

# Galileo Comes to Spiritual Direction

## *Awe as the Mental Experience of God*

Spiritual Director (SD): Come in Signore Galilei. I am honored that you would wish to visit with me.

Galileo Galilei (G): Thank you for your discretion, seeing me at this odd hour of the night and risking your own safety by seeing someone who is under house arrest. I am grateful.

SD: We all do what we must to make our way toward meaning in our lives and my way is to be with seekers like you, just as your way is studying the movements of the stars. May I call you by your first name Galileo, which after all this is what history will end up calling you?

G: Yes, of course.

SD. Thank you, Galileo, Using your given name is quite lovely as it suggests an intimacy for many generations to come with you and your ideas which are now deemed heretical.

G: Galileo may be what history will call me, who knows? But everyone calls me Galileo now, even when they are defaming me behind my back.

SD: I know something of your conflict with the church—that from your study of gravity and astronomy you ascertained that the earth circles the sun. The Inquisition considers such a belief to conflict with church orthodoxy and tried you for heresy.

G: Yes, they found my view "foolish and absurd in philosophy, and formally heretical since it explicitly contradicts in many places the sense of Holy Scripture." When I defended my views, the church took it as an attack on the Pope and so I was in even more hot water. But I am not here to commiserate with you about the myopic view of the church, the ambiguity of its standard of orthodoxy—"the sense of holy scriptures"—which are in themselves often nonsensical or the church's penchant for operating upon the absurd notion that it can control what people think. [shakes his head grievously]

SD: Yes, do tell me what brings you to spiritual direction?

G: I am here because as later history will perhaps describe me, I am the point of the spear of a new level of consciousness that will emerge among humankind called the enlightenment perspective. I rejoice in this perspective because it has given me the chance to explore and develop the scientific method, to begin to understand gravity and most joyfully to make observational discoveries about our galaxy.

SD: Yes, I am aware of your use of the telescope to confirm the phases of Venus, finding four moons of Jupiter, observing Saturn, analyzing spots on the sun and of course proving scientifically that the earth circles the sun. You must find this work exhilarating.

G: Indeed, I have. But this gets to the nub of my issue. On the one hand, I have felt my discoveries about the nature of the universe have brought me ever closer to the mystery and wonder of creation and the beneficence of the Creator; and on the other, have left me feeling empty and deprived of a feeling of intimacy with God, which so many saints describe. I have been particularly touched by the image of intimacy, even with all its darkness, experienced by John of the Cross who died so recently in 1591. Is it too much to ask? I am deeply religious, and I want more.

SD: So you hold this wonderful, expansive view of God the creator, and personally you have experienced the majesty of creation which allows you feelings of awe and wonder as you behold and see the intricacies of the workings of our universe. There is no question of a solid spiritual grounding in your intellect about how you understand God, but what I am also hearing is that you would also like a heart experience of God.

G: Yes, precisely.

SD: You have hit on the tender spot for many of those in the coming centuries, who will experience reality through the lens of the Enlightenment perspective, especially those in the early 21st century. An understanding of the way forward begins with understanding the different centers of intelligence that we human beings have.

G: The truth is when I was young I considered going into the priesthood. Though I have had three daughters outside of marriage, I have otherwise lived all my life as a pious Roman Catholic. The more I have delved into science, you might say the more I have become an enlightened scientist, the more certain I have become of the existence of God. Like the Old Testament psalmist says I tremble at the awe and might of the Creator of the cosmos. But still in these twilight years of my life somehow this is not enough.

SD: A shadow aspect of being in the enlightenment perspective is that we see reality so much more clearly than from the preceding mythic perspective that our enlightenment perspective can seem like the big enlightenment or satori, as it has been talked about by saints and adepts for centuries. Unfortunately that is simply the ego's attachment to this perspective of intellectual clarity and a concomitant failure to see that the enlightenment perspective is not the enlightenment like the Buddha experienced under the bodi tree, but simply a stage on the path of the evolution of consciousness. As we all ultimately learn, anything the ego gets attached to is going to be a burr under the saddle of our continued spiritual growth. This burr slows up our growth and simultaneously keeps us questioning and seeking. It is what brought you here this evening.

G: You are right. I do experience dissatisfaction at where I am spiritually, even though I have experienced states of awe and wonder at the majesty and splendor of the universe. Yes, I can see the gift of the dissatisfaction.

SD: The experience of awe you describe sounds primarily like it is a mental experience. Would that be true?

G: Yes, well I have never considered that it might be anything else.

SD: The historical advent of the enlightenment perspective will lead to human beings focusing almost exclusively on their mental function as a way to understand and take in meaning from their experiences of reality. Again this will be particularly true in the 21st century. However, there is not just one, but there are three primary centers of intelligence through which we perceive and experience the world. You have had experiences that many of those in the years to come will not have—transcendent spiritual experiences through the mental center of intelligence. Later folks will be stuck in their mental center without the experiences of awe that you have had and not be able to ask the question you are asking—is there not more than ideas in my head to know about participating in God.

G: Interesting, my friend. Three centers of intelligence? Talk a bit more about these.

SD: The three centers are located bodily: the body center with its pivotal point located between the base of the spine and below the belly button; the heart center located in the center of the chest next to the heart and the head center located at the third eye. These are the bodily locations of our body intelligence, our heart or emotional intelligence and our mental or head intelligence.

G: How do these centers constellate? Does one revolve around the other?

SD: Intriguing question. But no, not as far as we know. More to the point of your question is how they interact with each other. Generally speaking we default to one way of knowing, and one other center is secondary, supporting the default center. The third center becomes little used and is repressed.

G: How does the secondary center work in support of the primary center?

SD: You do like to question. [Smiles] Well, here would be an example. A heart centered person might tend to have a feeling and then have a thought that would rationalize the meaning of the feeling. Or, you as a head type might have a thought or produce a brilliant theorem and then you would have a feeling that emotionally supports the value of your mental effort. You come to religious awe through the mental center. The word awe is probably the best way to describe spiritual connection through the mental center. For the body and heart center it can be experienced more intimately as freedom and joy or peace and love.

G: It is hard for me to conceive that I have another center of intelligence as meaningful as the mental center. This way of knowing is what has made my life worth living. Your thoughts will take some time to get used to.

SD: I understand. Consider it in the manner that one might who makes the leap from seeing the universe as earth centered, with the sun and moon and stars as far flung earth accouterments, to understanding the sun is the center of our solar system and the earth is one of several planets in a solar system which is a small part of an enormous galaxy among millions of galaxies. This shift in perspective is a Zen koan leap that defies logic. Similar is the leap to recognizing that there is another center of intelligence we have that has a different way of knowing than the one we have primarily defaulted to all our life.

G: Hmm. I think I see what you mean. Yes, there is the word—think—not feel or sense. I am starting to get it.

SD: Well, give it some thought over the next few weeks and we will meet again in about a month.

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*The Body Centers of Intelligence*  
&  
*Seeing with the Eye of the Heart*

SD: Welcome, Galileo, it's good to see you again. Hope you have been staying warm. Tuscany can be a bit cold in February.

G: Yes, it has been down to freezing many nights recently, but I have often been by the fire thinking about the things we discussed last time. I would like to know how I access the emotional and body centers of intelligence and develop them? And how their development might bring me into greater intimacy with God? Despite being vilified by the church, as I told you before, I am a deeply religious person.

SD: [Smiles] Not surprised about your questions. Let's dig right in. Let's start with the heart or emotional center. First, understand that each center of intelligence has a spectrum of knowing that it focuses upon depending upon the person's stage of spiritual growth. So a spiritually mature person with a head center perspective might spend all their time seeking answers to questions to elevate the experience of humankind. On the other, hand a person at a totally undeveloped stage of spirituality might use their intellect simply to work on nefarious schemes to make themselves rich. In other words, the focus of each center of intelligence looks different depending upon the person's stage of spiritual growth, across a spectrum from gross self interest to compassionate devotion to the interest of others. We might think of Jesus as an example on the self-giving side of the spectrum. In other words, just because a center of intelligence is highly developed doesn't in and of itself mean that a person's consciousness is evolved or that the focus of their intelligence is compassionate and life giving. This depends upon the stage of spiritual growth the person has obtained.

G: I understand. Perhaps in the former category we would put Cesare Borgia, the scoundrel who died a few years before I was born.

SD: Yes, that helps illuminate the spectrum. So in terms of the heart center a heart way of knowing could be filled with anger, jealousy or hate and other self-centered emotions and this person would have a very myopic way of interpreting the world through these conflictive emotions. We would not see this person as spiritually developed at all. On the other hand, a person could have a deeply developed sense of compassion and keen sense of beauty and know the world through this perspective and we would think of him or her as a person of deep

compassionate intelligence whose life expresses these values. Take beauty for example. How do we know what is beautiful?

G: There is much beauty in the Tuscan countryside even in winter. Beauty is all around us.

SD: True, and many of the great Italian artists are not only accomplished in the techniques of their art, but have an intelligence about how to create beauty.

G: I am beginning to appreciate what you are saying. They had skills but above all they had an eye for beauty.

SD: In terms of the great saints and mystics, most of them seem to have had very universal ideas of God, on the one hand; and, on the other, also experiences of intimacy with God. As to the former, their mental center allowed them to come to understand that God was this mysterious, universal force of energy and love that created the earth and which still drives forward creation. I think this is something that you have experienced.

G: Exactly.

SD: And in addition, they experience from their emotional center an energy of love and intimacy in their lives which feels like a presence that they call God or the Holy Spirit. They might also relate experiencing God as an emotion that overcomes them when they see a beautiful sunset or a baby being born or a work of art by Michelangelo whose works I am sure you have seen as he died just a year before you were born.

G: Yes, the Sistine Chapel ceiling and the David move an old curmudgeon like me to tears.

SD: So you see the different centers are there operating in all of us whether or not we have developed them.

G: Tell me a little about the body center of intelligence?

SD: Like the other two centers it arises on the same spectrum from gross self indulgence to deep self-giving, depending upon many factors, including the person's stage of spiritual growth. This spectrum runs from those who are grossly indulgent to bodily pleasures to those who know just the right time to put a hand on the shoulder of a friend to give assurance. Our great chefs and our great generals all have ample portions of bodily wisdom. We all experience this wisdom

when we go by a dark alley and become aware of danger not through the mental process of seeing it but from our body intelligence of sensing it.

G: Okay, I think (Ha!Ha!); thinking again. I get it. How does developing our body wisdom move us closer to God and how do we do that?

SD: We develop our emotional and body wisdom with similar practices, though they work in different ways. It is helpful to look at these from the Hindu perspective, which over the centuries has developed ways of understanding these centers of intelligence as they relate to the spiritual journey. In the Hindu tradition development of our spirituality through our emotional center is called Bhakti, it's the yoga of devotion. On the other hand, Karma yoga, or the path of action without attachment, is the development of spirituality through the body center. Jnana yoga or the path of knowledge is the path you have been on all your life—the development of spiritual wisdom through inquiry into the nature of reality.

G: I can appreciate the symmetry of what you are saying.

SD: If you wish to develop your emotional center you can start with simple acts of devotion such as picking flowers and putting them on the altar or lighting a candle there. Beyond that all the great traditions advise meditation practices, or what we Christians call contemplative practices, as ways to quiet the afflictive emotions of the heart center so that the emotions of love and compassion can naturally be more available to arise. These practices are also particularly important in karma yoga to be able to let the action from the body center flow without attachment to the object of the action. The fruit of contemplative practices in the later stages of spiritual growth is that feelings of the heart or bodily actions are energized by being-ness and presence and their connection to divine nature and not by the ego structure.

G: You are suggesting that I engage in contemplative practices in order to develop a heart-centered or body-centered connection with God.

SD: Yes, contemplative practices help open up the repressed center of intelligence and also open up the possibility of new state experiences of the divine.

G: State experiences. What do you mean by that?

SD: Since pre-historic, for thousands of years all tribal societies had practices in which through chanting, drumming and dancing or sometimes substance use, human beings entered into an altered state of consciousness where they had direct and intimate experiences with God.

G: I have heard of that and certainly believe John of the Cross had state experiences of both deep separation from and union with God.

SD: We have to get beyond our ordinary way of knowing, whether that knowing is through our mental, emotional or body center, in order to experience God directly. As you know a traditional mass has many ways the senses might be altered to open the opportunity for an altered state experience. But beyond having an altered state experience through music and the smell of incense, the design of a cathedral has always been an inspired human effort to create a structure likely to induce an altered state experience of God. This is certainly the inspiration behind all the great cathedrals being built in your time. Can you imagine what it must be like for a person from the countryside, who has never seen a structure over two stories high, to enter St Peters and see sunlight filtering through thousands of pieces of stained glass amid the smell and light of hundreds of flickering candles. Surely one would think God dwells in such a place.

G: Yes, I believe I understand what you are suggesting, but for me the experience of the mass has always been more mental. I appreciate the order and certainty of the ritual. I certainly don't experience it as an altered state of union with God.

SD: Well your experience is like that of most people many centuries from now, where the church structure and its ritual have become trite and far from engendering an altered state only induce boredom. So in the centuries to come, particularly the 21st, the old rituals and structures will not be helpful, especially for people in the enlightenment stage or beyond, and it will become increasingly important to have contemplative practices that open the possibility of state experiences of God.

G: Do you have to be at a particular level of spiritual growth to have state experiences?

SD: No, you can have state experiences of God at any stage of spiritual development but as the culture moves more exclusively toward a mind focused one of seeking to understand religion and spirituality mentally, then contemplative practices will become extremely important, or if I might convey my own opinion, absolutely necessary.

G: If humans have had state experiences of God since pre-history, is an emphasis on them a type of religious regression?

SD: Good question. As stages of faith, or the level of perspective through which one experiences reality, change then the way a state experience of union with the

divine is experienced also changes. The raw experience of being alive and sensing through touch and smell and seeing can be both a practical physical experience and a transcendent one at the same time. How these two understandings, worldly and divine, of the same experience are revealed and interpreted depends upon the level of spiritual growth of the person having the experience.

G: I am aware of having wonderfully awe filled moments simply from the intellectual inquiry I have pursued all my life.

SD: And I am sure that your mental way of knowing the world will always be your foremost entry into experiencing the divine as a part of reality. We all need to be thankful for the center of intelligence that is most developed in us.

G: But it seems I am missing something from the other two perspectives. So practically what should I do.

SD: Well let me explain to you how to do Centering Prayer and how to use Welcoming Prayer. Both of these practices help us bring our emotional and body centers of intelligence on line to deepen our bodily and emotional experience of reality. At the same time these practices open us up to simultaneously perceiving both the worldly nature and the divine nature of all our experience. Contemplative practices allow us to have increasingly deeper experience of our lives and to become more and more awake to the divine's presence in each moment. We increasingly realize we are always experiencing in a single moment both the material, the world of form, and also the divine, the formlessness reality that sustains and underlies the world of form. This realization often gives rise to an experience of intimacy with both creation and the Creator.

G: What are the gifts of the development of each of our centers of intelligence?

SD: Wonderful question. There are four important qualities that emerge from the development of each center of intelligence as we grow spiritually. The four qualities of the mind are: insight, awe, perspective and wisdom. The four qualities of the body are: engagement, humility, humor, and acceptance. The four qualities of the heart are: forgiveness, gratitude, compassion, and generosity.

G: You have given me much to ponder and as that up and coming young French physicist Blaise Pascal suggests: there is little downside to wagering you might be right. I will give your suggestion of contemplative practices a try.

SD: Thank you for coming Galileo. Let me know if it would serve your spiritual journey to continue our discussion at a later time.