The Cloud of Unknowing
(The Divine Darkness)
(23/04/1998)

The "Cloud of Unknowing" is spoken of in mystical literature, and it is described as "darkness being greater than the light".

Dionysius, the Areopagite wrote of this very matter. He was thought to be the same character who was a friend of Paul, but because of his patristic references (i.e. to senior members of the early church) research suggests that he lived approximately from AD475 and is sometimes referred to as "Pseudo" Dionysius to indicate that it was a mistaken identity.

The term Areopagite refers to a member of the tribunal of Areopagus, otherwise known as 'Mars Hill', just to the west of the Acropolis in Athens. This was a very high court for the Greeks. Some think that his actual origin was that of a Syrian monk. Whoever he actually was is not important, it is the knowledge or thoughts that he had which can be helpful on a deeper Spiritual path. As usual we must sift through the orthodoxy as expressed in dogma, and see how the core matches up to our own experiences or that of others.

Dionysius then, in his book "The Mystical Theology"(don't let the title put you off!), or as it was "Mystica Theologia" tells us about this darkness, which incidentally makes sense because of our understanding of modern science. In his opening words he speaks of the necessity to "direct our path to the ultimate summit of Thy Mystical Love" so here we are in a rarified location far beyond the usual "New Age" level, or that of church members.

He goes on to say that this is "the most incomprehensible, most luminous and most exalted, where the pure, absolute and immutable mysteries (of spirituality) are veiled in the dazzling obscurity of the secret silence, outshining all brilliance with the intensity of their darkness."

The remoteness of the "summit" contrasts with the idea of the "God within." This aspect of God within is real enough, where the Cosmic force sent by God can infuse us. But this is different matter to actually approach the God-head where difficulties would be encountered by the approach of those not admissible. This in any case would be, as it mentions above, the "ultimate summit."

If the 'God within' were to be the ultimate summit, then there would be a denial of the supreme power of the force that keeps the stars in place, clearly there must be an ultimate that is beyond the reach of someone locked in the phenomena syndrome who can talk of God being within. Here we are talking about something beyond this.

So, what is this "darkness" more brilliant than the light? Certainly Dionysius was not kidding when he spoke of it being "incomprehensible." We do know in our own experience how spirituality can be riddled with paradoxes, which do not comply with so-called 'common sense', or limited to human understanding based on knowledge within the vortex. This is the reason for the "koans" of the Zen Buddhists which are carefully devised nonsensical riddles which are meant to make the student of Zen realize the limitations of logic and reasoning. The paradoxes present in these riddles makes it impossible to solve them by thinking.

In the school known as the Rinzai, the student has to solve many koans. This is the only way that teachings in this school are taught. It is training in intuition rather than much book knowledge. It is here with Dionysius that we have a similar scenario. So the 'ultimate summit' is a light of the secret silence, and where the intensity of the darkness outshines the brilliance. This is a koan if there ever was one. Yet stay, this can be a familiar phenomenon if we, for a moment, take advantage of the current scientific findings, which were not available in Dionysius' day. We can help to show what this means.
Let us look at the Electromagnetic spectrum:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1020</th>
<th>1018J</th>
<th>1016</th>
<th>1014</th>
<th>1012</th>
<th>1010</th>
<th>108</th>
<th>106</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gamma Rays</td>
<td>X Rays</td>
<td>Visible</td>
<td>Infra</td>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Microwaves</td>
<td>Radio waves</td>
<td>ultra violet</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The visible part is that narrow bit near the middle. All other aspects of light are not perceived by us, although they are there. If we were in a dark room which was illuminated by, say, radio waves, we would not see them, neither would the room be lit in any way. It would be complete darkness.

So it follows that this "darkness" would be no evidence of the lack of light, simply that we cannot see it, and if say radio waves, or microwaves were the medium of God's "light" it would be darkness to us.

You will notice the frequencies marked on the chart in terms of 'Hertz' which is simply the modern way of describing so many 'cycles per second' a cycle being the length of a wave, whether it be light or sound. (For example our hearing can detect sounds from approximately 20-20,000 cycles per second.) Frequencies at the bottom end 10 to the power of 6 (10,000,000) up to the top end as per the chart, 10 to the power of 20 (1000,000,000,000,000,000,000 cycles per second) CB radio band can be between 460 and 470 megahertz, that is million Hertz.

So even in this material world there are examples of phenomena which greatly exceed our ability to experience them, apart from special instruments that make use of them. But our five senses cannot.

So, coming back to Diosysius, this Divine darkness does not mean the absence of light, but merely that we would be unable to see it, hence for us we are in the impenetrable darkness.

Here we enter the darkness and as a result are, to us, removed from all we knew, thought, even the presence of God. We seem to be abandoned. Yet, this is a blessed state, being removed from all our possibly faulty ideas, a complete emptying of everything so that we are virgin pages, ready to receive the higher understanding that will follow.

So, to recap, the darkness is really a light far too higher a frequency for us to see, hence it has the appearance of darkness to us. In this utter and complete void we may feel abandoned, and without any guide to show us the way. Complete darkness is never experienced in this country, there is always light pollution. Now, if you go down one of these caverns near Castleton (either Treak Cliff, or Blue John) there is a time on the escorted exploration where the guide puts out the light. Being so far under the earth there is absolutely no light whatsoever, the darkness simply presses on you. This then if you ever go there is a symbol of the darkness of which we speak.

Going through the clouds is a similar situation. The journey up to the pink mountains can be used to reach higher spiritual levels than the normal 'out of the vortex' meditation, and the clouds become "clouds of unknowing", when in them a similar nothingness occurs. It is a realisation that all we have learned, or thought, cannot adequately describe the real situation regarding knowing God. All we thought we knew, all the maturity that we thought we had is made void, it again is a blessed state because we are being emptied to be ready for the greater understanding. It is to have the "rebirth" to exist in that 'darkness that is outshining the light.'

The unknown writer of "The Cloud of Unknowing" wrote of this mystery (about the 14th Century) like being in a thick cloud with nothing to show where one is. This gives a similar experiences to being in the Divine Darkness.

He says:

"How shall I think of myself, and what is He? (i.e. God), and to this I cannot answer but this - 'I wot (know) not'.

For thou hast brought me with thy question into that same darkness, and into that same Cloud of Unknowing that I would thou wert in thyself."

Here, in spite of the stripping of knowledge, and the realisation that one simply does NOT know, the
emptiness and seemingly abandonment that occurs, yet he can say that he wishes that the questioner was with him in the cloud.

One can have knowledge of worldly matters, GCSE’S, A levels, or university degrees, but there is this cloud in the way (or the darkness) which makes all this learning of no help. "The world by wisdom knew not God" so we read in 1. Corinthians 1. 21. and again 1. Cor. 3. 19 tells us that "The wisdom of this world is foolishness with God"

So the "Cloud of Unknowing" goes on to say as the notes above have indicated-

"For of all other creatures, and their works, yea, and the works of God's self may a man have full head of knowing, and well he may think them, but of God himself can no man think. And therefore I would leave all that thing that I can think, and choose to my love that thing I cannot think. For why? He can be loved but not by thought...and although it be good sometime to think of the kindness and worthiness of God in special and though it may be a part of contemplation, nevertheless yet in this work, it shall be cast down and covered with a cloud of forgetting."

So the emptying will take place somewhere along the line. If we are prepared for this in our understanding and mind, we shall not be afraid or bewildered when it happens to us. This could be in this lifetime or some other one, or at another level.