

BASICS 4

Undertaking the Quest... of the Overself

When this vague yearning for something that worldly life cannot satisfy becomes unendurable, it may be a sign that they are ready for this Quest.

He who stands on the threshold of this Path is about to commence the last and greatest journey of all, one which he will continue to the end of his days. Once begun, there is no turning back or deserting it, except temporarily. And since it is the most important and most glorious activity ever undertaken, its rewards are commensurate.

The aspirant's decision to aim for the highest Goal is the governing factor: if he sticks to this decision, he is bound to succeed sooner or later. The question now arises: What is this Goal? It is the fulfilment of the Real Purpose of life, as apart from the lower purposes of earning a livelihood, rearing a family, and so forth. The aspirant will become fully Self-conscious—as aware of the divine Overself as he now is of his earthly body. And this achievement will be perpetual, not just a matter of occasional glimpses or fleeting intuitions. Even though the Quest has become more difficult under modern conditions, it has not become impossible. The timeworn means to this end must simply be brought up to date. What are the means? They are thought, feeling, will, and intuition used in a special way. This constitutes the fourfold path, or Quest.

What is the hidden metaphysical meaning of the Quest? It is that the infinite self in man finds that it cannot achieve adequate self-expression in the finite and imperfect life of the world. The ego may try as it will, do what it may, but the bliss, wisdom, serenity, and perfection that are the natural attributes of the Overself, in the end elude its every move. There is ultimately no alternative except to let go of searching and grasping the outer world, and retreat within. There, deep inside its own being the journey to enduring satisfaction will thenceforth be. This is the Quest leading to discovery of Overself.

This quest of the soul is ageless. Never has the human race been without it, never could it be without it.

Life compels no one to enter upon this conscious Quest, although it is leading everyone upon the unconscious Quest. Even among the students of this teaching, not all are following the Quest, many are merely seeking for an intellectual understanding; their interest has been attracted and their curiosity aroused, but they have not felt called upon to go any farther. This may be due to inner weakness or to outer difficulties or both. Such men and women do not have to pledge themselves to any moral tasks or mystical exercises. Nevertheless, their studies and reflections upon the teaching will not be without a certain value and will place them on an altogether different level from the unawakened herd which is bereft of such an interest.

Some come to the truth in a roundabout way. The Quest is direct.

In pursuing this integral quest, they have the satisfaction of knowing that they are pursuing the only quest which can bring them to a truth which is all-embracing and all-explaining.

The risks of entering such a spiritual adventure may be quite formidable, but the risks of not entering it are unquestionably frightful. For the probabilities of wrong action and mistaken choice will still remain, with the painful karmic aftermath.

The vision of the world and the understanding of life which he receives from the lips or books of others will never be so true nor so real as that which he makes his own. What shall it profit a man if he hear a thousand lectures or read a thousand books but hath not found his Overself? The student must advance to the next step and seek to realize within his own experience that which is portrayed to him by his intellect. And this is possible only by his entry upon the Quest.

In humility the quest is to be begun: in even greater humility it is to be fulfilled.

The Quest not only begins in the heart but also ends there too.

The quest often begins with a great sadness but always ends with a great happiness. Its course may flow through both dark and bright moods at times, but its terminus will be unbelievably serene.

Between the ordinary man who takes himself as he is, and the philosopher who does exactly the same, there stands the Quester. In the first case, outlook is narrow, being limited by attending to the inescapable necessities and demands of day-to-day living. In the other case, peace of mind has been established, the thirst for knowledge fulfilled, the discipline

of self-realized. In between these two, the Quester is not satisfied with himself, has a strong wish to become a better and more enlightened man. He tries to exercise his will in the struggle for realization of his ideal.

There is nothing more important in life than the Quest, and the time will come when the student discovers that there is nothing more enjoyable as well. This is inevitable in a Quest whose essential nature is one of infinite harmony and unbroken peace. No worldly object, person, or pleasure can ever bestow the satisfaction experienced in uniting with the Overself.

If the Infinite Being is trying to express its own nature within the limitations of this earth—and therefore trying to express itself through us, too—it is our highest duty to search for and cultivate our diviner attributes. Only in this way do we really fulfil ourselves. This search and this cultivation constitute the Quest.

The Quest is both a search for truth and a dedication to the Overself.

By "Quest" I mean the deliberate and conscious dedication to the search for spiritual truth, freedom, or awareness.

The inner meaning of life does not readily reveal itself; it must be searched for. Such a search is the Quest.

When a man begins to seek out his real nature, to find the truth of his real being, he begins to follow the Quest.

He who enters upon this Quest will have to revise his scale of values. Experiences which he formerly thought bad, because they were unpleasant, may now be thought good, because they are educative or because they reveal hitherto obscured weaknesses.

After such considerations, we are led to wonder what constitutes the reality behind the universe. This is a quest which takes us into religion, mysticism, and philosophy and the great mysteries of life, a quest which eventually confirms those celebrated words of Francis Bacon: "A little thinking may incline the mind toward atheism, but greatness of study bringeth the mind back again to God".

The quest we teach is no less than a quest for knowledge in completeness and a search for awareness of this Universal Self, a vast undertaking to which all men are committed whether they are aware of it or not.

The great central questions of life for the thinking person are: What am I? What is my true relation to, and how shall I deal with, my surroundings? What is God, and can I form any connection with God?

Every puzzle which fascinates innumerable persons and induces them to attempt its solution—be it mathematical and profound or ordinary and simple—is an echo on a lower level of the Supreme Enigma that is forever accompanying man and demanding an answer: What is he, whence and whither? The quester puts the problem into his conscious mind and keeps it there.

It is a quest to make a life of better quality, both inside and outside the self, in the thoughts moving in the brain, in the body holding that brain, and in the environment where that body moves.

The quest is simply the attempt of a few pioneer men to become aware of their spiritual selves as all men are already aware of their physical selves.

It is a quest to become conscious of Consciousness, to explore the "I" and penetrate the mystery of its knowing power.

When a man passes from the self-seeking motives of the multitude to the Overself-seeking aspirations of the Quest, he passes to conscious co-operation with the Divine World-Idea.

If a scheme for progress, such as the Quest, remains intellectual alone and does not come down to the heart, and move it, the aspirant will continue to remain outside the precinct of the Overself.

The central point of this Quest is the inner opening of the ego's heart to the Overself.

It is, from another standpoint, a quest for his own centre.

The very idea of a quest involves a passage, a definite movement from one place to another. Here, of course, the passage is really from one state to another. It is a holy journey, so he who is engaged on it is truly a pilgrim. And as on many journeys, difficulties, fatigues, obstacles, delays, and allurements may be encountered on the way, yes! And here there will certainly be dangers, pitfalls, oppositions, and enmities too. His intuition and reason, his books and friends, his experience and earnestness will constitute themselves as his guide upon it. There is another special feature to be noted about it. It is a homeward journey. The Father is waiting for his child. The Father will receive, feed, and bless him.

Bring again and again into remembrance the fact that you are a pilgrim, that this world is but a camp, and that the situations in which you find yourself, or create for yourself, should be regarded not from the worldly point of view only, but still more from that of this quest of the Overself.

The stages of the Quest pass by degrees from the disciplining of the ego to the opening of consciousness to the Overself.

Note: more info <https://www.paulbrunton.org/notebooks>: Progressive Stages of the Quest on (#2853) and (#3853)

The aspirant enters on the Quest of the heavenly kingdom from the first moment that he becomes willing to try to give up his ego. It does not matter that it will engage his whole lifetime, that success may only be found in some future incarnation. From that first moment he becomes a disciple of the Overself, and a candidate for the kingdom of heaven.

It is a brave struggle for freedom, a noble refusal to be the ego's puppet or the animal-self's victim, a fine resolve to win strength from weakness.

How shall he deliver himself from his weaknesses? How can he get free from his pseudo-self and let his true being reveal itself? How cease to negate and begin to affirm his own best values? The quest, with its practical disciplines and mystical exercises, is part of the answer.

Many aspirants wrongly believe the quest to be a movement from one psychic experience to another or from one mystical ecstasy to another. But in fact it is a movement in character from animality to purity, from egoism to impersonality.

The Quest teaches a man the art of dying to the animalistic and egoistic elements in himself. But it does not stop with these negative results. It trains him also in the art of re-creating himself by the light of the ideal.

Coming to this Quest in the philosophic sense simply means coming to human maturity.

Who does not prefer joy to grief? The instinct is universal. There is a metaphysical basis for it. Individual beings derive their existence from a universal Being, whose nature is continuously blissful. This is dimly, briefly echoed in the satisfactions of earthly desires. The quest of spiritual fulfilment is really the search for a fuller and more lasting share in the Divine Peace, the true heaven which awaits us in the end, whether in the freedom of so-called death or in the confines of physical flesh.

The Quest is a veritable re-education of the self, leading in its turn to a noble transcendence of the self.

What is the quest but a process of moral re-education and mental self-conquest, a probing for and overcoming of those faults which keep the Light out of the mind?

We ought perhaps to have particularized the significance of this word, for many men and women are engaged on the food-quest, the pleasure-quest, and so on; only a few, however, are on the Philosophical Quest.

The quest means disciplined emotions and disciplined living, sustained aspiration and nurtured intuition.

The quest is an adventure as well as a journey: a work to be done and a study to be made, a blessing which gives hope and a burden of discipline which cannot be shirked.

The quest is a continual effort of self-release from inward oppressions and self-deliverance from emotional obstructions.

This quest is really a system of therapeutic training devised to cure evil feelings, ignorant attitudes, and wrong thinking.

Nobody, not even its bitter critics, may question the purity and nobility of its ethics, however much they may question the accuracy of its metaphysics.

This is not a quest which tries to tempt prospective candidates with the offer of prosperity or to bribe them with the satisfaction of their desires.

This quest is not in the private jurisdiction of any particular group, sect, school, or religious following. That is a narrow concept which must be firmly repudiated. It is the quest of life itself, the need of self to comprehend its own being.

The Quest is not to be looked upon as something added to his life. Rather it is to be his life itself.

The truth must pass from his lips to his life. And this passage will only become possible when life itself without the quest will be meaningless.

It is only the beginner who needs to think of the quest as separate from the common life, something special, aloof, apart. The more proficient knows that it must become the very channel for that life.

The meaning and end of all such work is to arouse men to see certain truths: that the intuitive element is tremendously more important than the intellectual yet just as cultivable if pursued through meditation, that the mystical experience is the most valuable of all experience, and that the quest of the Overself is the most worthwhile endeavour open to human exertions.

Each man has only a limited fund of life-force, time, and ability. He may squander it on worldly pleasures or spend it on worldly ambitions. But if, without neglecting the duties of his particular situation, he realizes that these are changing and transient satisfactions and turns instead to the quest of the Overself, he begins to justify his incarnation.

The fact that so few have ventured on this quest offers no indication of what will happen in the future. If mankind could take any other way to its own self-fulfilment, this situation might remain. But there is no other way.

For him there must exist something more than merely being a member of the herd; there must be a higher direction leading to truth to satisfy the mind, to a nobler character to satisfy the conscience, to refined beautiful and gentler moods inspired by the arts, music, literature, and reverence. For him there must be a Quest.

The most important questions which a man can ask himself—What he is and What he is here for—must be answered before his life finds its proper course. Otherwise, in the higher sense, he remains a mere animal.

It is better to accept the loneliness of the quester than the complacency of the worldling who lives without any understanding of life's inner purpose.

Those who wish to do something more than merely glide over the surface of mystical life, who wish to be fully at peace with themselves, must take to the quest.

Our whole life on earth is in the end nothing else than a kind of preparation for this quest.

To put one's own purposes in harmony with the universe's purpose is the most sensible thing he can do. Therefore there is nothing unpractical, irrational, or eccentric in the Quest. Only the unthinking crowd, who suffer blindly and drift tragically, may believe so. No one who has felt the inner peace, received the deep wisdom, and touched the rocklike strength which mark the more advanced stages, could ever believe so.

The quest is not an enterprise of fits and starts, not something to be started today and left off tomorrow, but is the most durable undertaking in a man's life. This is to be his most sacred life-purpose, the most honoured ground of his very existence, and everything else is to be made to subserve it.

As he advances on this quest his scheme of values may change. This is partly because he learns by experience what every man has to learn, quester or not, that all is passing and nothing is stable, that the fruits of desire may turn to ashes, and that every day brings him nearer to death and farther from life. But it is partly also what the non-questers too often fail to perceive, that existence is like a dream, ultimately hollow, and that without some sort of link, connection, communion, or glimpse bringing him nearer to the inner reality his life remains unfulfilled.

Before embarking on this teaching, he should ask himself: "What attracts me most in this teaching? What do I hope to get out of it? Am I seeking religious satisfaction or metaphysical truth or moral power or inner peace or psychic faculties? Will I be satisfied with a theoretical understanding or would I go so far as to put it into practice? Am I willing to set aside a half hour daily for the exercise in meditation? How far do I wish to travel in the Quest of the Overself?"

We walk the Quest uncertainly, human nature being what it is, human weakness following us so obtrusively as it does.

The decision to embark on this quest—so new, uncommon, and untried to the average Westerner—becomes especially hard to the man seeking alone, with no companion or relative to fortify his resolution.

If the quest seems too far from one's environment or circumstances, it is still a good time to start, for the reward will be better savoured.

The quest upon which he has entered will be a long one and the task he has undertaken a hard one. But the Ideal will also be his support because his conscience will endorse his choice to the end.

Is there some particular purpose in my birth here? Is it all mere coincidence? Must we doubt, deny, even reject God? These are some of the questions a thoughtful man might ask himself.

If experience, reason, or intuition cannot bring him to the conviction that a higher power rules the world, a master's help, grace, or writing may do so. If that fails, he has no other recourse than to keep pondering the question until light dawns.

Can we build a bridge between this sorrowful earthly life and the peaceful eternal life? Are the two forever sundered?
Every seer, sage, and saint answers the first question affirmatively and the second negatively.

Whoever perceives the inferiority of his environment to what it could be, as well as the imperfection of his nature in the light of its undeveloped possibilities, and who sets out to improve the one and amend the other, has taken a first step to the quest.

The quest will continue to attract its votaries so long as the Real continues to exist and men continue to remain unaware of it.

This does not mean that a spiritual outlook requires an unquestioning acceptance of what man has made of himself and of the world.

Only when this search for a higher life has become an absolute necessity to a man, has he found even the first qualification needed for the Quest.

If the quest is only an emotional whim or an intellectual fad for a man, he will make little headway with it. If on the contrary it is something on which his deepest happiness depends and he is ready to give what it demands from every candidate, if he is resolved to go ahead and never desert it, he will possess a fair chance of going far.

A mighty longing for liberation from one's present condition is a prerequisite for the philosophic quest.

To obtain something they greatly desire, men will arouse their will and apply it strongly. Only when sufficient experience of life matures them sufficiently are they likely to arouse and apply this same will to the Quest itself.

Those who care enough for advanced ideas to seek them out in spite of social rebuffs, as well as those who have the courage to explore what lies beyond already accepted ones, have become a marked proportion of questers.

The Quest calls for men of the world who are not worldly, aspirants with clear minds, endowed with common sense, students who will strive to lift themselves from inner mediocrity to inner superiority, followers who will strive to make worthwhile contributions to their environment.

Until he has become conscious of his shortcomings, his ignorance, and his sinfulness, a man will rest in smug complacency and receive no spur to self-improvement, no impetus to enter the quest. Humility is another name for such consciousness. Hence, its importance is such as to be rated the first of a disciple's qualifications.

The mass of people are apathetic toward the quest: the poor for one set of reasons, the rich for another. Only the few capable of individual judgement, the defiant and independent thinkers, will be capable of rising up out of the mass.

You have launched upon a quest from which there is no turning back. You have embarked upon a journey which will demand from you the utmost patience and deepest faith, the strongest determination and cultivation of the keenest intelligence lying latent within you.

This Quest is not an undertaking of a few weeks or months. It is, as I have often said, a lifetime's work: patience is required from us and must be given by us.

Yes, you may discover the elusive secret of life—but you must first work for it. "The gods sell anything to everybody", announces Emerson, "at a fair price". Take a few minutes off each day to find yourself, to question yourself, to awaken yourself—that is part of the price demanded.

Spoiled plans or disappointed hopes may turn a man toward this quest but only appreciation of peace or love of truth can keep him on it.

The traveller on this quest is a man who uses his consciousness and his will to better his character and purify his heart.

To believe that this quest is only for religious people, or for impractical dreamers, and not for reasonable people or for men active in the world is to believe something that is untrue.

It is wrong to look upon this quest as one for semi-lunatics, emotionally disturbed persons, or gullible, brainless miracle-hunters. It is not a place for the deposit of sicknesses, troubles, and deficiencies. Such things must be taken elsewhere for repair.

The prejudiced man wants his prejudices confirmed not contradicted. He is not really looking for truth. Before the quest can even begin, prejudices must be removed. This is a psychological operation which the man cannot perform upon himself, except in part, without a great effort.

The fool cannot follow this Quest. He may try to but he will be sent back to learn some wisdom through earthly lessons and through earthly difficulties brought on by his foolishness.

The very name "Quest" implies movement, travelling, journey; those who remain stationary cannot be said to be on the "Quest". By this I do not mean those who find themselves stagnating against their will, but those who make no effort inwardly to advance.

The Quest is too individual a matter to fit everyone in the same way, like a ready-made suit of clothes. Each man has his own life-problems to consider and surmount. In trying to do so wisely nobly and honestly he does precisely what the Quest calls for from him at the time.

The truth is sometimes so spiky and so uncomfortable that people hide from it. Entry on the Quest is a sign that enough courage has been gathered to face it. Those who assert that they are questers but who are too much in love with their own fancies are incapable of facing the realities behind those fancies. To this extent their quest is a bogus one, although not usually a consciously bogus one.

If a man will not come to this quest willingly, because it leads to Truth and he loves Truth, then he must be forced onto it, unwillingly, because there is no other way to alleviate his burdens and reduce his miseries.

Most persons have no inclination to wake up when dreams are pleasant, whereas when they are frightening they soon awaken. So too the dream of worldly life does not impress them with the need of true religion until it becomes tragic or severely disappointing. Only when sorrow drives them to question the value of living do they take a real interest in non-worldly urges.

Certain events will so arrange themselves as to put a man upon the quest, or if he is already on it, to prepare him for a further advance. They will not be pleasant events, for they will crush his ego, or render it lame and weak for a time. But it is only through this apparent defeat by circumstances that he is compelled to accept a course which will, spiritually, benefit him greatly in the end.

Where a man is ready for this Quest but stubbornly clings to his old familiar way of thought and life, the Overself may or may not release karma that will tear him away from it. His ego's desires will then be macerated by suffering until its will to live gets weaker and weaker.

In one's search for Truth he may have progressed through orthodox Christianity, Christian Science, and Spiritualism—but, eventually, the Quest will lead him away from limited, organized public approaches, and bring him to the unrestricted freedom of the Presence of the Overself. Other movements, such as those mentioned, may be useful to beginners; but when some progress has been made, the path necessarily opens onto the Quest where it becomes unlimited, individual, and private.

A few come to this quest after the shock produced by the unreasonableness and unfairness and stupidity of the treatment they received from the organization, the group, the sect, the church, the party, to which they belonged. Some crisis in their lives, such as the need to get married or to get divorced, blocked by a solemn bleak dogma or decision, became the occasion of the shock. Or, as in Gandhi's case when he was thrown out of a railway compartment by an arrogant member of the ruling race, heartless discourtesy provoked swift disillusionment. A single jarring incident, a single deliberate injustice or hurt or insult was enough to bring on such resentment and indignation—penetrating as sharply as a hypodermic needle—that character change and a new outlook were inaugurated. Some have even come to the quest not because they had any real vocation for it but because they had nowhere else to go, because the world had lost all meaning, all hope for them through some ghastly tragedy or some heartbreaking loss, and this was a better way than committing suicide. But the best way to come to the quest is of course to fulfil the higher possibilities as a human being.

All the experiences of life are in the end intended to induce us to seek wholeheartedly for the Overself. That is, to lead us to the very portal of the Quest.

Most persons need a drastic shock, an enforced awakening, a sharp arousal from that long sleep, which is the egoic existence, if they are ever to come alive spiritually. This is effective only if it breaks old habits, trends, and inclinations, thus making a new man. It may come about through hearing or reading a teacher, or through harsh events like malignant illness or unexpected bereavement.

When a man comes to the point when all his outer life dissolves in tragedy or calamity, he comes also to the point when this Quest is all that is left to him. But he may not perceive this truth. He may miss his chance.

The glimpse also does in part for a man what initiation did in some ancient mystical institutions. It sets him on the road of a new life, a life more earnestly and more consciously devoted to the quest of Overself. It silently bids him dedicate, or rededicate anew, the remainder of his life on earth to this undertaking. It is a baptism with inner light more far-reaching than the baptism with physical water.

This momentary glimpse of the Overself provides the real beginning of his quest. The uninterrupted realization of it provides the final ending.

Many are the aspirants who complain that they have had no mystical experiences, no rapt ecstatic exaltations, no great awe-inspiring enlightenments. "Give me just a single Glimpse", they cry disheartened, "and I will then be sure that your path is correct, your way is the one for me. Otherwise..." Some of them drift away to join sects, teachers, cults, or to embrace new doctrines, techniques, systems. Some remain but are halfhearted, apathetic, and often critical. A few concern themselves with fundamental issues and work patiently on, holding the view that this Quest must be followed to the end for its own sake, whether Glimpses do or do not come.

The urge to follow the Quest, the impulse to find the higher consciousness, comes from the Overself.

Such a goal may be unappealing to many, held by their attachments as they are; but it is fascinating and alluring to a few, "old souls", much experienced after a long series of earthly lives, whose values have been altered, whose glammers and illusions have been eliminated. They feel like wanderers returning home.

The Quest of the Overself is none other than the final stage of mankind's long pursuit of happiness.

Those who are tired of the falsities and inanities accepted by so many, who want to come to a true life, must come to the Quest.

Out of the Quest will come a yearning for what is the best in life and the highest in Truth.