

A misty forest path at night, illuminated by a glowing light trail that leads into the distance. The trees are bare and the atmosphere is blue and ethereal.

The
Silent
Path

AWAKEN TO YOUR
HIGHEST POSSIBILITY

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THE INDIVIDUAL

To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

What exactly does it mean to be an individual? Who is an individual?

The next time you are outside, look at the vibrancy of life all around you. You will see the insects moving, the birds singing, and there will be no disturbance. There will be no questioning, no seeking, and no trouble. They will all just be going about their simple lives. You could even say that they are blissful. Bliss is nothing but a state of non-disturbance. The insects and birds are simply being in the moment.

A bird flying in the sky has no religion, it has no name, it doesn't know where it has come from, and it doesn't know where it is going. A bird doesn't have a philosophy or an ideology, it doesn't believe in heaven and hell, and it isn't interested in redemption. Yet, look at the life that is gracing that bird; it is utterly free in the vastness of the sky. If you can be absolutely free, for even a single moment, you will know the value of individuality, and you will also know a tremendous force that is the individual.

An individual is an ocean - a vast, unimaginable ocean of life. An individual is not what you see; an individual is simply what you are. There is a big difference between the person you see in the mirror and the person you actually are. The person you see in the mirror is just a form - a play of colors, light, and darkness. Switch off the light, and poof! The image goes away. What is *not* visible, however, is the conscious aliveness that is pulsating within you, through which even the contemplation, "This is my body," is happening.

The "I Am" thought that enters your mind marks the birth of your separate individual identity. Not everyone who has a body is

an individual. An individual is someone who has asked, “Who am I?” or who has contemplated on the thought, “I Am.” Therefore, although animals have bodies, they have no individuality. The “I” thought has simply never occurred to them. In this sense, an individual does not take birth through the body. An individual takes birth with the birth of the “I Am” thought. Birth of the “I Am” thought represents the beginning of a long and arduous journey to find the real meaning and purpose behind this separate individual identity.

The “I Am” thought is both our greatest blessing and our greatest curse. If not for the awareness of our separate individual selves, we could have existed like animals, without a care in the world. We could have lived and died simply as a process of life, just like everything around us. It would not have been necessary for us to sit here on Earth and envy the freedom of a bird flying in the open sky.

Now that we have become aware of ourselves, there is no respite until we find the true purpose of who we are and why we are here. Our entire life is a quest to find an answer to the most

important question of all, “Who am I?” Not knowing who we are is the root cause of our fears, frustrations, and sufferings.

As much as we are suffering our ignorance, we are also suffering our modern comforts, intelligence, and sophistication. We are suffering more now than ever before. Our modern accomplishments are only arrogantly screaming and supporting our ignorance. No other generation has been as frustrated, spiritually barren, utterly disoriented, and lost as we are. We are the forgotten children of existence. We are walking alone in the dark wilderness of life, carrying our little gadgets and gizmos into an unknown future, searching for meaning, purpose, and connection.

The individual is lost amidst the collective ideas and concepts of humanity. We have buried him under a mountain of social, political, philosophical, religious, and economic rubble. An individual has to fight his way through this enormous systemic burden before he can inquire about himself and the nature of life around him. Very few of our modern systems are working

for the liberation of the individual. Most of our systems are simply working for themselves.

Therefore, the question, “What does it mean to be an individual?” is more important now than ever before. We have to explore this question precisely because we have smothered the individual spirit to fuel the blind pursuit of progress. The answer to this question holds the future hope of humanity. If we get this wrong, we can very well consider ourselves doomed.

I came across this story, by Jonathan Safran Foer, that beautifully illustrates how important each individual is to existence:

“I read the first chapter of 'A Brief History of Time' when Dad was still alive, and I got heavy boots about how relatively insignificant life is, and how, compared to the universe and compared to time, it didn't even matter if I existed at all.

When Dad was tucking me in that night and we were talking about the book, I asked if he could think of a solution to that

problem. “What problem?” “The problem of how relatively insignificant we are.”

He said, “Well, what would happen if a plane dropped you in the middle of the Sahara Desert and you picked up a single grain of sand with tweezers and moved it one millimeter?” I said, “I’d probably die of dehydration.” He said, “I just mean right then when you moved that single grain of sand. What would that mean?” I said, “I don’t know, what?” He said. “Think about it.” I thought about it. “I guess I would have moved a grain of sand.” “Which would mean?” “Which would mean I moved a grain of sand?” “Which would mean you changed the Sahara.”

“So?” “So?” So the Sahara is a vast desert. And it has existed for millions of years. And you changed it!” “That’s true!” I said, sitting up. “I changed the Sahara!”

“Which means?” he said. “What? Tell me.” “Well, I’m not talking about painting the Mona Lisa or curing cancer. I’m just talking about moving that one grain of sand one millimeter.”

“Yeah?” “If you hadn’t done it, human history would have been one way ...” “Uh-huh?” “But, you did do it, so ...?”

I stood on the bed, pointed my fingers at the fake stars, and screamed: “I changed the universe!” “You did.”

The question, “What does it mean to be an individual?” cannot be answered by society. How can society answer this question when it knows nothing about the inside of a person? Society’s concern is with the outside. The business of society is, was, and always will be the outside. The question “Who am I?” is relevant only to an individual. If you are at the point where you can even ask this question to yourself, it means that you have already taken the first step in recognizing that the answers to your most important questions of life are not outside. With this question, you have looked in the right direction—you have looked for your answers within. “Who am I?” marks the beginning of a new inquiry - *Self-Inquiry*. With the birth of this question, your spiritual quest to know yourself has begun.

You should not mistake a religious quest for a spiritual quest. Spirituality has nothing to do with religion. If spirituality is a

living garden where beautiful flowers are growing, religion is a museum where all those once-beautiful flowers are now wilting. If Buddha was that beautiful flower, then Buddhism is that museum. If Jesus was that beautiful flower, then Christianity is that museum. While religion emerges out of the mind of man mostly for his selfish desires, spirituality takes birth in the longing heart of an individual. Spirituality is an existential longing to know who you are; it is the desire of the universe to know itself through you.

It is a tragedy that many people mistake religion for spirituality. I am not saying that religion has nothing to offer humanity. Religion can be a great possibility when understood correctly. In its current form, I believe that religion is failing to help people go beyond their personal suffering and find deeper meaning in life. We are attracted to religion and spirituality for the same reasons; both are a kind of horse riding. The only difference is, spirituality is about you riding the horse, and religion is about the horse riding you.

Modernization, in some ways, has taken away the deeper

meaning and purpose from life. It has severed the roots of our ancient spiritual connections. Yet somehow, it has empowered us by giving us greater freedom to choose for ourselves what is good and bad. Now, more than ever before, we can easily afford to get back to our inner spiritual roots. It is an altogether different matter as to how many of us *want* to exercise this choice. Today, an individual is in a much better position to choose a path of his own.

There was a time for kings and ministers, popes and priests, cultures and countries, and for ideas and ideologies, but today is the time for the individual. Today, a single individual has the power to effect change within and around him, more than anyone that has come before him. The combination of secular laws, education, internet, and technology has freed individuals from the burden of outdated dogmas and superstitious ideologies that have plagued society for a very long time.

There was a time when you had to get permission from the Catholic Church before you could publish your work. The word *publish* even today has an air of anxiousness surrounding it

- maybe because we subconsciously remember that once upon a time we were burned at the stake for publishing an idea that was contrary to the deeply held superstitious beliefs of the church. The church refuted the publication of Galileo's works because his heliocentric model put the sun at the center of the solar system. This conflicted with the firmly held church belief that the earth was flat and at the center of the universe. History is a testament to the fact that the Catholic Church branded Galileo a heretic and confined him to house arrest. What was Galileo's heresy? Is it just that he spoke his mind? The word "heresy" simply means "to go your own way".

We might have come a long way in exercising our freedom of expression, but we are still psychologically bound to our past. There is a part of us that remembers how our free ideas and expressions were suppressed. We are still living in the fear of society and the people in it. If we are our thinking, then we are our past - that is why it is so difficult to shake off the limiting ideologies and suppressions of the past and look at life from a new perspective. We might be physically living in the 21st

century, but depending on our ideas, values and beliefs, we might psychologically still be lost somewhere in the 10th century.

Unless we break free from our individual and collective pasts, we cannot understand the real meaning of the word “individual”.

An individual is too vast a phenomenon to be understood from within the prison walls of society. Self-inquiry requires a bit of space - it requires silence and stillness, aloneness and contemplation, mindfulness and meditation, and love and compassion. An individual is the future hope of humanity. Only an individual can turn the tides of time and move humanity in a new direction. We need something big. We need a new motive and purpose for our future. We need a revolution that can offer us new vision and direction, and this revolution has to happen within the deep recesses of a human heart.

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