of the practical implications of this concept in the dialogue is the idea that a thing takes on the essential quality of that in which it participates. So, fire, participating in heat, takes on that essential quality, while snow, participating in cold, is essentially cold, such that one always finds cold where one finds snow, and heat where one finds fire. At the advance of cold, fire must withdraw, as cold contradicts fire's essential quality, and fire will cease to exist rather than admit or participate in that quality that contradicts its essential nature. In the same way, at the advance of fire, snow will withdraw or cease to exist rather than abandon the quality of coldness essential to it. All of this belongs to a subtle argument that Socrates eventually makes in the dialogue for the soul's immortality, the central interest and concern of the company, and understandably so, since Socrates is about to be executed, making the discussion anything but theoretical.

THE DAIMON: HEEDING THE INNER VOICE

Truthfulness presupposes humility, because in order to be truthful, one has to be willing to defer to something greater than one's will. In any moment when we bow before the truth, regardless of how we may feel about it, regardless of any admission of error on our part that may be required, regardless of how much we may wish things were otherwise, in that moment the tyranny of the will and hubris fall away, and we enter into our proper relation with the gods of chaotic unfolding and with our life and fate. It is essential, therefore, that we remain available to the truth, which means

that we remain openminded and teachable. The proper role of the true philosopher is ever that of the student.

The teacher may show up in various forms, the most immediate and intimate of which is the inner voice that the Greeks called the *daimon* /dī'-mōn/. We may think of it as the voice of intuition that speaks in stillness, without words; our better sense or “gut” instinct—a kind of knowing without having to be told. The Greeks understood it as an inner presence, a divine intermediary installed in the human psyche by the gods to watch over and guide human affairs, an inner oracle to be consulted and followed. In moments of exaltation, artistic inspiration, or deep stillness and receptivity, this inner voice, the daimon, counsels and cautions us in accordance with the truth, and in this mission it is unwavering, for the truth is what it is and never otherwise. In practice, the daimon comes often as an inner alarm, the sudden prompting that one is about to take a wrong turn, a cautionary sense of the need to refrain. If we choose to ignore such inner warnings, as experience sooner or later makes plain, we do so at our peril and sometimes at great cost. Here is how Socrates describes the daimon:

This sign I have had ever since I was a child. The sign is a voice which comes to me and always forbids me to do something which I am going to do, but never commands me to do anything.

| *Apology*, Benjamin Jowett translation

Eventually, Socrates and his friends did not take an important step without consulting the daimon. Even this much—this moment of pausing, becoming receptive, and checking in with our inner ally to see if there are any objections to a course of action that we’re considering would improve our character, and so, our life and our fate, as it would lift us above the epidemic practice of living in reaction to things, rushing ahead on the basis of desire or will alone, and ignoring or trivializing what we often look back and recognize in hindsight as clear indications that we were about to commit an error.

The willingness to consult and honor the daimon is essential to the cultivation of a well-ordered soul. But when we begin to pay attention to our intuition, listening in stillness and with receptivity for the silent voice of the daimon, we may hear many inner voices, such as the voice of our desire, our resistance, our fear, the voice of strategic thinking, of unexamined

assumptions and expectations, of beliefs into which we were inducted when we were children and never questioned or examined. Indeed, we may encounter an inner cacophony of conflicting voices, each with its own agenda. These promptings may leave us confused and wondering how we can distinguish all of these inner voices from the true voice of the daimon. One student, attending a lecture given by Ram Dass, raised his hand and asked: “You say we should follow the inner voice, but I find so many voices in there, how do I know which one is the right one?” Ram Dass replied: “Listen for the more inner one.” To help you do this, consider the following:

- ✦ The daimon does not present arguments, reasons, or explanations. It does not contend. It prompts with a clear conviction of “yes” or “no,” most often, “no.” Mental wrangling is an indication that one has not yet entered the state of stillness and receptivity required to hear the daimon.
- ✦ When we receive the daimon’s instruction, there is often an element of recognition, of having heard a truth we already knew. Socrates called this “recollection.”
- ✦ The silent words of the daimon seem to emanate from the heart or the gut rather than from the head, and are more felt than thought. They are, literally, the embodiment of truth. When we speak from our heart, when we “get it off our chest” or “spill our guts,” we can feel that our voice emanates from a deeper place in the body than when we are talking “off the top of our head” or “through our hat.” The difference is tangible, and obvious to anyone paying attention.
- ✦ The daimon’s counsel is consistent over time. Though circumstances change, the instructions of the daimon do not, because its wisdom is not circumstantial but flows from intuition, which is a seeing into the heart of things. As the saying goes, “the truth will out.” Sooner or later, what comes to light is what was there all along. We may deny the truth, but doing so only compounds the debt of the original error, prolonging or aggravating our suffering until a great deal may be required of us to make the needed correction.

The daimon is that inner presence that will not leave us alone. The sooner we heed its counsel, even if it seems to us that the consequences of doing so will be demanding or daunting, the better off we are.

TRUTHFULNESS, GOODNESS, AND BEAUTY

For the ancient Greeks, excellence is the passkey to the good life, and excellence belongs to what is true and good and beautiful. In this view, every excellent thing—from works of art to noble human acts—is excellent by virtue of participating in and thus expressing the true, the good, and the beautiful—the three aspects of the divine. The idea has persisted through two millennia, and is celebrated in these famous lines of verse by John Keats in his poem, *Ode On a Grecian Urn*:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

This realization of the kinship between what is true and what is good and what is beautiful can in itself be life-changing. Indeed, if we took it to heart, we would find our lives immeasurably improved, for hubristic attitudes and actions, in their willful and blind flouting of the truth, are destructive and ugly and lead to tragic outcomes. By this reckoning, if we made beauty our North Star, governing ourselves by that standard, measuring our choices simply by whether or not they are beautiful, we would automatically become ambassadors of the good and the true “as the night follows day.” Excellence would take root in our character, and true happiness, regardless of outer circumstances, would accompany us as faithfully as a shadow.

The practice of truthfulness calls us to remember that we did not create ourselves. No human hand set the Earth spinning through starry space or opened the immense cosmic expanse around us in which the planets and suns and galaxies hang, suspended by the mysterious collaborations of electromagnetic and gravitational forces. We are the children of a vast and timeless chaos out of which we somehow emerged. Each moment of our lives, then, is lived as a result of the ingenuity and generosity of something inscrutable. We are not in charge here, but are entirely dependent on forces greater than our will, from the turning of the seasons to the next breath. In this core truth lies the basis of humility, which alone places us in proper relation to this something greater. Humility and truthfulness go hand in hand, for truthfulness is nothing more than the acknowledgment of what is, and is as it is. In every moment of being truthful, we are deferring to something beyond ourselves.

We have said that truthfulness is the master principle of practice. Next, we're going to look at how truthfulness informs the other four points—innocence, showing up, diligence, and dialogue.

TRUTHFULNESS IN PRACTICE

Truthfulness and Showing Up

“We are the chattel of the gods,” Socrates tells us in the *Phaedo*, reminding us that we belong not to ourselves but to the greater forces that brought us forth into existence. We do not place ourselves in the world, or on the timeline of our personal history, with all its endowments and limitations, but rather find ourselves here, such that our life can be fulfilled only through an acquiescence to the fundamental truth of our being-here, in the world, living the life we have, safe in the wisdom of humility. Showing up, however, goes beyond the basic willingness to be in the world where the forces of chaos have “thrown” us. It also implies the willingness to be here as we are, without pretense, justification, or apology. To show up means to live from the inside out, to bow to the truth of who we are and allow its expression.

If we choose not to show up, then to that extent, we choose in some way or other to hide—from life, from the forces of chaotic unfolding, from our truth. Each point of practice is rooted in a fundamental choice. Thus, we can either show up or hide. The choice to show up, to move with our life rather than against it, to be in the world, to be who we are—is an act of humility that defers to the truth of our being-here. Conversely, the choice not to show up, to move against life rather than with it, to try to hide from the world, to be other than we are—is an act of hubris that denies the fundamental truth of our being-here. For this reason, showing up and truthfulness are inseparable, and so much a part of each other that in practice, the difference between them can be difficult to discern. Agreeing to live our life truthfully, deferring to the mystery out of which we emerge into the world and our personal history, we fulfill a basic requirement of the well-ordered soul. We *are* here; that is the truth of the matter—it cannot be denied. If we try to deny this truth by hiding, then we show up as hidden! The truth, as Socrates tells us in the *Gorgias*, cannot be refuted.

Truthfulness and Innocence

The practice of innocence involves remembering that as our vision is severely limited by the unpredictable nature of chaos, our conclusions are at best approximate and fallible, and therefore subject to revision. We can know, but as William James argues in *The Will to Believe*, we cannot know that we know.

We may talk of the empiricist way and of the absolutist way of believing in truth. The absolutists in this matter say that we not only can attain to knowing truth, but we can know when we have attained to knowing it; while the empiricists think that although we may attain it, we cannot infallibly know when. To know is one thing, and to know for certain that we know is another. One may hold to the first being possible without the second; hence the empiricists and the absolutists, although neither of them is a sceptic in the usual philosophic sense of the term, show very different degrees of dogmatism in their lives.

Objective evidence and certitude are doubtless very fine ideals to play with, but where on this moonlit and dream-visited planet are they found? I am, therefore, myself a complete empiricist so far as my theory of human knowledge goes. I live, to be sure, by the practical faith that we must go on experiencing and thinking over our experience, for only thus can our opinions grow more true; but to hold any one of them—I absolutely do not care which—as if it never could be reinterpretable or corrigible, I believe to be a tremendously mistaken attitude, and I think that the whole history of philosophy will bear me out.

Our knowledge then is partial and relative, never absolute. We can have knowledge, certainly, but the moment we believe our knowledge is infallible, our thinking becomes dogmatic; innocence is abandoned, hubris triumphs, and conclusions can become dangerous. Simply remembering how little we really know at any moment in the great scheme of things, and that our knowing can never be more than an approximation of the truth as it has revealed itself thus far, keeps our feet on the path of humility and saves us from slipping into a complacent, unteachable stance. An open mind, in this sense, is a mind that has not forgotten the truth that we live in a medium of mystery. By remaining innocent, we remain open to excellence and happiness.

Truthfulness and Diligence

Diligence has two aspects: doing what is ours to do and refraining from attempting to do what is not ours to do. There is no doubt that we cannot live the good life denying responsibilities that belong to us, but it is also true that we leave the good life behind when we try to assume responsibilities that are not ours, those that rightly belong to another or simply lie outside the ambit of our will. To walk this line, we first must discern it, and herein lies the relation between diligence and truthfulness, for the denial of a responsibility that is, in truth, ours, is an untruthful act as surely as is the attempt to seize control that we do not have or manage that which we are not constituted to manage. Usurping another's rightful responsibility is an act of theft, one that flies in the face of the truth of what belongs to us and what does not. By the same measure, the excessive diligence of exerting our will beyond its limits in the hubristic effort to manage or control that which must be left to the unfolding forces of chaos denies the truth of our limitations, and sets us up for the often painful curriculum of suffering.

Truthfulness and Dialogue

Dialogue also has two aspects. First, it refers to conversation between two or more people whose purpose is the discovery of the truth or deeper truth about whatever concern has brought them together. Second, it is the wordless conversation in which each of us participates with life—with “the gods”—through how we conduct ourselves in the world and in our affairs, and how life responds. In both forms of dialogue, we are called to enter into relationship with the truth. Thus, in both, our commitment to truthfulness is paramount.

Sometimes the truth we are called to acknowledge is humbling. We have been in error; perhaps we have been willful. There may be something to put right, an apology to offer, amends to make. Hubris has no interest in such things. It is too busy arguing foregone conclusions, justifying itself, being right at all costs, establishing or maintaining its dominance. These are the chains and lead weights that it wears proudly while railing against fateful consequences. By placing a greater value on the truth and staying teachable, we become light. We can float over outcomes that once would have dashed us to the ground. We can rise above situations, move with them, let go of our will when necessary, make creative adaptations—all through the simple

willingness to keep mind and heart open to the truth of the matter, so that the truth matters more to us than anything else.

Clearly, it is important, when engaging in dialogue, to speak with someone whom one trusts, which means trusts to be truthful. As Plutarch writes: “I don’t need a friend who changes when I change and who nods when I nod. My shadow does that much better.” Those who demonstrate a measure of humility likely will be good candidates for dialogue, while complacency, dogmatic thinking, or other signs of hubris will disqualify a prospective partner in the mind of any mindful person. In dialogue, we are entrusting our innermost life to another; we owe it to ourselves to be discerning and to hold to high standards. As the other is trusting us similarly, we want to offer the best in us. To do this, we need no special training in philosophy. We do it simply through our resolve to be truthful. Nothing more is required. Truthfulness comes naturally to us; every child is truthful until he or she is taught otherwise.. Dialogue between two people is truthfulness shared.

Dialogue’s other aspect—the silent, ongoing conversation between our inner life—our choices, our character, our dreams and desires—and the events that come out to meet us in the world is no less a call to be truthful. Experience tests us, there can be no question. If we live long enough, it will bend us, perhaps even break us, but sometimes in the breaking we are broken open. If we remain open, willing, teachable, holding to the ways of humility, committed to truthfulness as revealed in dialogue, humble in our willingness to show up, steadfastly innocent, and discerning in diligence, then the truth can only enrich and deepen and instruct and guide us, and whatever our fate, we will not suffer it.

EXERCISE: LETTING THE TRUTH SPEAK

Please read the entire exercise before putting it into practice.

This week, tell the truth. Does this sound simplistic? We’re not liars, after all, are we? But the exercise goes beyond merely reporting facts accurately, beyond scientific truth to the truth of reporting the unadorned truth that the daimon whispers to you in the silent language of your better knowing.

Here you are being asked to tell this sort of living truth, to “check in” for a moment before you answer or act, even and perhaps especially in those situations in which you may have felt earlier that you could not be truthful. Be sure that such speaking the truth will not put you in harm’s way. For example, telling an abusive partner that you no longer are willing to tolerate mistreatment may present serious risks, depending on the circumstances, such that it may be prudent to do this in a public place, with a third party present, or with assistance from local law enforcement. The point of this exercise is not for you to provoke a situation in which you might be threatened or hurt. The daimon always takes such things into account, and would never prompt us to speak or act recklessly. That said, most truth-telling does not involve such extreme risk, but in every case where we have believed that we could not be truthful, choosing to be transparent and allowing the daimon to speak through us requires that we let go of our will, stop trying to manage or manipulate outcomes or other people, and let things happen according to their own inner nature and timing. In this respect, telling the truth is an act of trust—in the daimon, in the redeeming power of humility, and in life as it unfolds through chaotically unpredictable turns and progressions. By all means, when you tell the truth, be skillful. Be kind and considerate. You are not an attorney arguing a case in court. The feeling should be one of deferring to things as they are, simply that. How things are is not your doing. In telling the truth, we have no agenda and nothing to prove. We are simply getting out of the way of the gods so that things can become what they already are.

WEEK 3
SHOWING UP



SHOWING UP: LIVING IN LIVING COLOR

When one is willing and eager, the gods join in. • Aeschylus

Having a well-ordered soul requires that we “show up,” which means that we take part in our life and the world around us in whatever way feels natural. It is a fundamental agreement to be where the forces of chaos have placed us, and to live our story in the truth of who we are. Showing up is a living statement of the willingness to put ourselves in the hands of the gods, to release all concern over outcomes, focusing instead on improving our character through the humility as embodied in the five points of practice.

Showing up means choosing to participate enthusiastically in the unfolding story of our life. Sitting at home and waiting for anything in the hope that it will bring us happiness is poor practice. It is not that one is not participating when one sits at home and waits; it is rather that one is participating unskillfully, because showing up of this sort is passive, and passivity, not being our nature, is willful. We did not come to this life to be passive but to express, to explore, to create, to learn and discover, to evolve, to contribute. Acknowledging the workings of fate through chaotic elements, we know that we have no power to make anything happen, because we have no way to even anticipate, let alone manage these elements. The conditions of life are wrought by the gods, who speak the creative word or *logos* (from the Greek *legein*, “to gather into being”), but in this speaking, they take into account where we stand.

In Genesis, after Adam eats the forbidden fruit, he goes into hiding. It is an absurd reaction, since he is attempting to hide from the Omniscient. Oddly, God asks Adam where he is, but clearly this can’t be taken at face value, as though God is playing hide-and-seek with Adam and can’t find him. The question has far more significance, for it is a question the answer to which will seal Adam’s fate. God is asking “Where art thou?” in the sense of “Where are you standing?” Asking someone where he stands is not a request for physical coordinates. We want to know, for example, where a person stands on the issue of abortion or capital punishment or assisted

suicide. The question, “Where do you stand?” is an invitation for others to show up, to reveal something essential about their nature. In Adam’s case, the issue is his relation to the Creator. Adam is dreaming that he can hide. He is thinking that he can avoid showing up, but hiding is itself a way of showing up. There is, finally, no way to hide from or avoid our fate.

In practice, showing up means that we’re willing to be “out there” in the world, available to fate, willing to be seen and heard in the truth of who we are. It is a commitment to be at once visible and transparent at the foundational level of our very being.

AGREEING TO BE

Showing up begins with the willing acceptance of certain life-determining conditions that we did not choose. That we exist at all, in this world, at this time in history—these are “given” and not subject to our will. Neither do we choose our parents, our geographic location at the time of our birth, our genetic endowments, our socioeconomic level, or the unique convergence of aptitudes and limitations that will accompany us on the earthly sojourn. All of these factors are worked out through the mysterious agency of chaos before we arrive; they determine what is for practical purposes, the general framework of our fate. Certainly, as we grow older and reach the age of choice and responsibility, there may be things we can do to affect some of these “givens.” We can move away from the place where we were born, improve ourselves socioeconomically, work to overcome physical and other limitations. Not all of these conditions, however, can be altered in this way. For example, as long as we live, we live in the world, subjects of time and space and our human physiology with all of its susceptibilities. Ultimately, the choices we make to shape the given aspects of our existence can only reach so far. They cannot overcome the fundamental realities of our creaturehood, which is to say our existence as beings created by forces beyond our will and our control. In the face of these givens, then, we have only one choice—a choice that, as we have said, is the primary choice of practice: to accept with humility what lies beyond our control, or attempt to control the uncontrollable through force of will, which is the way of hubris.

Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, writes: “There is only one truly serious philosophical question, and that is suicide.” Put a bit less dramatically, this comes down to the question of whether or not to agree to continue living the life we have been given, to go on being in the world where the gods have thrown us, to defer to the fact of our own existence. Shakespeare expresses it this way, in the opening lines of the Hamlet’s immortal soliloquy: “To be or not to be; that is the question.” Here, as well as in the writings of other poets and existential philosophers like Camus, we come upon the idea that man is that being for whom existence is a question. “Why live?” is a riddle of the Sphinx with which each of us must come to terms, whether through thoughtless acquiescence or in the turbulent depths of self-examination.

On the path of excellence, humility, and self-knowledge, we answer this question as follows: We live because, in that we are alive, our life is the will of the gods. We did not create ourselves, but emerged into the world at the leading crest of the tides of chaos. This means that our life belongs not to us but to life itself, and so we have no right to take it. We see this very point made in the *Phaedo*, the Platonic dialogue in which the last hours of Socrates are recounted. In that masterful work, Socrates says that one who has lived a philosophical life need not fear death. In fact, he explains, the philosopher wishes for death all his life, because the body, with its incessant needs, demands, desires, and distractions proves a perpetual hindrance to the life of contemplation and reflection through which alone one may gain a glimpse of the truth. In this light, mortal life is regarded as an illness from which we are cured, at last, in death, and it is not an accident that Socrates’s last words are to direct Crito to make a sacrifice to Asclepius, the god of healing, in Socrates’s name. In effect, Socrates’s answer to Camus, becomes this: As we belong to the gods, we have no right to quit our post, even if death should prove to be the greatest blessing that can come to us. Even, then, in a paradigm where death is viewed as a release from worldly constraints into a liberating afterlife, we have a primal responsibility to the forces that created us to live out our story here as best we can.

SHOWING UP IN THE TRUTH

The agreement to be, which we may think of as “ontological willingness,” is fundamental, but showing up involves more than assent of this most basic sort. Once we are in accord with our being-here, with the fact *that* we exist, our willingness must expand to include the truth of *who* we are. We show up fully when we are willing to let the brilliant colors of our identity flow forth into expression free of denial, for we are who we are whether or not we’re willing to honor it, and the denial of any truth always involves hubris. Self-acceptance is one of the hallmarks of humility, and the starting point for self-work. It allows us to live our story naturally and gracefully, moving into deeper agreement with the truth of our own being, for we cannot be set against ourselves without being set against the gods who fashioned us and placed us here in the mortal world of time and space.

Of course, who we are is an evolving reality, not static, not finished at any point along the path of our life. We have outgrown earlier truths many times. Thus, showing up, like the other points of practice, is more art than science, and as with any art, we must apply ourselves if we aim to achieve a degree of virtuosity. Showing up artfully requires that we cultivate self-awareness and self-knowledge by remaining alert to the promptings of the daimon, so that we can stay true to the evolving story of self.

This honoring of self is never narcissistic or self-aggrandizing. Narcissism is an extreme form of hubris that has nothing to do with the inner act of acquiescing in the truth of oneself, which as we have said is the precondition of showing up. Indeed, the narcissist is in flight from truth and deaf to the instructions of the daimon that, if followed, would avert the suffering and tragedy that sooner or later knock at the door of the house of hubris. The differences between these two stances is glaring in practice. While self-acceptance does not apologize for its truth, knowing that its role is not to assert but to defer, it has no problem apologizing for its errors, whereas self-aggrandizement never apologizes even when it is in the wrong. Self-acceptance refuses self-contradiction, self-aggrandizement refuses to be contradicted by others. Self-acceptance, grounded as it is in truthfulness, naturally falls in step with the other points of practice—innocence, diligence, and dialogue—and finds good fortune even in adversity, while

self-aggrandizement, regarding humility as weakness, opens the door wide to suffering and tragedy. Self-acceptance is led by the enlightened and unfailing guidance of the daimon, self-aggrandizement by the endless machinations of its own inflated will. In fact, despite endless bravado and posturing, the inveterate narcissist is in flight from the truth and from the gods, and inevitably becomes the unwitting agent of his own undoing.

What does it mean to be in flight from the gods? In our modern view of fate, “the gods,” as we noted earlier, refers to the unfolding forces of chaos that converge and surface in every life. These chaotic forces are unknown in any situation; we can neither anticipate nor control them, yet they can influence, shape, and determine outcomes that matter to us greatly. They may move against our will in the blink of an eye, altering our life profoundly, setting us on new and sudden paths, moving along undreamt of arcs. Certainly they cannot be counted on to be kind, for there is nothing in chaos that can be counted on to be anything. All the practice in the world cannot exempt us from the uncertainties of mortal life. Even so, and as daunting as this may seem at times, neither are we exempt from the responsibility of showing up. Like it or not, we are participants, not bystanders, not observers of our life. Living fully means being willing to participate fully, not hiding, not living in half-measures. In order to live fully, we must be *available*—to the inner promptings of the daimon, to the truth as we see it, to our life in the world here and now, to those things for which we are rightly responsible, to dialogue with others that serves our and their continuing evolution in excellence and the improvement of character, to the mystery of our being—here, to the gods, and to our fate.

AN ELEMENT OF PARADOX

Once we understand showing up in terms of availability, we encounter an element of paradox. We have said that showing up involves allowing the living colors of our truth to flow forth into expression—not to deny, not to trivialize or interpret or translate or hide—but simply to be, participating fully in the story of our life, knowing that we have no guarantees, that the forces of chaos have their own outworkings and timings. It becomes clear upon a moment’s reflection, however, that there are times when the truth

of the situation before us and the daimon will prompt us *not* to express. At such times, showing up in the truth must mean expressing the truth of *not* expressing—not speaking, not acting, not moving forward as we may wish or think we should do, but deliberately refraining from doing so.

An example should make clear that there is far more involved here than mere semantics. Let us imagine the middle-aged parent of an adult child. Perhaps the child is willful, lacking in good judgment, and so on. The parent sees the adult child about to make a mistake, perhaps a serious one, a mistake that will bring hard consequences. The daimon cautions against saying anything. Why? The parent loves the child and wishes to make an appeal in the child's behalf. Now, if the parent proceeds, offering unsolicited advice, everything depends upon the child being teachable, willing, receptive—and we already have stipulated that the child in question is on the path of hubris. Furthermore, the hardest advice to take is advice that is unsolicited. What happens? The well-meaning advice is perceived as criticism. The child pushes back, now more resolved to dive headlong into error. At the end of all this, the parent is not surprised. The inner voice had advised against saying anything. Its wisdom ran deeper even than parental love and devotion.

It is a difficult situation, one that tests the parent's character. The child's error is in plain view to the parent. Yet the child is an adult, and has the same right to learn the lessons already learned by the parent, without interference. No wisdom can be gained by proxy. Each of us has and has the right to our curriculum, to make our mistakes and learn from them, for until we do, they are not ours. It is not only a matter of being right, but also of that maturity of judgment that knows that however good our intentions may be, there is only so much we can do, even for those we love.

There are times to be transparent and times to be opaque, times to speak out and times to keep silent, times to act and times to refrain from acting. In practice, we discern the difference by taking a moment to consult the daimon, by staying teachable as life instructs us about what works and what does not. Practice always serves the greater good. This may mean saying nothing even when what we have to say is in principle correct. As we cultivate artful living, called *phronesis* /fro-nee'-sis/ by the Greeks, we come to understand through experience that the greater good cannot be served in

principle alone. It is a living thing. Inwardly, the paradox does not operate, for whether we speak or refrain from speaking, act or refrain from acting, move forward or hold back, the practice is the same—to allow our being-here to be guided by the inner voice, artfully and in accordance with the truth of the moment at hand.

SELF-RESPECT VS. SELF-ASSERTION

Showing up follows naturally from self-respect, and self-respect from recognizing that the self is the handiwork of something greater than itself, for we did not create ourselves nor this world into which we are born and through which we pass along the mortal journey. True self-respect, then, cannot be separated from respect for chaos in the sense of the primal mystery that brings all things forth into existence. Thus, showing up has no bravado in it, no self-assertion, no pushing to the front of the line. On the contrary, respect for the self as a divine achievement humbles us and fills us with a sense of awe before the inscrutable ingenuity of the gods, until we come to feel the divine presence at every turn. Humility is the soil in which virtue and excellence (*arête*) blossom. It is the foundation of abiding happiness (*eudaimonia*) and the good life (*ataraxia*).

Once we understand the act of deference to the divine implicit in self-respect, self-honoring, even self-love in the sense of the highest possible regard for oneself as an expression of the infinite creativity of chaos, we can never again confuse self-respect with self-assertion, for the first is always born of humility, while the second, of hubris. Showing up is simply non-resistance, a bowing to the greater will in the agreement both to be here and to be who we are. Self-assertion knows nothing of this ontological acquiescence. Filled with self-doubt and often self-loathing, it must seize every opportunity to assert itself, to win, to prove something, to be right, and in this secret state of contradiction, set against itself, blind to the mystery of chaos and caught up in worldly machinations, it also is set against the gods, and like Oedipus, strides obliviously along the path of tragedy. It is only a matter of time and circumstance, for the gods keep the ledgers of man, and are not fooled by posturing. As Herman Melville writes in one of the many haunting passages of *Moby Dick*, “Be sure of this, O young ambition, all mortal greatness is but disease.”

EXERCISE: THE SCHEDULE OF THE GODS

Please read the entire exercise before putting it into practice.

One of the defining structures of worldly life is *time*. Not a day goes by that we are not time aware, compelled by schedules and deadlines, from the moment we wake up under the jurisdiction of the alarm clock until the abacus of the hours has been counted and we fall once again into timeless rest. We may take time, spend time, pass the time, even kill time. So basic is our relationship with time that our stance toward it embodies and confesses how we are choosing to show up.

Whatever your relationship with time has been to date, and regardless of the sort of work you do or the demands of your daily agenda, for one week consider that you are on the “schedule of the gods,” that the gods are responsible for the timing of things from the most important to the most trivial. For one week, delegate all concern over when things happen. If you are running late, remember that you are on the schedule of the gods. Running late, within the shifting currents of chaotic unfolding, can save our life. In light of this, we can release our will and show up in a state of deferral and acquiescence to those forces that are beyond our control. We can choose, put simply, to befriend time, so that we are no longer racing against time but moving in cooperation with it, floating downstream in the temporal river rather than swimming madly against the current—an act of hubris that sooner or later leaves us exhausted.

To illustrate: Imagine a man driving to an important meeting. He leaves the house in plenty of time, but soon is running late. Every traffic light is red, the driver ahead of him is on a cell phone and in no hurry at all, and in front of that driver is a school bus. He does everything he can to get there on time, but events seem to be conspiring to prevent it. Finally, he pulls into the parking lot of the building where the meeting is to take place only to find that there are no parking spaces. He circles the lot frantically. His watch lets him know that the meeting is about to start, and here he is, and now what? He parks in a reserved spot and runs into the building, racing down the hall to the meeting room, fuming. His blood pressure is elevated, and he feels like a victim of time. This is how he shows up.

This example shows how hubris gives rise to suffering and unwanted outcomes. The hubris in the story is not great, neither is the suffering. Yet it demonstrates the very principle operating in those cases where both hubris and the suffering it brings are great, and it is the principle that interests us here, not the degree. The man driving to the meeting means well. He is diligent; he does his part, yet even perfect practice is no guarantee of good fortune. We do not practice in order to try to control events, but to gain that self-control that is the key to happiness, regardless of events. Where was the man's error? He began asserting his will by resisting time. Because he set himself against time, time set itself against him. Caught in a feedback loop of reaction, he forgot that the gods are in charge, and set out to control the unfolding of events, which no man can do. This willfulness was driven by his attachment to things unfolding in a certain way—namely, arriving at the meeting on time and in a sanguine mood rather than at the breaking crest of a wave of frustration.

If he had remembered that he is on the schedule of the gods, he could have released that attachment. He could have remembered that the gods see more and arrange more behind the scenes than he ever can see or arrange on the worldly stage. He could have released his will, gone with events rather than against them, and his showing up at the meeting would have been wholly different, and better.

Remember that “the gods” is our term for chaos, and not chaos as mayhem, not the chaos of tragic consequences brought into our lives by hubris, but as something closer to the ancient Greek sense of *khaos* /kah'-ōs/—the vast medium of creative forces that spring from emptiness, intersecting and surfacing in every life in ways that we cannot anticipate or manage. To agree to live, even for a week, on the schedule of the gods means to agree to adopt a stance of nonresistance, willingness, and receptivity toward the unknown and unseen, to be here fully and participate even when it is clear that we are not in control of the seasons of things. Adopting such a stance requires that we let go of the demands we place on time that time then places on us. We will still have our schedules, but our deadlines will be lifelines as what were urgencies become preferences. Living in agreement with the gods, it turns out, is the only way to truly live at all.

WEEK 4
INNOCENCE



INNOCENCE: REMEMBERING THE GODS

Wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder. • Socrates

INNOCENCE AND WONDER

Philosophy begins with a sense of wonder that anything at all exists rather than nothing. When we ponder not how things are or what they are but rather *that* they are, we are lifted out of immersion in the everyday and into a wordless state of beholding, for we have reached that half-lit boundary where thinking ends and mystery begins. Ordinarily, this mystery, despite its omnipresence, is overlooked and forgotten. Indeed, it is hidden by virtue of its obviousness, and by the hubristic presumptions of human knowing. We assign names to things, and think thereby that we understand their nature, but the name is not the thing named any more than the map is the territory it depicts. Naming something gives us a way to get used to it, to take its being-here for granted, but the name does not contain the essence of the thing itself. In truth, the named thing remains mysterious, standing forth as though from out of thin air, declaring its nameless nature. We may give it a thousand names, yet in itself, it remains inscrutable.

THE WISDOM OF SOCRATES

The word *philosophy* means “love of wisdom.” In this sense, the end of philosophy, its fulfillment, is wisdom—and a wisdom that coexists with wonder. Yet, there is nothing in the meaning of the word that implies that such wisdom is attainable, and Socrates tells us that wisdom in its pure form, what the Greeks called *sophia*, is reserved for the gods, and not something that can be realized by mortals. Indeed, Socrates’s lifelong philosophical mission begins when he learns of the Delphic oracle’s cryptic pronouncement, when asked if anyone is wiser than Socrates, to which it replied, “No one is wiser.” Knowing that he had no wisdom, no knowledge in this absolute sense, Socrates set out to prove the oracle wrong. He thought that he would search for and find someone wiser than he, someone

who knew something about the nature of life and living, whereupon he would return to the oracle and make his case. “You said that no one is wiser than I, but here is someone who is, so what did you mean?” As it turns out, however, Socrates is unable to find such a person. Those whom he engages in philosophical dialogue (the “dialectic,” called the *elenchus* by the Greeks), prove to be no wiser than he. In fact, they are full of opinions that prove to be false, including the opinion that they possess wisdom. The conversation invariably ends with Socrates exposing this “false conceit of knowledge,” thereby demonstrating that his dialogical partners know nothing after all, any more than he himself does. Socrates reports this at his trial, in a passage so lucid and beautiful that we include it here:

You must have known Chaerephon; he was early a friend of mine, and also a friend of yours, for he shared in the exile of the people, and returned with you. Well, Chaerephon, as you know, was very impetuous in all his doings, and he went to Delphi and boldly asked the oracle to tell him whether—as I was saying, I must beg you not to interrupt—he asked the oracle to tell him whether there was anyone wiser than I was, and the Pythian prophetess answered that there was no man wiser. Chaerephon is dead himself, but his brother, who is in court, will confirm the truth of this story.

Why do I mention this? Because I am going to explain to you why I have such an evil name. When I heard the answer, I said to myself, What can the god mean? and what is the interpretation of this riddle? for I know that I have no wisdom, small or great. What can he mean when he says that I am the wisest of men? And yet he is a god and cannot lie; that would be against his nature. After a long consideration, I at last thought of a method of trying the question. I reflected that if I could only find a man wiser than myself, then I might go to the god with a refutation in my hand. I should say to him, “Here is a man who is wiser than I am; but you said that I was the wisest.” Accordingly I went to one who had the reputation of wisdom, and observed to him—his name I need not mention; he was a politician whom I selected for examination—and the result was as follows: When I began to talk with him, I could not help thinking that he was not really wise, although he was thought wise by many, and wiser still by himself; and

I went and tried to explain to him that he thought himself wise, but was not really wise; and the consequence was that he hated me, and his enmity was shared by several who were present and heard me. So I left him, saying to myself, as I went away: Well, although I do not suppose that either of us knows anything really beautiful and good, I am better off than he is—for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows. I neither know nor think that I know. In this latter particular, then, I seem to have slightly the advantage of him. Then I went to another, who had still higher philosophical pretensions, and my conclusion was exactly the same. I made another enemy of him, and of many others besides him.

After this I went to one man after another, being not unconscious of the enmity which I provoked, and I lamented and feared this: but necessity was laid upon me—the word of God, I thought, ought to be considered first. And I said to myself, Go I must to all who appear to know, and find out the meaning of the oracle. And I swear to you, Athenians, by the dog I swear!—for I must tell you the truth—the result of my mission was just this: I found that the men most in repute were all but the most foolish; and that some inferior men were really wiser and better. I will tell you the tale of my wanderings and of the “Herculean” labors, as I may call them, which I endured only to find at last the oracle irrefutable. When I left the politicians, I went to the poets; tragic, dithyrambic, and all sorts. And there, I said to myself, you will be detected; now you will find out that you are more ignorant than they are. Accordingly, I took them some of the most elaborate passages in their own writings, and asked what was the meaning of them—thinking that they would teach me something. Will you believe me? I am almost ashamed to speak of this, but still I must say that there is hardly a person present who would not have talked better about their poetry than they did themselves. That showed me in an instant that not by wisdom do poets write poetry, but by a sort of genius and inspiration; they are like diviners or soothsayers who also say many fine things, but do not understand the meaning of them. And the poets appeared to me to be much in the same case; and I further observed that upon the strength of their poetry they believed themselves to be the wisest of men in other things in which they were not wise. So I departed, conceiving myself to be superior to them for the same reason that I was superior to the politicians. At last I went to the artisans, for I was conscious that I knew nothing

at all, as I may say, and I was sure that they knew many fine things; and in this I was not mistaken, for they did know many things of which I was ignorant, and in this they certainly were wiser than I was. But I observed that even the good artisans fell into the same error as the poets; because they were good workmen they thought that they also knew all sorts of high matters, and this defect in them overshadowed their wisdom—therefore I asked myself on behalf of the oracle, whether I would like to be as I was, neither having their knowledge nor their ignorance, or like them in both; and I made answer to myself and the oracle that I was better off as I was.

This investigation has led to my having many enemies of the worst and most dangerous kind, and has given occasion also to many calumnies, and I am called wise, for my hearers always imagine that I myself possess the wisdom which I find wanting in others; but the truth is, O men of Athens, that God only is wise; and in this oracle he means to say that the wisdom of men is little or nothing; he is not speaking of Socrates, he is only using my name as an illustration, as if he said, He, O men, is the wisest, who, like Socrates, knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing. And so I go my way, obedient to the god, and make inquisition into the wisdom of anyone, whether citizen or stranger, who appears to be wise; and if he is not wise, then in vindication of the oracle I show him that he is not wise; and this occupation quite absorbs me, and I have no time to give either to any public matter of interest or to any concern of my own, but I am in utter poverty by reason of my devotion to the god.

| *Apology*, Benjamin Jowett translation

This profound self-knowledge that ultimately we know nothing, that all our knowing, all our wisdom, is at best an approximation, ever subject to error and revision, is the cornerstone of humility and so, of practice. In the philosophical literature, it is termed “Socratic ignorance.” Here, in this curriculum, we use the word *innocence*—the original meaning of which is “to do no harm,” because we recognize that the hubris of false opinion and the mistaken notion that our knowledge is ever more than educated guesswork, is one of the most harmful forces at work in our lives and in the life of the world we call “history.” Convinced that we are right, we cut ourselves off from

deeper truths of living that reveal themselves only to the humble. We become complacent and unteachable. Unthinkable actions are justified in the minds of those who have abandoned thinking. And in turning our backs on the truth we turn our backs on the gods, opening the door to suffering and tragedy.

In Plato's *Laws*, we find the Socratic revelation extended to describe an inherent failing of humankind. False opinion is the root of our errors and our unhappiness, individually and collectively:

Of all evils the greatest is one which in the souls of most men is innate, and which a man is always excusing in himself and never correcting.... Through a similar error men are induced to fancy that their own ignorance is wisdom, and thus we who may be truly said to know nothing, think that we know all things....

| *Laws*, Benjamin Jowett translation

When we become attached to our conclusions, when we hold them too tightly, as it were, we slip into complacency and dogmatic thinking. In its most severe forms, this becomes fundamentalism, the Inquisition, the Crusades, and we have seen the catastrophic results far too often on the world stage. At the more local level, forgetting to remain innocent leads to self-aggrandizement, wishful thinking, narcissism, unreasonableness, and in every case the collapse of that intellectual and spiritual humility through which alone we may walk the path of self-knowledge that leads to the state of philosophical maturity that the Greeks called *eudaimonia*, translated usually as “happiness” but perhaps best as “human flourishing.”

FORGETFULNESS AND RECOLLECTION

In the *Meno*, one of Plato's dialogues examining the nature of knowledge, Socrates demonstrates that we come to know things through a process of *recollection*. He does this by asking an uneducated slave boy a series of questions that reveal the boy's inherent grasp of certain principles of geometry, applying which the boy, guided by Socrates, is able to prove a theorem despite the fact that he has never been taught geometry. Thus, Socrates argues, learning is a kind of retrieving of what we already know, but “possess in forgetfulness.” Through the agency of dialogue, this forgotten

knowledge can be recalled and articulated. The important point here is that there are truths that are innate rather than acquired through worldly experience. These truths are known not empirically but intuitively.

Now, we are not alleging that all knowledge is innate in this way. We may not possess the knowledge, for example, of who is calling when the phone rings. As the identity of the caller is an empirical matter, it must be settled empirically—but this is beside the point. The truths that always concern Socrates, the same ones with which philosophical self-work is concerned, are not empirical but spiritual. They are the truths of skillful living, the truths that establish our relation to the gods and to what is good and beautiful, the truths that open the way to genuine and abiding happiness, and so on. They are the truths of what it means to be most excellently human. And these truths, the empirical world cannot give us. They are whispered to us in the inner sanctum where the daimon resides, and it is there that we must go to receive them.

We see recollection at work in counseling sessions all the time. The client is in possession of some truth that she has denied, usually because she fears the consequences that she expects would follow from acknowledging that truth. Sooner or later, if the work proceeds, she comes around to admitting what she knew all along, and this simple act of deferring to the truth frees her from the burden of her self-imposed forgetfulness. She recollects her own better knowing. The counselor, to that end, serves a Socratic function in a kind of midwifery that helps the client give birth to a new way of seeing and being.

KNOWLEDGE AND DISCERNMENT

Do the two principles of Socratic ignorance and recollection seem at odds? One tells us that ultimately we possess no knowledge; the other tells us that we possess it in forgetfulness. On one hand, we are asked to accept that all of human effort must forever fall short of truth, and that to deny this is to fall prey to conceit and invite those calamities that follow hubris like a shadow; on the other hand, we are told that truth is as near to us as an act of remembering. How are we to reconcile these two?

The resolution of this seeming contradiction shows itself when we consider the difference between wisdom or knowledge in any absolute sense and *discernment*. Absolute knowledge, truth, or wisdom are beyond human reach. They are beautiful ideals, but shine far off in the heavens, like stars. Discernment, however, has nothing to do with absolutes, but with what is, as it is, in truth, in the moment before us, here and now. If we could not make such determinations, there would be little point in extolling the virtues of truthfulness, for we would be unable to distinguish what is true from what is not. If we are to be precise here, we might allow that indeed we have no power of discernment left to our own devices, so subject are we to hubris, narrowness of vision, error, complacency, wishful thinking, and the rest of that dark and destructive cast of characters—but we would be quick to add that something in us can and does discern, something divine that can guide us unflinchingly in exchange for nothing more than our willingness to hear and heed its call. That something is, of course, the daimon.

You will remember that the daimon, while in us, is not us. In this sense, its discernments are not ours, and we cannot rightly take credit for them. So, we see that we may possess knowledge that was never given to us by the world, knowledge that is not ours, and that while our greatest wisdom lies in remembering our ignorance so that we remain innocent, we nevertheless have access, however unpracticed, to the divine wisdom, for there is in each of us a spark of the divine that continually offers us cues, now urging us on, now warning us to hold back, and always doing all it can to let us know when we are in the presence of truth, and when we are not. This distinction, this ability to see through what is untruthful, to recognize what is true and what is not true, this is discernment, and this we possess through being possessed by the divine presence within. Most importantly here, we are made receptive to the daimon through remembering that we know nothing through our own agency, but only those things that are revealed to us through the discerning spirit that inhabits us. Socratic ignorance and recollection, it turns out in practice, are part of each other. The more truthful we are in remembering how little we know, the more humble we are in that regard, the more receptive we are to the wisdom, knowledge, and discernments of the daimon. Thus is the gap bridged and the seeming paradox resolved: What we possess of the truth, we possess

by proxy. Wisdom is the province of the gods, but we may eavesdrop, as it were, because the gods did not throw us here to rely on impossibly limited resources. Through the inner voice, they accompany us at every turn, so that through their discernment, we may become discerning. Innocence is the gateway to recollection.

THE TYRANNY OF CONCLUSIONS

Nowhere is the tyranny of hubris more evident than in the damaging effects of conclusions we hold too tightly. Sometimes these conclusions are glaringly detrimental, as in self-deprecating beliefs, expectations of the worst, worry, victim thinking, assumptions that raise our blood pressure and furrow our brow—and in all of this, you would think that we would have the good sense to take refuge in uncertainty by reminding ourselves of how little we know, but sadly, such is not the case.

The failure to stay innocent has destroyed families, ignited wars, and fostered the current climate of terrorist and antiterrorist obsession. Truly there is not a tragedy reported in the daily headlines that cannot be traced back to some hubristic assumption that went unquestioned. No man is more dangerous than the one who is convinced that he is absolutely right and someone else absolutely wrong. Such certainty, set loose in the winding corridors of chaos, invariably leads to unexpected, unwanted, and eventually tragic consequences.

The gods are not bound by human demands, schedules, deadlines, or plans. They can bring us good fortune in unexpected hours, through unanticipated channels, in surprising forms. Through the inscrutable dispensations of chaos, what seems to us a setback may prove to be the very thing that saves us, for we rarely know in the moment that something happens what its significance will be in the unfolding story of our life. Hubris, of course, wants no part of this. If we're running late on our way to a meeting, we may curse the traffic lights turning red just as we approach, or the bus that pulls in ahead of us, or a hundred other factors that seem to be conspiring against us. Immersed in the assumption that arriving late is a bad thing,

feeling frustrated and thwarted, we may not stop to consider what the delays prevented. For all we know, running late may have spared us a great deal worse. Practice does not ask us to assume that this was the case, only to admit the truth that we don't know, because our life in every detail takes place in a medium of chaotic unfolding—and furthermore, that as we don't know, we serve no good purpose by pretending that we do. What makes a thing good? What makes it bad? Socrates, preparing to raise the cup of poison to his lips, reminds his heartbroken students that death itself may be the greatest good that can come to us.

What happens to our life when we throw off the yoke of hubris, freeing ourselves from the tyranny of stolen conclusions? At first, the prospect of befriending uncertainty may seem daunting, but the confession that we don't know all the things we were pretending to know frees us from the burden of false opinion and returns us to our native innocence. We become curious again, open to new things, more interested in others, all in willing partnership with the gods. We know that we do not know what tomorrow will bring, or even what the next moment will bring, but we do not need to know. Instead of feeling driven by our will to make things happen, we can get out of the way and let them happen. Rather than trying to lead our life, we can follow it. We will still have our conclusions, no doubt. But they will no longer have us. Tempered by innocence, they lose their tyrannizing power.

Innocence allows us to get our will out of the way and adopt a stance of cooperation with the forces of fate. Our innate tendency toward hubris, however, too easily draws us into a state of forgetfulness, such that innocence must be recollected. How can we do this? How can we remain properly humble, especially under fire, when some situation has thrown down the gauntlet?

It helps greatly to think of conclusions not as “things” but as actions. They move. They change. The whole history of science bears witness to the approximate nature of knowledge and the inevitability of revision. Once, all of the available facts confirmed that the sun revolved around the Earth. After Copernicus, we “knew” that the sun, not the Earth, was at the center of our

celestial system—hence, a “solar system”—with the Earth revolving around it. Then Einstein came along and showed us that the Earth and the sun actually revolve around each other, since motion is relative to some frame of reference. Relative to the Earth, the sun does do the “going around.” There is no way to say ultimately what is going around what, just as there is no way to know that any particular discovery will be the final one and not undone the following year by some surprising development. This is how scientific knowledge advances—through periodic revision and paradigm shifts. The same principle is at work in our personal lives. Often a conclusion can be reversed by a change in circumstances that we never saw coming. Such reversals essentially “rewrite the past,” such that a “good” thing becomes a “bad one,” or a “bad thing” a “good one,” and in this quick-change artistry of the world we see that no conclusion is assured, because no conclusion is beyond the reach of the revising hand of chaos. The result of facing this is a certain detachment from the world without loss of engagement. This wisdom, the Stoics regarded as the highest human attainment. Through it, one becomes poised. Resting in the release of innocence, we find that the changing winds of circumstance no longer have the power to throw us off balance.

This saving power of innocence is nicely illustrated in the well-known story of the Chinese farmer and his teenage son, who lived on a small plot of land, owned a modest house and one horse, and eked out a living through hard work from sunup to sundown. One day, the horse, their only real possession, jumped the fence and ran off into the hills. The boy was inconsolable and spent the day complaining and cursing their bad luck. His father, however, said: “We shall see.” The next day, the fugitive horse returned from the hills followed by a herd of wild horses, which now by law belonged to the farmer and his son. While the boy was overjoyed; his father said only, “We shall see.” On the third day, the farmer’s son climbed on one of the wild horses and was thrown off, leaving him with a badly broken leg. Again, he lamented the unfairness of life, to which his father replied, “We shall see.” On the fourth day, the province went to war, and all the young men in the town were conscripted for military duty—except the boy with the broken leg.

EXERCISE: RECOLLECTING INNOCENCE

Please read the entire exercise before putting it into practice.

If you're feeling troubled by some worrisome conclusion, stop, take a breath and a step back, and ask yourself: "Do I *really* know this?" Knowledge, by definition, cannot be wrong, but innocence reminds us that we can never know if what we have concluded constitutes knowledge. As William James states, we can know, but we can't know that we know. Any conclusion—including those based on the so-called facts, can change direction in the blink of an eye. Indeed, the facts themselves can change—and even if they do not, the conclusion we have about them can, so that we see that they did not mean what we had taken them to mean. As both the facts and the meaning and significance we ascribe to them are mutable, no fact or conclusion has the power to take us hostage without our permission. The most we can say in truth is that things appear to be a certain way right now, and that we don't really know what this means across the greater arc of a day or a week or a year, or what fate will do with this in the next moment, but that we are willing to meet what comes in a state of poise and openness and curiosity, and in such a stance we are already free of the stranglehold of hubris.

It is a matter of how we punctuate our experience. Where we had placed an exclamation mark in the throes of reaction, innocence places a sobering question mark. Where we had put a period for all time, innocence puts an ellipsis. Taking a moment to ask ourselves, especially when we're facing a vexing situation, "Do I really know this?" delivers us from tyrannizing conclusions to an awareness of our life as a process, as something moving and changing and unfolding each moment, and as we become more willing to move with our life rather than against it, in that very moment, we win the favor of the gods.

WEEK 5
DILIGENCE



DILIGENCE: TRUTHFULNESS IN ACTION

It is not possible to fight beyond your strength, even if you strive. • Homer

THE TWO ASPECTS OF DILIGENCE

In the next point of practice, diligence, the principles of truthfulness, showing up, and innocence converge on the stage of action in the world. Practiced skillfully, diligence helps keep the soul well-ordered, adding immeasurably to our happiness and resilience in the face of the inevitable vicissitudes of life. Without diligence, on the other hand, the soul falls into disarray, inviting all manner of suffering.

Now, diligence has two aspects:

- ♦ doing what is ours to do
- ♦ not doing what is not ours to do

Thus, we can see that diligence depends on discerning the line between what is and what is not ours to do. Beyond discerning this line, diligence requires that we be willing both to do our part and to refrain from trying to do more.

DOING WHAT IS OURS TO DO

What is ours to do is ours, and we commit one of the great errors of hubris when we deny or otherwise attempt to evade our rightful responsibilities. We may have concocted good reasons, excuses, and justifications, but the gods are not impressed by such evasions. They hold us accountable for diligence denied or deferred, such that, as a rule, the longer we put off doing what is ours to do, the worse are the resulting consequences. Time is a factor in this aspect of diligence, in that skillful practice calls us not only to do our part but to do it without delay, and furthermore, to do it willingly, even cheerfully, with neither resistance nor complaint. The Greeks considered such willingness, which they called *eusebeia* /yoo-seb'-yuh/, part and parcel of the well-ordered soul and the good life.

There are many things that it is given to each of us to do. Here are some examples:

- ♦ admitting when we are wrong
- ♦ admitting when we don't know something
- ♦ heeding the inner voice of the daimon
- ♦ meeting our financial obligations
- ♦ honoring or revising our commitments as the truth requires
- ♦ releasing all concern over outcomes, timing, and ways and means
- ♦ staying teachable

We can see in this list of examples how the points of practice intersect to determine the depth of our diligence. Admitting when we are wrong, for example, is a matter of showing up, which always implies showing up in the truth. Admitting when we don't know something demonstrates that we are on friendly terms both with the truth and with our innocence. Heeding the inner voice of the daimon presupposes a stance of humility toward the gods as expressed by the particulars of our being-here. Meeting our financial obligations and honoring or revising our commitments all follow naturally from showing up truthfully. Releasing all concern over outcomes, timing, and the ways and means by which events and conditions play out reflects the clarity of not trying to control that which lies beyond our control. Finally, staying teachable implies innocence and, in practical terms, the willingness to enter into dialogue both with like-minded others and with the gods through the dialogue of lived experience.

Carried out in earnest, the five points of practice become a framework for self-care, for nothing surpasses the power of humility to set us on the path of the good life, nor anything the power of hubris to squander us and keep happiness forever out of reach. To do what is rightly ours to do, and moreover to do it cheerfully, knowing that it is the will of the gods, is a sure sign of the well-ordered soul—but it alone does not fulfill the requirements of diligence. There also is the essential matter of refraining from overextending ourselves in the attempt to do what is not ours to do, either because it rightly belongs to another, or because it must be left to the gods to work out in their own time and manner.

NOT DOING WHAT IS NOT OURS TO DO

Little brings the gears of life to a screeching halt like exaggerating our authority and the reach of our will. Such hubris nearly always fails to recognize and respect the sovereignty or timing of others, and willfully trespasses into territory that is in truth under the governance of the gods. As the adage warns us, “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

For this reason, much of the art of diligence lies in refraining from the sort of hubristic presumptions and actions that lead us to meddle, intrude, and interfere with unfolding events, not only where others are concerned but also where the chaotic factors operating in a situation are not subject to our influence.

There is always a line between appropriate and inappropriate action, between what is ours to do and what is not, between willingness and willfulness. This line marks the limit of our will. It is a limit that the well-ordered soul is ever mindful to recognize and respect, since crossing that line is an act of hubris that gives rise to error and suffering. Here are some examples of the failure to recognize and respect this limit:

- ✦ giving unsolicited or unwanted advice
- ✦ knowingly misrepresenting the truth
- ✦ manipulating, using, or deceiving others for selfish gains
- ✦ using force to impose our will
- ✦ enabling others (doing for them what is rightly theirs to do)
- ✦ refusing to let go of things that we cannot control
- ✦ dictating another’s curriculum, including the timing

Note that we are bound by the truth even in those cases where we don’t like the truth, or wish it were otherwise, or have the best of reasons for denying or moving against the truth. Good reasons do not exempt us from the adverse consequences of hubris. Let’s consider an example adapted from a philosophical counseling session: The client, a middle-aged woman, came to the session concerned about her adult son, a married man and the father of two children. The son had been out of work for a year, during which his marriage had become so strained, the stress was taking an emotional toll on the two children, who had begun having nightmares and

otherwise exhibiting troubled behavior. In order to “help out,” the woman had been subsidizing her son’s family financially, buying them groceries during the year, paying bills here and there, and so on—none of which seemed to have helped the situation, and the woman even had begun to suspect that such “help” had made things worse. Worse, it seemed to have fostered resentment in her son and his wife, who recently had suggested that perhaps she should have less access to her grandchildren. Now, the first thing that the counselor pointed out was the violation of diligence implicit in the woman’s practice of “helping” her son by doing for him what rightly belonged to him to do for himself and his family. By preempting his responsibility, she had insinuated herself between him and the gods and denied him a needed life lesson, diminishing his self-respect and earning his antagonism. It was a well-meaning act of theft. In truth, his problem was his, and it was his to work out a solution. This case showed, as many do, how much damage can be inflicted in the name of love and “helping.” The remedy at the end of that year of hubris was the same as it had been at the start of the year, neither more nor less available to the client—to bring her actions back into agreement with the truth, disengage her will, and let her son find his own way, all of which she did. Soon after, the son got back on his feet, accepted responsibility for the choices he had made that had caused the problem in the first place, and got his life on track and moving forward again. As a happy footnote to the story, the changes wrought by the client’s wise disengagement allowed her son to see his mother in a more generous light, and the tide of conflict and resentment turned.

Letting go of what isn’t ours can be emotionally agonizing. To stand by and do nothing while someone about whom we care deeply starts down the wrong path or what seems to us the wrong path—to stand by and remember that we are helpless because the doing that is needed is not ours to do, so that we don’t make a bad situation worse by pushing against it, this is enough of a test for any soul. Sooner or later, the lesson must be learned. If we push, what we are pushing against is all but certain to push back, and our will, as an agent of action, rarely achieves what it sets out to achieve. Within the matrix of chaotic unfolding, the consequences of the use of force cannot be predicted. In time, we learn that imposing our will where it does not belong overextends us and throws the well-ordered soul off balance. It is a method for failure and worse.

THE PRINCIPLE OF REVERSE EFFECT

Hubris turns our efforts against our aims. The harder we push against any situation, the harder it pushes back. So consistently does this principle operate in human affairs, that we often can improve a situation greatly by “going the other way”—that is, by responding in a way that runs contrary to our first instinct to “rush in where angels fear to tread.” The ancient Greeks understood this principle of “reverse effect” well. In fact, it is the basis of Greek tragedy, *Oedipus Rex* being perhaps the best known example. What makes Greek tragedies tragic is the dark irony of reverse effect, for it is the relentless will of the protagonist that sets into motion a series of chaotic events that lead ineluctably to his downfall. Reverse effects prove again and again that our worst enemy is ourselves—yet the hubris in our nature is loathe to learn the lesson.

There is an old saying: “Be less interested, you’ll be more interesting.” This idea recognizes the workings of reverse effect, for what we pursue tends to flee from us. Far greater efficiencies are waiting for us in the simple act of delegating to the gods, but it hardly occurs to us that a situation could resolve, perhaps resolve well or even beautifully, without the involvement of our will. All of this, as always within practice, comes down to truthfulness, for the truth is that we do not make things happen through our will. What happens happens only through the dispensations of chaos. If chaos brings a man success, the hubris in his nature steps forward and takes credit for the good fortune, and he declares, “I did it myself.” If, on the other hand, his life deals him a setback, he blames the gods, for he would never bring such a fate upon himself, or so he thinks. He was the hero in his own eyes when things were going well; now he is a victim of some divine mistake or capriciousness or indifference or even injustice.

Humility saves us from such error and its dark consequences, because it recognizes that there is a terminus to human will, a line past which we are in the realm of chaos, and chaos must be given right of way. Once we have done what is ours to do, we have done our part. If we try to do what is not ours to do, we invoke the principle of reverse effect. There is a time to stop doing. There is a time to let go and trust life to find a way. In the practice of diligence, everything depends on recognizing where this line is drawn.

DISCERNING THE DIFFERENCE

It does not take us long, in the study of diligence, to arrive at the question: “How can we tell the difference between what is ours and what is not ours to do?” The best answer to this question questions the question, for it is a strange development that we ever became unclear about this. We have become unclear because hubris robs us of our native clarity, until we are left seeking answers to what we already know—but possess in forgetfulness. And so what we offer here, we offer in the way of a reminder, so that our discernment can return to us, leaving us wondering how we ever could have become unclear.

We are able to discern where the line is between the doing and not-doing of diligence by taking a moment to check in with the daimon. Why is this? Because the daimon speaks only the truth, and there is always something false in trying to do what is not ours to do. It is something one can feel. The inappropriate gesture, the “helping” that enables, the attempt to control outcomes that we know are not under our control—all of this has a certain effect on the body and the emotions. There is something off-putting about it, an incongruity, a cautionary prompting. If we pay attention to the inner response before we act, we will find that we have far more clarity than we may think we have as long as the question is still theoretical. We do not *have* to react immediately. We can take the moment required to consult our intuition to see if it has any objections. Socrates, in describing his daimon, said that it never told him what to do but always warned him when he was about to act in error. We may adopt the same standard, and refrain from acting in those cases where the daimon makes clear that it does not endorse the action. Feeling the inner protest we simply will refrain from acting. In the absence of any inner objection, we may proceed with the confidence that our action in itself will do no harm, since it will not have been undertaken willfully. The good that it may do, of course, remains in the hands of the gods. Many clients who come to a counseling session complaining of a lack of clarity about some action they’re considering are surprised by how clear they are once they take a moment to set aside all resistance and effort, turn within, and consult their deeper knowing.

EXERCISE: THE RED BALLOON

Please read the entire exercise before putting it into practice.

Sitting quietly, take a few slow, deep breaths, and close your eyes. Think of some problem you've been facing. Now, imagine that you're looking down at this problem from high above, so that you have a clear overview of it. Ask yourself if there's anything that you've left undone that might improve the situation. If there is nothing more that you can do, proceed to the next paragraph of this exercise. If there is something you've left undone that is rightly yours to do, open your eyes and write it down. Close your eyes again. Repeat this until you can't think of anything more that you could do. Open your eyes and look over your list. Reviewing each item on the list, check in with the daimon to see if there is any objection to your carrying out the listed action. If there's no objection, take the time needed to perform the actions you wrote down, doing neither more nor less than needs to be done, whether doing so takes an hour, a day, a month, or longer.

Once you've done all that you can do, it's time to let go and delegate the situation, the outcome, the resolution, the timing, and the ways and means to something greater than your will. The gods do not need your will to put things right. With your eyes closed, imagine you're standing before the problem face to face at ground level. In your hands is a deflated red balloon. Breathe the problem in so that you can feel the burden it has been for you. Now, breathe the problem out, into the red balloon, which fills with it until it's fully inflated. Note how good it feels to be free of the burden, how much more easily you can breathe now. Without hurry or delay, release the balloon. Feel it lift away from your fingers, and watch it ascend. You do not know what will follow, even in the next moment; no one does. But you have done your part, and have allowed the burden to be lifted from you. Because you are free, the situation is free to resolve in its own time and manner, under the unfailing hand of the truth and the ingenuity of chaos. As far as you're concerned, the matter is resolved. With your eyes still closed, survey the inner landscape. See what your life looks like without the problem. Feel the peace of this. When you become aware that you're smiling, open your eyes.

WEEK 6
DIALOGUE



DIALOGUE: THE EXAMINED LIFE

I do nothing but go about persuading you all, old and young alike, not to take thought for your persons or your properties, but and chiefly to care about the greatest improvement of the soul. • Socrates

THE DIALECTIC AND DISILLUSIONMENT

So self-serving are the ends of hubris, so myopic and unwilling to be questioned, that self-work must be done outside oneself, as it were. We must be willing to question assumptions and conclusions in which we have been deeply invested, call them out into the light of dialectical scrutiny, and see if they hold up, or prove to be like dead leaves caught in a whirlwind, with no life of their own. This brings us to the last point of practice, dialogue, which has two forms:

- ✦ the exchange of ideas in conversation with another, the sole aim of which is to illuminate a deeper truth and greater self-knowledge
- ✦ the wordless, living conversation in which each of us is continually engaged with the events of our life, both inner and outer.

In both forms of dialogical engagement, we are open to being shown a deeper truth, one that lies outside our current assumptions, opinions, and conclusions. It may involve acknowledging that we have been in error, that we have strayed from one or more of the points of practice, that we have failed to consider something important or been willful—in short, to be disabused of our illusions—in this sense, to be disillusioned. Sometimes this can be accomplished simply through the willingness to hear what the daimon is saying, but more often, dialogue is needed, and for this, we can turn to friends and others whom we trust to be truthful both with themselves and with us or to our experience in the world with the idea in mind that we are being instructed. In this section of the study, we're going to look at dialogue in both of its aspects of philosophical conversation intended to help us recollect deeper truths and philosophical reflection on our experience for the purpose of receiving and accepting life instruction.

SOCRATIC ELENCHUS: THE METHOD

Dialogue in practice is based on the Socratic method of question-and-answer, known in philosophy as the *dialectic* or *elenchus*, through which a certain premise is examined by exposing its assumptions or drawing out its implications. Subjecting any truth-claim to this sort of scrutiny reveals hidden philosophical conflicts of inconsistency and contradiction, whereupon the claim is no longer convincing. Through the process, we come to see that what we thought was true was only what we *thought* was true, and we are to that extent “dis-illusioned” and our innocence restored. We are in philosophical conflict whenever we adopt a belief that is set against the truth or against other beliefs we hold that the truth supports or when we are in violation of any of the five points of practice.

Dialogue is essential not only because we need something beyond ourselves to call us out of our current belief commitments but also because what we believe is not entirely a matter of choice. That is, something is convincing as long as it is convincing, and we cannot break its gravitational hold on our credence through an act of will. If you believe, for example, that you have a diamond in your pocket, then you cannot simply choose to believe otherwise. All beliefs are convincing to the believer as long as they are believed. Dialogue provides the great service of deconstructing beliefs that, while convincing, are nonetheless false and so, contribute to soul disorder.

Let’s look at an example of how the elenchus works. Imagine a woman married to an abusive man. Lately, the situation has been growing worse, and she has sought out professional help from a philosophical counselor who is versed in the Socratic method. The dialogue might go like this:

Counselor: What seems to be the problem?

Woman: My husband is emotionally abusive. Things have been getting worse, and I don’t know what to do.

Counselor: Do you love him?

Woman (after a long pause): Not anymore.

Counselor: Why do you stay with him?

Woman: I made a commitment—“for better or worse” and all that.

Counselor: You believe that we should honor our commitments?

Woman: Of course. Shouldn’t we?

Counselor: No doubt we should, most of the time.

Woman: What do you mean?

Counselor: Well, honoring our commitments seems like a good idea as a general rule, but what if circumstances change such that keeping our word would cause someone harm?

Woman: Can you give me an example?

Counselor: Suppose someone lends you a gun and asks you to hold onto it, and you agree. A day later, he returns to claim his property, but he is in a dangerously agitated state. Do you give him the gun?*

(Socrates offers this example in Book I of the *Republic* to demonstrate that justice is too complex to be reduced to a single principle or rule).

Woman: I would not.

Counselor: Would you agree that, as a rule, we have a responsibility to return property on loan to us when the owner asks us to return it?

Woman: I see.

Counselor: The general rule notwithstanding, we can imagine a situation where following the rule would be wrong, while making an exception to the rule would be the better and wiser course of action.

Woman: Yes.

Counselor: We wouldn't want to keep our word if it meant putting someone in harm's way.

Woman: Certainly not.

Counselor: We might say that if it comes down to it, the safety and well-being of another are more important than keeping our word or honoring a commitment we made under different circumstances.

Woman: Yes.

Counselor: And what about if you're the one who is in harm's way? Does a different standard apply?

Woman: I don't see how it could.

Faced with an exception to the rule, the woman had to acknowledge that there are more important things than keeping one's word or honoring commitments made under different circumstances. She also recognized that there was no basis in truth for exempting herself from this better, more enlightened standard. Through the probative questions of the counselor the black-or-white thinking of her old belief was deconstructed, exposing its hidden contradiction, freeing her from its gravitational hold and restoring order to her soul (consciousness).

It is important to choose the right partner for dialogue. Those who cannot stop talking about themselves and so cannot listen, whom you do not trust, who do not take instruction or correction willingly, who speak ill of others, who never admit that they are wrong, who have to have the last word—these should be disqualified. A philosophical partner does not need to have had formal training in philosophy. The only requirements are uncompromising truthfulness and the willingness to listen and consider what is said. Finally, the person you engage in dialogue should be someone whom you are confident has your best interests at heart.

THE EPOCHÉ

The *epoché* (“suspending”) is a theoretical method devised by the ancient Greeks for examining beliefs, assumptions, and conclusions “purely,” by setting aside all judgments concerning the nature or even the existence of the outer world. Centuries later, Edmund Husserl adopted this method as “phenomenological reduction,” which “brackets” the question of how the phenomena of the world exist or even if they exist “in themselves” in order to distill the contents of the observing consciousness that correspond to the phenomena. There is a shift here from a philosophical curiosity about the nature of external reality to a curiosity about the nature of the one whose reality it is. Husserl’s phenomenology marks a dramatic reversal in thinking that turns modern philosophy back toward its roots in the Greek directive, “know thyself.”

In the practice of dialogue, we use the *epoché* by suspending belief in a given conclusion long enough to examine its contents with an open mind and heart, regardless of how much we may be invested in it. This takes humility and courage, for we must be willing to defer to the truth as it reveals itself, face whatever contradictions were hiding in current belief, and venture into unknown territory, beyond what we know or think we know, beyond what we have taken to be true thus far, beyond established habits and holdings and compromises—all in order to be reachable and teachable. In short, we must care more about the truth than we do about our opinions—wherein lies the humility—placing greater value on our “human flourishing” and the state of our soul than on the seeming safety and comfort of an unexamined conclusion—wherein lies the courage.

The epoché can be thought of as an open space, a clearing where the truth has room to show itself. We invoke the epoché when we sit down with our philosophical partner to examine a particular belief or conclusion, especially in some area of our life where we have been struggling. The working assumption in dialogue is that our struggles and suffering follow from the disordered state of our soul, and not as a result of this or that outer condition, regardless of how convincing it may be that the problem and its resolution lie outside us. So, we bracket the world, set it aside for now, to see if our beliefs “work,” if they play well with other things we believe, make sense and hold up under dialectical examination, or if they fall apart, collapse in contradiction, lead to absurd or unacceptable or unworkable conclusions, and so on. The examination, the one that informs the dialogue regardless of the situation, is thus self-examination, and the liberating awareness, self-awareness. When the dialogue comes to its natural conclusion, the epoché has served its purpose, and we return to the world. And even if the situation with which we had been struggling has not in itself changed, neither will it be the same, for now it will be reflected in the light of greater clarity, understanding, and self-knowledge, and to that extent, will no longer have the power to create disorder in the soul.

The epoché sets the stage. You sit down with your philosophical friend in willingness. Now you begin talking about your situation or whatever concerns you, speaking from the heart, without self-censorship. As you continue to talk, your friend will hear something in what you say—perhaps in an aside or in the way you say what you said or in what you avoid saying—and he will shine the light there. He will point it out, bring it forward, out of the shadows, and ask for its credentials. Through this process, underlying assumptions and implications are brought out into the open where you can see if they hold up under questioning, if they are in league with the true and good and beautiful, or contain unconvincing or unsatisfying or conflicted elements. Some beliefs, followed far enough, end in contradiction and lose their authority. One sees through them, and they are no longer convincing, usually because a “truer truth” has presented itself. As this process proceeds, you can feel order returning to your soul. And though the factual circumstances may not have changed while you were engaged in dialogue, you sense that things already have improved. So does the self-work of dialogue restore us.

HOW THE TRUTH REVEALS US

Socrates understood that our knowing is not absolute, that the most we can do is examine our beliefs and conclusions in light of the best assumptions we can make, which is to say those that most closely approximate the true, the good, and the beautiful. In dialogue, then, the aim is not the disclosing of truth in any objective sense, not scientific or empirical truth, but the human truth of excellence, the virtue that the Greeks considered to be the key to happiness. As our assumptions establish a starting point and framework for our beliefs, their truth is in itself never demonstrated; rather, it is taken on faith. Of course, these assumptions themselves are subject to dialectical examination, deconstruction, and revision—but at the end of the day, whatever beliefs are left standing will be rooted in faith, not knowledge, and to that extent, what we take to be the truth of any matter says more about who we are than it does about the world or the nature of reality. As Anaïs Nin writes, “We don’t see things as they are, we see them as we are.”

Every statement of belief is thus a revelation of identity, every assertion of truth, an autobiographical confession. This applies in all issues of philosophical truth, which as we have said, cannot be resolved empirically. If I say to you, “There is a yellow house on the hill behind you,” that is not a philosophical claim but an empirical one. You can determine the truth or falsity of the statement by turning around and looking. But if I say, “You should support our troops,” you cannot just turn around and look. You have to engage the statement, let it work on you, consider what it assumes and implies. You have to come to terms with what it asserts and with the claim it lays on you, if any, and this coming to terms reveals something about who you are. All of the conversations between Socrates and his respondents in Plato’s *Dialogues* involve the dialectical examination of this sort of claim. And in every dialogue, the respondent’s answers to Socrates reveal whether he is walking the path of humility or hubris. Usually, by the end of the dialogue, he has been humbled against his will, for he has been dis-illusioned and made wiser in the realization that he was not as wise as he had supposed.

We have seen that how we hold our beliefs is perhaps as important as what we believe. Are we willing to learn, open, teachable, curious about some

“truer truth” that lies just over the next rise? Or are we complacent, closed, interested only in what we already know or think we know, unwilling to learn and discover and evolve? While the gods remain ever unpredictable, even cursory observation over time makes one thing plain: Those who hold their beliefs lightly, who remain humble and available to ever better, truer, and more beautiful realizations flourish in the joy of a life lived fully and well no matter the conditions around them, while those who resist new understandings, who hole up in dogmatic certainty, who never venture outside the territory of unexamined belief suffer the constrictions and misfortunes of hubris no matter the conditions around them. Nowhere is this feature of our soul more evident than in how we engage one another and the world in dialogue.

IN DIALOGUE WITH THE WORLD

We engage the world in dialogue when we approach our experience as students, for living itself is a kind of dialogue in which the gods offer us instruction through life’s ineluctable lessons. We are, in this sense, in continuous conversation with chaos, even when we sleep, and dreams come to us with urgent messages written in a hand that is not ours.

As with the spoken word shared in dialogue with another, the living word of events leads us in the direction of the next truth, the truth we most need to acknowledge, the truth that has the power to set us free of self-imposed burdens. The woman who marries one alcoholic man after another may look back with resentment at this history of disappointment and failure, until it occurs to her that she is the common denominator. “Maybe life is trying to tell you something,” we can imagine her friend saying. Maybe it is. For those committed to self-work, there’s no maybe about it. It’s only a matter of whether or not we’re paying attention. The instruction, the truth of the choices we’ve been making, wittingly and unwittingly, is being laid out before us—but are we available to recognize and receive it?

If a man runs repeatedly into a wall, it might be said that the wall is trying to tell him something. Hubris blames the wall. Humility questions itself. To the extent that we’re willing to be students of our experience, it will

lead us to the right self-questions, just as we're led to the right self-questions in philosophical dialogue with another. Our life will offer us as much of the truth as we're willing to acknowledge.

EXERCISE: ON BEING TRANSPARENT

Please read the entire exercise before putting it into practice.

Dialogue With a Friend

Contact a friend, someone who has consistently demonstrated truthfulness and the ability to listen well, and tell him or her that you want to get together to talk about something that's been on your mind. If you don't have such a friend, a clergyman, life coach, or philosophical counselor may serve. When you sit down together, be sure not to go too fast. Often, and especially if there's a lot of emotion involved in whatever concerns us, we may have a tendency to race ahead of the truth. Before you begin talking, take a few breaths, slow down, find the clearing within you that gives the truth room to come forward. Now, simply state the problem or concern. Keep it simple. Don't go into a lot of detail. The situation may be endlessly complex, but the assumptions, beliefs, and conclusions you harbor about it that are leaving your soul in a state of disorder are not complicated. More often than not, a lot of detail is a distraction, a way of avoiding the truth that has the power to set us free. The resolution of all contradiction lies within us. It is for us to change, not the situation. The moment we are different in the needed way, the situation self-corrects. If I put my hand in fire, I experience pain. It is not the fire's fault. Fire burns; that is its nature. The saving question is always a self-question. Why am I keeping my hand there? Truthfulness and diligence go together. The only person we can save is ourselves.

Once you have stated the problem, talk about what it means to you, what makes it difficult for you. The idea is to be transparent, not watching what you say, not self-censoring. Let your friend see through the words to the underlying beliefs and assumptions. He may point out an incongruity, a contradiction in your narrative, a place where you have been tripping yourself up or painted yourself into a corner. He may show you how you are keeping your hand in the fire. He may comment on the stance you've

assumed—how you’ve been in the role of victim, persecutor or prosecutor, rescuer, and so on. As the dialogue evolves, you become more transparent to yourself. You see that you were giving yourself to beliefs that have no credentials and are no longer convincing or workable, because they are not true, not good, not beautiful. This self-awareness frees you to make a better choice.

Dialogue With the World

The truth does not hurt us. When we suffer, it is because of the soul disorder we bring to a situation. It is because in some fashion, we have set ourselves against the truth. As we have seen, one way to become aware of how we have done this is to engage in dialogue with a philosophical friend, the value of which hardly can be overstated—but it is not the only way. To the true student, the teacher is everywhere. In a manner of speaking, the chaotic unfoldings of our life are philosophical friends—guides, teachers, allies, provided that we meet them in a spirit of humility and willingness. In this exercise, go out into your day with the same willingness to be transparent that you bring to dialogue with a friend. The sense one has in this stance of transparency is less one of acting upon events than of being acted upon by them. Pay attention. Listen for the lesson. Let your experiences in the world speak to you. You may be working overtime to make something happen that refuses to happen. There is desire in it, but no truth. Accept the instruction. Perhaps in the larger arc of things, what refuses to happen shouldn’t. A *Course in Miracles*, expressing this view, states: “If it’s not meant to be, it’s meant to be better.” In our practice, we’re not concerned with whether what comes will or will not be better, because it already *is* better the moment we enter a state of nonresistance toward our being-here.

We can live in the world as students so that our experience becomes our teacher, and we find ourselves in steady and reliable dialogue with the mystery of chaotic unfolding. It’s not a matter of “reading into” things. We don’t need to go hunting for meanings. The gods know how to make plain any truth that we have been ignoring or denying. All that’s required is receptivity. If we’re the least bit willing to be instructed, the instruction is available. Today, see your life as a philosophical friend. Let it teach you through your willingness to be a student—the noblest of callings.

IN CLOSING

Congratulations on completing this study. We think you'll find, as we have, that the principles and practices presented in these pages can be used to improve any situation in which you find yourself. It is simply a matter of identifying which point or points of practice are "out of alignment" and making the choice to let go of all effort, resistance, and willfulness in favor of a truth that has been "hiding in plain sight," awaiting your recognition and acceptance.

The ancient Greeks understood well that happiness is an "inside job," that no outer condition or set of circumstances has the power to satisfy us for long. Plato goes as far as saying that, if our soul is not well-ordered, then the things that we pursue in the world as though they were our greatest good turn out to be curses. It seems clear that we cannot be right with anything until we are right within ourselves. What does it mean to be right within oneself? First and last, it means to accept things as they are, to meet our experience truthfully. If we were truthful through and through, the other points of practice would take care of themselves, for in every moment of hubris, there is something false. Humility, innocence, willingness, happiness, human flourishing—all have their roots in truthful living.

We want to add here a reminder: We are all sitting in Plato's cave, watching dark shapes moving along the wall in the fire lit darkness, doing the best we can to make out what is real and what is not. Conclusions that seemed to us incontrovertible and self-evident turn out later to have been shadows. We are fallible beings. No practice is perfect, and we are all but certain to step off the path, to forget, to succumb to the arguments and urgencies of hubristic thinking. Error in this life is inevitable, and nothing over which we need worry since, accepted as instruction from the gods, even our errors are pressed into the service of our greater good.

If questions come up along the way, please feel free to contact us through the PhilosophyCenter web site at philosophycenter.net. We're keenly interested in your journey of self-work, and here to support you however we can.

