

Critical Path to Nirvana

by Art Ticknor

The path to Nirvana is as simple as 1-2-3.

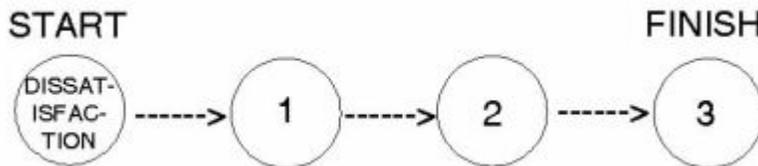
The starting point is dissatisfaction, which can take on many shapes and hues. It may be tied to a fear of what death will bring, for example, or a deep disturbance at the perceived lack of meaning or purpose in your life, or an intolerable doubt that you are what you think you are.

Step #1 is intuiting, or hearing and believing, that all answers lie within. If you're fortunate, this intuition or belief will also include the understanding that you don't find the answer but become it.

Step #2 is turning the focus of your attention around until you find yourself looking at what you're looking out from.

Step #3 is admitting or accepting the implications of what is seen in step #2.

The critical path diagram is theoretically as simple as:



But this process or progression is not something that can be understood by the mind or managed by the individual. Even getting from dissatisfaction to step #1 is not something that we can *do* or force to occur. The vast majority of humanity will not be so fortunate as to reach step #1.

Moving on from point #1 to point #2 is the part of the path or "the way" that gets the most attention in the literature of spiritual work. The consensus view is that this is an arduous journey with many hazards, and the truth is that few people who start the journey complete it. Franklin Merrell-Wolff was convinced that for each individual there is a shortest path -- and that finding that shortest path depends on applying intuition to customize the tools or techniques needed to continue the journey to fit one's own peculiarities. Richard Rose referred to his similar conviction as "creating the ways and means committee."

Douglas Harding had a profound experience of seeing what he was looking out from at age 33, after which he devoted his life to developing and demonstrating experiments that would give people their first conscious glimpse of this direct seeing. Some people "get it" upon first exposure to one or more of the experiments, which might be described as thought-experiments that take you beyond thought. So it's possible that moving from step #1 to step #2 could occur rapidly.

Something has to break the hypnotic spell which keeps our focus outward, whether that "outside" is the physical dimension or the mental dimension. If something like Harding's experiments -- and I don't know of anything else like them -- don't do it for you, either by lack of exposure to them or lack of impact, then you're faced with a potentially long haul with no guarantees. Success once again depends on factors beyond our control. First, you must have or find *faith* that you can find a total answer, or faith that nothing else is more worthwhile than devoting your life to trying. Second, you must have or find the determination to stick with what will seem, at some point, like an absurd or hopeless task, like Don Quixote's jousting with windmills.

Somehow the focus of attention has to be turned around so that you "retraverse the ray of creation" in Rose's poetic phrasing. This may involve bringing the mind under control, which can't be done directly. Rose's recommendation was to learn to turn the attention away from irrelevant thoughts in order to do *productive thinking* about the problem -- the problem being lack of adequate self-definition or knowing what we really are. By doing so, this may bring a temporary halt to thinking, opening the possibility to an experience of direct seeing such as Harding's vision at age 33. Rose was a proponent of stopping thought, as was Ch'an master Huang Po. Merrell-Wolff, on the other hand, found it didn't work for him. He concluded that it was a common recommendation because most people arrived mainly from the feeling side, whereas his own path was mainly from the thought or intellectual side.

"What prevents this observing of the observer or looking at what we're looking out from? How can I do it?" It's what we really are at center, so in a sense there's nothing preventing it. It's accessible to anyone when they stop turning away from it. But it's not something we can *will* or *do*. You might ask yourself whenever the how-to question comes up -- and the more often it comes up, the better -- "What is more compelling to me at this moment? What business do I feel I have to attend to first? What excuses do I provide myself? What side trips have I been taking?"

When you reach step #2 and find yourself looking at what you're looking out from -- observing the observer -- you may not "enter nirvana" immediately. Nirvana or the kingdom of heaven is not a paradisiacal place you gain entry to. The term literally means a blowing out, or extinction. It may take repeated seeing of what you really are at center before you admit or accept the implications. "Wait a minute," you may find yourself thinking, "I see that what I am is self-aware and contains all existence ... but I'm the observer that sees this." To reach step #3 and cross the finish line from great dissatisfaction to Full Satisfaction, something has to get blown out. And this thing that gets extinguished is the final holdout: the spiritual ego, the conviction that I, as observer, am a thing apart.