Though this longing of the soul to be realized is always with us, we are usually not aware of what the yearning means. We are more often than not caught up in what we think we want. Our focus is on what we want, on that something, or someone. It is on the sometime, or the somehow, and not on the yearning itself. To become aware of the yearning itself, to notice that, to be curious about it and want to know what will actually satisfy it, is the beginning of the way.

The Sufi’s have a teaching story about this. The wise fool, Mullah Nasruddin, has lost his keys. One night he is outside frantically looking for them under a streetlamp. His friend comes along and asks what he is doing. Mullah says, “I’m looking for my keys.” His friend says, “Well, where did you leave them?” Mullah replies, “In my house.” Which of course prompts the question, “Then why are you looking out here?” Mullah replies, “Because the light is better out here.”

This story makes us laugh at the absurdity of it all. We think Mullah should look inside his house. But like all spiritual teaching stories, it is really about us. We are all looking for the key under the streetlamp. We are looking for the key to open our understanding. We are looking for the key to happiness. We are looking for that something we have felt was missing all of our lives— that which we have searched for high and low.

The truth is, it is in our own house. It is within us. All the spiritual masters and the scriptures tell us this. You may look high and low, here and there, down the block and under the street lamp, but the kingdom of God is within you.

The mystic poet Rumi wrote:

There is a life-force within your soul, seek that life.
There is a gem in the mountain of your body, seek that mine.
O traveler, if you are in search of That.
Don’t look outside, look inside yourself and seek That.

So why doesn’t Nasruddin look in his own house? Why don’t we look within when we yearn for something that will “do it” for us? Mullah says, “Because the light is better out here.” In our own way, we say the same thing. We say: I know how to look out here; I can see out here; I can identify this thing or that, I don’t know how to look inside my own house. I don’t know how to look inside myself. It is too dark in there. Too mysterious.

At some point we realize that looking “out there” is not going to bring the fulfillment we are seeking. Yet, often, because we don’t know what we are really looking for, or how to look for it, we continue to search outside. It’s like the scenario we go through when we have lost our keys and we look in our handbag or our coat pocket where we ordinarily keep them. We don’t find them there.

The soul’s innate longing is the spiritual force within us that has us yearn to awaken—to know the truth about life, to realize our divine nature and express it fully. We often experience this soul yearning as if something is missing, as if there is something we want or need. Becoming aware of this yearning marked the beginning of my spiritual journey when I began to ask what it was I really wanted. The quest for truth had begun.
We look a few other places, but then we return and look again in our pockets or our handbag. This time perhaps more aggressively, even though we have already looked there and know they are not there. It’s a habit; we are conditioned to believe we will find them there.

It takes spiritual insight, and then, steadfast discipline, to direct our attention in the right way—in the way that will actually bring the fulfillment we seek. Even when we have heard, reflected upon, and realized that what we seek is actually within us—by the force of habit we may go back, time and time again, to believing that something out there is going to be “it.” This is called: “forgetting.”

An antidote to “forgetting” is to pay attention to the yearning, rather than what we think will cure it. Explore the longing itself. Instead of focusing on what we think will answer it, we can inquire into the nature of our wanting. *The key to our freedom is to ask ourselves: What do I really want?*

When Paramahansa Yogananda came to America in 1920 his maiden speech was on “*The Science of Religion.*” He helped everyone find their keys. Not their literal keys of course, but the key to unlock this mystery. He said we all seek to avoid pain and try to find pleasure or happiness. Whether it is seeking selfish pleasure or our highest altruistic endeavors, this is universally true. If we analyze our actions and motivations, we can see it. Then he explained that it is not actually pleasure or happiness we seek, but bliss. Pleasure, and the happiness that comes along with it, is temporary. What we really want is bliss, happiness that does not end.

This search for bliss is our search for God, our soul’s longing for its Beloved. Paramahansaji wrote: *Many people may doubt that finding God is the purpose of life; but everyone can accept the idea that the purpose of life is to find happiness. I say that God is Happiness. God is Bliss. God is Love. God is Joy that will never go away from your soul...Happiness that is delightfully varied, though its essence is changeless, is the inner experience everyone is seeking. Lasting, ever new joy is God. Finding this Joy within, you will find it in everything without...*

With faith and discernment, our yearning can lead us to the divine Truth of our Being—God within us as us. Stay connected to the yearning. Follow it; don’t lose it by attributing it to anything external. As Rumi advised: *O traveler, if you are in search of That. Don’t look outside, look inside yourself and seek That.*

Our joy hides in plain sight. It is always within us. Mullah Nasruddin may still be looking for his keys. But we can find ours. 🕉️

Yogacharya Ellen Grace O’Brien is the Spiritual Director of CSE.