

Reporting on The ALL

a day spent with Timothy Freke

Jon Creffield

It is a bright October morning; I am driving from my coastal home inland towards Glastonbury. The sun is dazzling, it is a fresh day. I am about to attend a seminar held by Timothy Freke, author of controversial books examining the origins of Christianity and a self-proclaimed "stand up philosopher."

Green fields, trees clad in browning leaves, and beautiful swelling hills speed by, soon Glastonbury's famous Tor looms into view, its tower perched awkwardly atop it.

I am looking for St Mary's Church Hall, it is situated opposite the ruins of Glastonbury Abbey on the appropriately named Magdalene Street - appropriate as Timothy Freke is a great believer in the sacred feminine.

Parking is easy, a few spaces are available outside the hall for disabled visitors and a large car park nearby costs £5 for the whole day.

Freke is a spokesman for The Alliance for Lucid Living - The ALL. Attendees are each making a £75 contribution to The ALL's funds.

Simon Small, an ordained Anglican priest and author of books on Christian mysticism, waits outside the hall to direct attendees towards an upper room. "We've met before haven't we?" he asks in a friendly fashion.

I'm not sure we have but it is possible. I attend Church of England services, infrequent Quaker meetings and have even been known to show up at a Unitarian hall. In any event I feel certain I will remember him now, he has a cordial air about him.

The seminar itself is being held in a well-lit room with cream-coloured walls, exposed pine beams and highly polished pine floorboards. Its only decorations are a clock and an image of Jesus on the cross.

A table is laden with some of Freke's books. The author of more than twenty works he is best known as the co-writer of *The Jesus Mysteries*, *Jesus and the Lost Goddess*, *The Laughing Jesus* and *the Gospel of the Second Coming*. Copies of his recent book *Lucid Living* are also on display.

Freke greets everyone personally. He is a small man wearing a pinstripe suit and glasses. His head is shaved. He has a friendly style and a warm manner.

Debbie, Tim's attractive wife, checks each attendee against a list and hands out name tags. In a side room tea and coffee making facilities are available. As I go to make myself a drink a kettle crisis has just been averted - there had not been one available but collective efforts have rustled up no fewer than four.

I chat to an older gentleman named John. He has driven 270 miles to be here today having left home at 6.00 am. He is not the only one to travel far, a vivacious lady who admires the tattoo on my forearm has travelled all the way from Ireland, flying in to Bristol and then travelling the rest of the way by bus. Another attendee has journeyed from the Midlands; in fact many of Freke's admirers are willing to go a long way to hear him speak.

Chairs have been laid out in a trio of crescent shaped rows. As we sit ourselves down I notice a laptop and speakers set to one side. I hear an estimate for the number of people in attendance, seventeen or eighteen I am told, but my own count puts the number at twenty. Some, like me, are first timers. Others have attended Freke's workshops and seminars before. Most are middle-aged but there are individuals well into their retirement years and men and women in their late twenties too.

Freke takes off his shoes and jacket and sits down on a chair in front of us. There is a light hearted atmosphere. He tells us that "Simon's gone to look for stragglers."

Simon returns without any lost sheep and we can begin.

Freke explains that this is a new venue. He points to the image of Jesus on the cross and describes it as the "guy being tortured on the wall." He explains that he encountered some curious questions when booking the church hall. He'd been asked if The ALL was a cult and replied "No, are you?" Another query that had astonished him was "Will there be any spells?"

He goes on to tell us that according to a poll 33% of US citizens fear they are being attacked by witches.

We now move on to one of Freke's main points, "Nothing is what it seems" and "You are not who you seem."

He tells us that according to people he trusts, people with a sound scientific understanding, we are only "Appearing to be here." He holds out his arm and touches it with his other hand, a puzzled expression on his face. He acknowledges its reality but "Not in the way it appears to be."

He tells us that, "Close up no one is who they seem."

The purpose of the day's seminar is, he says, to create a bubble where people can come together to transform consciousness. To change our state of consciousness we must wake up.

He tells us that consciousness comes and goes; it wells up from a state of unconsciousness. Thus the oblivion of deep sleep gives way to a dream state that in turn becomes a waking state. He wants us to step out of our normal waking state.

In order to help as many people as possible achieve this transformative awakening he believes a community is needed. Socialising, active support and events will allow likeminded individuals to help each other progress. "A new consciousness is evolving."

Freke is enthusiastic about the idea of community; his hands rub together as he talks about it. Debbie asks how many people will be attending the meal being organised for post-seminar discussion and fun (a Sunday walk up the Tor is also planned and other events designed to "bolster a sense of community.") Only a few of us fail to raise our hands - after Freke's enthusiasm I feel a little awkward. I feel sure that the meal would be interesting and I would actively enjoy walking up the Tor but a mixture of obligations and necessities coupled with a lack of funds pulls me elsewhere.

Outside a car alarm goes off. The noise is loud and intrusive. From time to time it stops only to resume a short while later. Freke uses it as a metaphor for the expansion and contraction of consciousness. To paraphrase his explanation, there are narrow and wide states of consciousness. One gives way to the other. To become lucid is to enter an even wider state of consciousness than that which we experience in everyday waking life.

Mystery. A word we will hear often in the course of the day. Freke explains that we have ideas about everything we are conscious of. Indeed, he says, we are conscious by separating things. He stresses that this is not a bad thing. We need ideas in place in order to live. Youthful mystery has to evolve into adulthood for survival.

But there is a negative side to this accumulation of ideas, we can start off like spry lambs and end up like staid sheep.

As adults we can forget a simple truth - "This" is amazing.

He refers to our existence as a story. We are each a story. The story is about time - concepts come from the deep past. We project these concepts into the

future. This is necessary for survival but can make us forget "Now." We are in danger of being sucked into the story, into our concepts.

As an example he refers to the clash between adults and teenagers. The child lives in the now, the adult is more aware of time - thus the child does not want to do homework, not when the pleasures of the moment call, while the adult concerned for their future pushes for studies to be done.

Freke holds out the ideal of having both at once - the now and the concept, the child's consciousness and the adult's.

At first a child's world is small - perhaps home and grandparents' house and the strange journeys between the two. Gradually the world widens, school enters the picture, more and more concepts come, more and more ideas are established.

Eventually the illusion that "everything is sewn up" forms - we believe we know and understand the world around us. But true reality, this moment, is an awesome mystery.

How then to reach back into ourselves? Can we enter the moment?

The answer, he suggests, is to be authentic, to acknowledge that "I am here in this moment and it is an awesome mystery."

Freke, referring to Zen Buddhism, asks what it is to hear something. He says that things don't exist but we must treat them like they do.

We get lost in an idea of what "This" is - that idea changes us for the worse.

Our story, our concepts born out of our existence in time and our need for survival, is like a dream. It can mesmerise us. One thing, he says, never changes from childhood to adulthood, become conscious of that and in doing so life becomes magic.

How to prompt this lucid state? How to begin lucid living?

We are divided into three groups - initially, perhaps because I am attending in order to report on the seminar, I am not assigned a group but then I am offered the chance to sit with the more advanced attendees in a circle directed by Simon Short, he takes the time to qualify his ordained status by stating that he is "technically still ordained."

After a period of relaxation we each describe our reasons for being here. In this circle most of the members come from a Christian background and, albeit in

an unorthodox fashion, express Christian sentiments. "Jesus is my friend," says one lady who was raised as a Roman Catholic.

To my mind the group seems as Christian as any Quaker meeting I have attended. I find myself talking quite openly about personal spiritual matters. I feel at ease and am surprised both at how open the group is and at how easily I vocalise my own experiences. I tell them my main purpose for attending is to write reports so that readers might know what it is like to be present at a Timothy Freke seminar.

The seminar had begun shortly after 10.00 am. It is now 11.30 am and we stop for a coffee break. Everyone breaks into pairs or small groups to talk. Unsociable chap that I am I find myself sat alone and take the opportunity to jot down some more notes - I have been making a running record of Freke's talk.

My impression so far has been that the group is more Christian than I had expected given Freke's Christ Myth thesis. With some exceptions they seem like exponents of Liberal Christianity.

I try to sum up what Freke has told us. My understanding of his teaching is this: as children we attached no ideas to the sensory input that amazed us. In order to survive we began to break up this world of wonder into separate idea-units. Now we can become lost and despondent in those ideas - only based on patterns created by our senses - and fail to appreciate the wonder of The Mystery.

Being sat alone, albeit writing, begins to make me self-conscious. I wonder if that is an illustration of how our world of ideas and concepts can create an unhappy experience. In place of such thoughts Freke would have us stand in the now and be amazed by the universe, our own apparent realness, the concept of death, all we are and all we experience.

We resume at 11.50 am. Freke stretches and sways a little like an athlete warming up. He tells us he is intrigued by simplicity. When you meet another person you come to know their world of complexity.

He talks about Gnostic imagery and how in ancient depictions the sense of "I" is represented by a dot within a circumference - the inner world of imagination reaching to the outer world.

In a baby there is no space between the "I" and the edge of the conceptual circle. As adults we live on the edge of this conceptual circle, our objective is to travel back to the universal "I." Thus we begin a journey out at birth - now we must travel back.

From birth we are bombarded by concepts *unconsciously* - that is what makes us conscious. Freke says most of us are only conscious through *unconscious* concepts.

Deep down inside us there is a fundamental concept: self and other - I am.

Freke pauses to tell us what he considers to be new in his teaching, namely that "None of this is bad." We need complexity. We had to grow up. But we should strive to have a child's consciousness and an adult's - to be like children and like grown ups. He wants us to be in the Story and in The Mystery - be both in time and in the now.

Because we are stuck in one we think escape is in the other but we need both.

He turns to the subject of suffering and says that the problem isn't suffering it's *just* suffering. Suffering is always awful but with expanded consciousness it can be of use.

How to acquire expanded consciousness? "It's here available to everyone," Freke says.

See your story - step into it. Consciousness is us - the witness. It is in "This", it is our awareness. Awareness itself is the essence of being. Freke says, "The only thing I actually know is that I am." It is a mystery by nature, we can only be it.

He asks us if we can feel a change since we came in. For myself I am not sure but others nod enthusiastically.

Freke tells us he was once in a meditation cult but was glad to be out of it, friends who still belong seem no happier than anyone else; they just believe the solution lies in more meditation.

Again Freke says we should step into our story and become conscious of the being that is watching - become conscious of consciousness. He calls this "witnessing," but acknowledges that a new language is needed to express his meaning. To clarify the subject he tells us witnessing is not an internal dialogue, neither is it a detachment from "This." Rather it is something more intimate, an appreciation, a love, of what is happening.

We are split into pairs to take part in a "looking exercise." I find myself with a lady of retirement age named Diana. She takes charge and sits us opposite each other close by a window. Freke explains that we are to look into one another's eyes to try and reach through and connect with the "I" beyond. He mentions that everyone has the feeling that eye contact allows others to see inside them but assures us this is not true.

For a while we sit with closed eyes listening to Freke talk and trying to relax. When we open our eyes we sit staring at each other for a hugely long time. More than once Diana and I laugh. I find the experience uncomfortable. Staring at another person's eyes breaks normal social conventions and I can't get past the idea I might be making Diana uncomfortable - even though I know she wants to take part. I am glad when the exercise is over. Diana and I chat about it for a while and she tells me of her concerns about organised religion and the need for a new vocabulary to express the ideas behind lucid living.

Our discussion is broken off by the resumption of the seminar. Freke tells us each "I" is unique - no other "I" will ever experience what your "I" experiences. We are each a unique peephole in time and space - the deepest you has no other qualities. We are both particular and universal.

To distance oneself too much from the world is to risk losing passion and colour. Freke talks about deep sleep, a state with no consciousness and no separateness.

If the universe wants to look at itself what else can it do but arise as separate individuals - but we're all one universe, at depth we are all one.

Freke talks of a hole in each person that can only be filled by communion - by this he means community and love. Organised religions, he claims, are stuck in the past and take away from this love.

He says, "I am the world and I am just Tim." He points out that who we are is contingent upon other things - we are vulnerable and can be turned inside out by events.

Freke says everything is in polarity. He acknowledges that staring can be intimidating - it is the consciousness behind the look that counts.

He wants to change the world.

It is now nearing 1.00 pm and we break for lunch, the seminar is to resume at 2.00 pm.

Glastonbury is a funny town. I walk out of the seminar chatting to another attendee. I get the impression he would rather walk alone but as we're going in the same direction he feels awkward about walking away. My need to stop at a cash point machine saves him from any embarrassment. Armed with a little money I explore the locality, I find myself wandering around the perimeter of a church building. Its gates are locked and when I accidentally drop my pen over the iron railing I am unable to retrieve it.

A mass of motorbikes passes by, heading for the car park. Dozens of bikers, mostly middle-aged men and women, remove helmets and stride off in their leathers.

All around me hippy-looking folk, some in Native American-style clothing, mooch around shops offering the secrets of magick and witchcraft - Glastonbury is a Mecca for New Agers, occult bookstores stand opposite old churches.

There is a dark side to the town too, individuals who look down and out, some with children, cluster in small groups. I wonder about drug use and what sort of lives these people might face.

Here even ordinary shops are adorned with mythic images - a centaur-like being rears up on a sign set above an otherwise commonplace business. By the time I return to the seminar I feel that its attendees, most of whom appear quite genteel, are more conventional than many of Glastonbury's other visitors.

As we gather together again Freke takes time to make it clear that the money raised by the event - each attendee has paid £75 - is not going to him but into the coffers of The Alliance for Lucid Living.

He takes some time to talk about his co-author Peter Gandy, joking that they have been described as "the Morecombe and Wise of mysticism." He tells us that he has written a new book, without Peter Gandy, called *How Long is Now?* It won't be available for at least a year. In it he believes he has achieved a tone similar to that of his seminars.

He talks about doubt. He urges us to fall in love with doubt. To find you are wrong spurs the opportunity to find new answers. He believes organised religion can cause you to bend events to fit a mould - a mould created by the religion.

Freke invites questions, in answer to one he says that people often wake up when death comes. Another query is about the mystery cults of the ancient world. How did they work? Freke's best guess is that they held philosophical discussions coupled with art and pageantry, mystic shows designed to awaken the audience - he offers the Catholic mass as an example "if it is performed well." He speculates on the possible use of natural hallucinogens.

In answer to a question about madness Freke talks of an epidemic of self hatred. Nearly everyone is good, he says, but we see the madness in us. Our internal worlds are both a blessing and a curse.

We master each stage of life only as we move on to another - he jokes about how successful he could be with girls if he were able to relive his teenage years.

Freke urges his listeners not to go along with collective attitudes of the herd, "Be distinctly you." Consciousness is separateness, but paradoxically a separateness that allows one to identify with the whole.

It is time for another exercise. As someone who dislikes the formal handshakes exchanged in Anglican services when we share the sign of peace with each other the idea of a "hands together" exercise is not appealing. I am paired with a woman near retirement age. She is fit and active, she tells me she recently served as a crew member on a tall ship and even clambered up in the rigging. Her journey here took two and a half hours.

We stand with eyes closed and hands together, our fingers touching. Again we are to reach through to the "I" beyond. I find myself distracted by the possibility that my shorter companion's arms might be aching - she tells me later that they were. Afterwards some people report profound experiences, a blurring of individualities. I can report no such insights.

Freke begins to talk about embodied enlivenment, his is no anti-material Gnosticism. He has a concept of "Big Love" that embraces the body as one becomes conscious of being conscious. He poses the question, do I lead my life or does my life lead me? He suggests that the more we can step out to the mystery the more we can step in.

He likes to quote from the Gospel of Thomas, recalling the question asked of Jesus, "When will the kingdom of Heaven come?" he quotes Christ's reply: "Not by waiting for it. The Kingdom of Heaven is laid out on the Earth and people don't see it."

So too with lucid living, says Freke. We can't see it all the time. We can't be totally awake - everyone must sleep. You must go into the unconsciousness of sleep in order to be conscious at all. The dream state is based on the sleeping state. In the same way, based on our everyday waking consciousness there is a more awake state.

We are not to aspire to remain in this lucid state, a child-like consciousness, all the time. We are not to stay at one level of consciousness but fluidly flow through them all. This lucid state is fleeting but increasing familiarity allows one to hold on to it for longer periods. In answer to a question he suggests many people will have had glimpses of this expanded state of awareness - I recall the morning my youngest son was born and some deep moments of spiritual understanding.

It is time for another group exercise. I am paired with a middle-aged man called George. We sit side by side but facing in opposite directions. All around us other pairs are similarly sat, all in close proximity to each other. After a period of

relaxation and soft music we are told to repeat the words "I am" to our partner, first one speaking and then the other.

Eyes shut I hear George and the voices of the other attendees softly speaking the words. Perhaps it is a trick of the mind but after a while it seems George's voice could almost be my own. Recollections of earliest childhood arise, I remember looking out from my cot towards my parents' bed and seeing a big brown spider crawling on the wall, I remember being in a carrycot as we left the car park at Virginia Water. For an instant I feel conscious of my thoughts being a part of my body - am I above them, in some way removed? The moment passes quickly.

As the exercise concludes a powerfully built younger man by the name of Crocket, a practitioner of the Japanese healing art Shiatsu, leaves the room to "ground himself." Upon his return we talk for a while about his beliefs. He points out that Freke conducts seminars and keeps attention without being dominant or overly assertive - even his body language is giving. I suppose the word meek comes to mind if all its negative connotations are removed.

Freke takes more questions, he talks about the impact of families on a child's developing consciousness, "We're told who we can't be and who we are by our families."

Freke suggests a photograph be taken of the assembled group but gesturing towards the cross on the wall says, "We don't want a man being tortured in the photo behind us." He borrows Simon Short's camera but can't figure out how to operate it. Simon takes over but he too is momentarily perplexed and the attendees laugh and joke as he struggles to take a picture.

All the chairs are gathered into one big circle. One by one names are drawn from a hat. Everyone then looks at the named person, staring into their eyes as the individual slowly casts his gaze around the group. Freke talks about feeling support and love. He is clearly moved. The process is a long one and as I am here reporting more than participating my name is not in the hat. Despite my dislike of such things I volunteer myself when Freke asks if anyone has been missed out.

I find the experience a little uncomfortable. It is unusual to find many people looking intently at your eyes. I do not feel the sensations that Freke and others clearly experience, but maybe that is due to my self-conscious reaction.

The seminar draws to a close. Freke gladly consents to being interviewed. He is warm and friendly, thoughtful and forthcoming in his answers. We sit to one side of the room, occasionally interrupted by the farewells of those who attended his talk. He gives each a fond goodbye.

During the interview it becomes clear his mother has had a great influence on his spiritual growth, not so much by what she said or taught but simply by being herself, he says his mother was "awake" naturally. I am surprised to discover that he does not think spiritual practices are the only way to "wake up."

"People can be awake with no spiritual understanding - spontaneously - through sport, science, anything."