

# **The Vital Mystic**

***A Guide to Emotional Strength  
and Spiritual Enrichment***

**by  
T.Collins Logan**

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THE VITAL MYSTIC, A GUIDE TO EMOTIONAL STRENGTH AND SPIRITUAL ENRICHMENT, Second Edition, March 2009

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“Learning is finding out what you already know. Doing is demonstrating that you know it. Teaching is reminding others that they know just as well as you.”

Richard Bach, *Illusions*

*This book is as much from as for the following people:*

My parents, my sisters Karin, Kirsten and Michelle, my brother Sam, my friends and inspirations Ann Z., Mark F., Lisa D., Robin B., Kristen H., Jim C., Shauna B., Carol L., Ted M., Joyce C., Dale T., Wendy T., Tim C., Joan L., Tim K., Jock B., Jutta E., Rick F., Marjorie M., Steve G., Anne T., Geral M., Milo H., David Z., Riley R., Tony H., my biological and adopted grandparents, and the many other teachers of my past and present.

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# Introduction

## *My Beliefs*

Having beliefs similar to mine – or any spiritual beliefs at all, for that matter – is not a prerequisite for appreciating this book. Nor is it my objective to convert people to my particular flavor of spirituality. On the contrary, my hope is that the insights and practices here will benefit people of all religions, and of no religion at all, strengthening the beliefs they already hold. However, you will see my flavor of spirituality reflected in much of this writing, so I will briefly summarize my views.

I am a mystic, in that I believe in a spiritual perception that is a part of our experience, and accessible to all. Within this mystical awareness, I believe we have great capacity to recognize and process information that our rational and emotional faculties can't comprehend, and thereby come to know the Sacred intimately and immediately. As to what the Sacred actually is, I don't claim any special knowledge, or even that I am able to express in words what my heart feels and spirit knows. However, the notions of holiness and divinity, of spiritual forces constantly at work in the Universe, and the potency of individual will have become as natural as breathing to me.

I also believe in a timeless soul, and that all human experience has the inherent and foremost purpose of evolving that soul. That is why this book describes things as *spiritually healthy* or *spiritually unhealthy*: that is, profitable or unprofitable for the soul's evolution. Are we reincarnated again and again until our soul learns what it is intended to learn? I think we are. Beyond our refinement in this earthly experience, I won't speculate on our next destination, but I remain open – excited, even – to whatever comes. As to various religions and philosophical systems, I would not assert that any has unique primacy in this journey, but that every tradition shares the same core values with every other. Although these belief systems sometimes differ in methodology and language, their objectives are universal: to provide comprehensive enlightenment and a means of perceiving the nature of things; to cultivate a deep and persisting compassion for ourselves and others; and to enhance our ability to do good in the world.

The deeper I delve into mystical matters, the more all of the separate ideas and experiences become one endless, interconnected ocean of being through which individual consciousness swims as but an illusion of self. However, I still consider our unique identity to be a useful, perhaps even necessary contrivance, as we each follow our own path through progressive stages of being. Individuality adds value – both to our own journey and to the good of All – through the contrasting perspectives, creative contributions and diversity of culture and experience it provides. Although I consider all of us to be more alike than different, I still enjoy celebrating those differences.

### *A Beginning*

I have tried to condense years of reflection into a relatively brief format, hoping to hold your attention while I revisit many ideas that may be familiar to you, and introduce some innovative concepts and practices from which I have benefited. I hope you will enjoy all of it. Concepts and processes are presented in many different ways because I expect readers to come from many different backgrounds,

with varying exposure to each of these subjects. In my attempt to wrap words around the abstract, you will find everything from poetry and inspirational quotes to real-life examples. All of it converges on a central idea: that wisdom and profound spiritual insight are not the provenance of an elite or uniquely initiated few, but are accessible to all – within each and every one of us. In fact, this book contains little of the definitive truth many might seek, and only maps a suggested course to realizations each of us must arrive at on our own.

In terms of the practices described here, I continually renew my commitment to them. Observing my life, one person might see me as struggling through a fog of my own inadequacies, while another might say I am full of Love and Light. I would not deny or justify either, but ascribe both conditions to being human. I cannot claim to be an authority on anything, but I have found the truth of what is in this book by living it. In preparing for Christian ministry, I spent four years opening my heart and home to the poor, the physically disabled, the socially outcast, the homeless and those struggling with substance abuse. In a decade of managing people, in environments ranging from public education and non-profits to a Fortune 100 company, I have counseled, encouraged and mediated for countless individuals, both in their professional and personal lives. In my ongoing volunteerism, I have overseen successful conflict-resolution and built consensus around community change.

Yet although much of what you will read here has been tested in service to others, the concepts and disciplines have emerged from two additional threads of experience seemingly far removed from that service. On the one hand, there is my own counseling. I saw my first therapist when I was eight years old, and over the past thirty years have spent hundreds of hours in therapy addressing the aftermath of a challenging childhood. From psychoanalysis to Codependents Anonymous, anger management to marital counseling, hypnotherapy to Hakomi, and Ritalin to Zoloft, I've been exposed to a broad range of techniques and philosophies. My

progress has been slow and at times painful, but if I am proficient in anything, it is the consumption of psychological care.

Another significant contribution to this work is my own spiritual awakening and ongoing mystical journey. I have had contact with the mystical since I was very young. When I was three, I awoke from an extraordinary dream, a potent vision of self-transformation that I vividly remember to this day. Since then, my dream-life has transported me to indescribable places, overwhelmed my senses with wonder, and infused my life with wisdom and contentment. Unbidden, and at first hard to understand, these experiences have both inspired me and changed me. Because of them, and aided by a natural curiosity and longing, I began a lifelong search for explanations. Over the last twenty years, this search has immersed me in many different spiritual traditions, resulting in a strong affinity for the beliefs and teachings of Christianity, Wicca, Taoism, Buddhism, Sufism, Vedanta and other systems of Yoga, Hermetic disciplines, the mystical Kabbalah and many others.

Techniques from every one of these traditions have introduced me to a new spectrum of spiritual perception, continually deepening my humility and joy, and inviting me to partake of the Divine. My spirit is awake. The flow of mysterious forces in and around me has captured my heart and expanded my understanding. With discipline and diligence in mystical practice, I have found a tiny haven of clarity; finally, a lot of things make sense that never have before. At the heart of this illumination is neither a selective combination of spiritual concepts, nor an additive syncretism of religious systems, but a paring down of differing approaches to their central substance, penetrating the quintessence of the mystic's way.

This, then, is a resting point in that journey, a time to reflect and share what I have learned, hoping it might be helpful to others. As soon as I reach the final sentence of this book, I am certain dozens of new ideas will present themselves, and a whole new perspective will emerge from the ordered pages I have left behind. Spiritual life is too dynamic to put on paper! Understandably, this book will be a

departure into the unknown for some, while for others it may only be recharting familiar territory. Any shortcomings you find here are sure to be the result of my own imperfect knowledge or inadequate prose, for although approaches may vary, the objectives and benefits of mysticism are universal and the principles and practices described in this work are sound. I only hope that this will encourage and inspire you to pursue your own unique path through the mysterious forest of personal discovery and to nourish the spiritual spark within.

“The raft is used to cross the river. It isn’t to be carried around on your shoulders. The finger which points at the moon isn’t the moon itself.”

Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*

### *How to Read This Book*

Although organized so that each chapter builds on the preceding one, there certainly is no right or wrong way to read this book. If you are like me, and tend to be non-linear in how you digest information, I have some suggestions that hint at a mystical approach to exploration and understanding:

- Let words draw you where your heart wants to go. If you see a chapter heading that intrigues you right away, go there first, then expand out.
- When you hit a speed-bump, such as a description or idea that doesn’t make any sense to you, skip over it. Move on and come back later.
- Read small amounts, and – especially if it is new information to you – mull over what you’ve read for a couple of days before absorbing any more. It likely won’t be as beneficial to rush or force your way through this book.

- Try being random: just open up and read a paragraph or two, then close the book, think about what you've read, and repeat the exercise.
- Find someone with whom you can discuss each topic or chapter, if only because synergy and synchronicity are much less likely in a vacuum.

Although I would encourage you to take an unorthodox approach to your reading, there is nevertheless an overlying organization. Chapters are grouped under the following sections:

1. **Charting a Course** – A proposed starting point for mystical inquiry
2. **Restructuring Mind & Heart** – The essential tools of the mystic
3. **Practical Applications** – Principles of a “spiritually healthy” life
4. **Navigating the Thorns** – How to recognize and cope with challenges along the way

At the end of each chapter are questions you may find useful. You could read the questions first, and work your way through the chapter with the questions in mind, or just use them for review. Better yet, come up with your own questions! Challenge every assertion made here, test them in the forge of your own heart, then shape them with the hammer of your spirit and the anvil of your mind.

One recurring theme you will encounter is that emotional strength and spiritual enrichment take time and committed effort. This book is therefore unlikely to be satisfying as a “quick fix” for spiritual or emotional challenges. There are certain to be sudden moments of realization or change in perspective that are the natural result of the practices described, but the most reliable and long-lasting method of self-transformation is what I call “herding wind across stones.” It is delicate and slow-going, requiring dedication and patience – which

are themselves the first fruits of compassionate effort. If you stick to it, you will be herding wind with skill and joy.

### *Usage of Quotes*

There are many quotes throughout, from musicians, poets, writers, thinkers, religious texts and other sources. Where the authors are more obscure, I have included the time period in which they wrote and their school of thought. Each quote is intended to add a perspective or clarify ideas, and is not meant to convey my grasp of the author's work or make my own words more authoritative. This, in combination with a deliberate modernization and reinterpretation of some of the older writings, makes it fairly likely that I will depart from how others may view these sources. Rather than accepting the context in which I present them, I encourage you to reflect on the meaning of the quotes in the original source material. In all cases, I believe your own path of investigation and discovery will enhance your understanding of all that you encounter here.

### *A Note to Scholars*

This is not an apology of mysticism or any particular school of mystical philosophy or practice. You will find language that reflects everything from perennialism to constructivism, and phenomenology to assertions of absolute reality. *The Vital Mystic* is replete with apparent paradoxes mainly because it offers an encounter with immutable truths through embracing subjective experiences. The cultural, religious and philosophical contexts for interpreting such experiences are, in my view, relevant only external to mystical practice, and except for some widely shared assumptions I have tried to avoid them. However, as we continually invent language to ascribe meaning and value to any belief, it becomes increasingly difficult to escape circular affirmations; mysticism is no exception in this regard, other than by proposing a process of direct, unfiltered spiritual apprehension.

There are certainly physiological, cognitive and behavioral events surrounding and inhabiting the mystical process which deserve careful analysis, and although such analysis is not the subject of this book some observations have been made in passing. One of them is the common thread of emotional transformation and contemplative advancement throughout most, if not all, mystical traditions, and this is addressed in some detail. There is, however, much about mysticism that undermines purely intellectual inquiry. For example, mysticism is antithetical to traditional scientific methods not in that it cannot be observed or readily duplicated, but because it is holistic. Emotions, intentions, an inward contemplative focus, and something more – something I have named *spiritual cognizance* – are concentrated into synergistic and synchronistic phenomena that are both intensely personal and, as a chiefly mystical claim, convey universal wisdom. Further, I believe that the ultimate objectives of mysticism cannot be artificially induced; that is, a nondual consciousness without the foundation of structured introspection and reformed intentions simply will not produce the same results. *The Vital Mystic*, therefore, contains little discussion of the psychological, neurological or other causal mechanics of spirituality, for it is primarily concerned with defining the benefits of mysticism, the concepts commonly shared across cultural and ideological boundaries, and a “best practices” approach to engaging a powerfully transformative discipline.

Lastly, it has been my earnest intention not only to avoid promoting one mystical methodology above any other, but also to take Thomas Merton’s criticism to heart, and spurn the “loose and irresponsible syncretism which, on the basis of purely superficial resemblances and without serious study of qualitative differences, proceeds to identify all religions and all religious experiences with one another....”<sup>1</sup> Instead, I propose what I believe to be the essential elements of a mystic’s way to spiritual understanding, suggest some criteria for an integrative approach, and outline meditative techniques which can be

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<sup>1</sup> *Mystics and Zen Masters*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967

tailored to individual requirements. Of greatest interest are the individual journey of the heart and mind, and entertaining a sufficiently dynamic ontological framework for that journey. As with much writing on metaphysical topics, to fully appreciate all that is proposed here requires a modicum of spiritual curiosity, an open mind and heart and a paucity of assumptions. The dialectics are not always orderly or concrete, and the syntheses offered live more in the realm of intuition than exposition.

### *Definitions and Concept Grouping*

Clear communication depends in large part on a shared understanding of language and usage. In Appendix A, you will find lists of key words and definitions that explain how each idea differs from others in the same concept grouping.

