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THE WISDOM OF *Yoga*

A SEEKER'S GUIDE TO
EXTRAORDINARY LIVING

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become to me a newly fascinating human being. We met regularly in the cemetery behind the church—which was just across the street from my house (and Maggie's). When wandering the cemetery Jake and I spoke a lot about death. I recalled for him the teaching that Yaqui shaman Don Juan had given to his student, anthropologist Carlos Castaneda: "The thing to do when you're confused," instructed the shaman, "is to turn to your left and ask advice from your death. An immense amount of pettiness is dropped if your death makes a gesture to you, or if you catch a glimpse of it, or if you just have the feeling that your companion is watching you."[10]

Jake wandered among the stones sometimes for hours at a time, perhaps hoping to get a glimpse of his own death. Or a longer perspective on his life. And so, that summer, Jake sat and peered and wandered and prayed and listened—like a hunter who wasn't sure if he was hunting or being hunted. Looking to his left.

Chapter 2

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH MIND

WILD PUPPY OF MIND

"OK. Remember your posture for meditation. Stable. Upright. Relaxed belly." I looked directly at Jake as I spoke, because he was slouching dramatically and looked as though he might fall asleep at any moment.

It was Jake's first meditation retreat. For the first time since I'd known him, Jake was really interested in sitting still, and in learning to meditate. Motivated as he was, however, it was still not a smooth ride.

For two days, I had been teaching a group of twenty beginning meditation students. Over and over again, I'd given the class a simple assignment: "Let your awareness rest in the sensations of the breath. Let the mind become absorbed in the rising and falling sensations of the breath."

This was my first class since returning to work from my writing sabbatical. I was enjoying it immensely and wondered, now, why I had been so reluctant to return to teaching.

This afternoon, I was instructing the group in the simplest of so-called concentration techniques—a mainstay of all meditative practice. In concentration techniques, we train attention to aim at an object—either an internal object, like the breath, or an external object,

like an icon—and to stay on the object, or continually bring awareness back to the object.

It's not as easy as it sounds.

Jake was struggling. He couldn't get comfortable. He sat with his eyes open, and a defeated look on his face, eyeing the silent whooshing of the overhead fan. His eyes met mine, imploring. I could read the look: can't we turn it off? By this point in the retreat, Jake had already adjusted the windows several times, turned off the fan next to him, and asked the grounds crew not to mow the lawn near the building. I had talked to him several times about how to handle his aversion to sound (explore the aversion itself, and let go of trying to perfect the environment), but he still struggled. He was bumping up against the major obstacle with which he would wrestle for the next year.

All of this is to be expected. As a meditation instructor, I know that most beginning meditators don't really meditate—in any technical sense of the term. It is a law of the universe: at first, we just begin to get accustomed to negotiating the extreme strangeness of the inner world.

"Just let your body breathe normally," I coached, in response to some weird sounds coming from the back of the room. These were the same instructions that I had already given over and over again through the last two days. "And now let your awareness rest in the sensations of breath. Wherever you feel the sensations. Belly, chest, tip of the nostrils. Awareness resting right there."

At about fifteen minutes into the "sit" everyone had finally settled down, and quiet suffused the room. Eventually, it was so silent that I could hear only the subtle rising and falling of the breath. The aroma of freshly mown lawn infused the room with a subtle sweetness, and the almost imperceptible movement of air on my face and bare arms and legs felt sublime.

It was a clear September afternoon. The big windows in the Sunrise Room at Kripalu were thrown open to the vast expanse of emerald lawn sloping gently off to the west. The direct afternoon sun

was filtered through a graceful stand of elms at the end of the lawn. The faint strains of a motorboat rose from Lake Mahkeenac below.

I settled into a concentrated state, and even the distant drone of the boat receded completely.

Thirty minutes later, I lifted the little mallet and hit the gong softly. The sound reverberated off the stucco walls and out onto the lawn in front. At first no one moved. Finally Jake took a big loud stretch and let out a kind of growl—signaling, I thought, his relief.

After a short break and a little stretching, the group reconvened to discuss our experience of meditation.

"How did it go?" I asked the group.

Jake threw up his hands. "I'm a total meditation moron.

"I can't do it. Can't do it," he said. "My mind is everywhere. But most of the time it's, well, it just ain't here."

He looked around at the faces of the group. "Well, all right. *All* of the time it's not here. Never here. Never. The whole time. I was faking it."

Everyone had a laugh, because, naturally—the mind being what it is—everyone had had some version of this experience.

"Welcome to the reality of your mind, Jake. And not just *your* mind. *The* mind. The *nature* of ordinary mind."

I explained to the class that the Eastern contemplative traditions have many words and phrases to describe the restlessness of this ordinary mind: monkey mind, wild elephant mind, raging river mind, crazy puppy mind.

Our first experiment with a meditation technique of this kind inevitably brings us face-to-face with an alarming discovery: we cannot do the technique at all! We cannot let awareness rest in the breath for even *a few seconds together* without it slipping off and thinking about dinner tonight, or that irritating snoring sound coming from our

neighbor. We've given awareness a very simple object—the breath. And such a simple directive: Stay!! Stay, Lassie, stay. Stay on the breath. But Lassie just keeps romping off to play in the woods.

I sometimes call this discovery "the Noble Failure." It is certainly a failure—because we discover that the mind will simply not rest on the object. But it is also noble, because it gives us (perhaps for the first time) a vantage point from which to observe the nature of ordinary mind.

All early attempts at contemplative practice present us with this Noble Failure. *Samvega* inevitably draws us into an investigation of the ways of the mind. But when we begin to explore, when we finally lift the lid of the mind, we discover that we're in complicated and difficult new territory.

I continued to probe. "Did any of you notice exactly where your awareness went when it slipped off the object of the breath?"

A rush of answers: The pain in my knee. The project at work. What I'm going to cook for dinner when I get home.

Where does the mind go? The past. The future. Our dreams. Our fantasies. Mind flits happily everywhere. But it cannot stay with the present moment.

When we use a meditation technique to examine our minds' activities, most of us are shocked to find out what's going on in there. It's a torrent of disconnected thoughts—reactions to sensations, memories, fantasies. It seems out of control. At any moment when we dip into the stream of ordinary discursive thought, we'll find a ceaseless, churning river of activity.

The discovery that it is impossible for us to maintain a fixed awareness on the breath—or on any object—for more than a few seconds at a time is a powerful and important one. Mircea Eliade, one of the twentieth century's most distinguished yoga scholars, comments eloquently on this phenomenon:

> The mere act of trying to hold the mind to a single point, an act with which higher forms of meditation all begin, teaches the beginner in a radically concrete and experiential way, that he or she has little or no control over the mental flow. All attentional training starts with this failure. Thus, when the Christian is asked to concentrate his attention solely upon God, when the Muslim attempts to link his attention solely to the names of God, when the Tibetan Buddhist attempts with massive attention to construct elaborate images of Tara on the screen of consciousness, the first lesson these practitioners learn is that they cannot do it.[1]

Just so. The experience in beginning meditation is that the attention constantly *slips off the object* and follows an associational stream.

I remember how disconcerting this discovery was to me as a beginning meditator. Like Jake, I was sure that everyone else on the meditation cushions around me was doing the technique better than I was—and that I was actually a meditation imposter of sorts.

Yet in spite of this undeniable failure—which I shared with all novice meditators—I found my early experiences remarkably freeing. Even remembering to bring my attention back to breath for a few seconds every minute seemed to have a profound effect. Why?

The answer goes to the heart of the transformation wrought by meditation. When one notices that the attention has slipped off the object, there is an opportunity for the observing mind to witness just exactly where this crazy puppy of mind has been: "Oh, I was just fantasizing, or daydreaming, or thinking about the past, or dreaming about the future. Now I can return to the breath." And with practice, this fledgling witness, this incipient observing self, cannot fail to notice some pattern in the train of associations that one follows away from the still point.

One of the first things the beginning meditator gets to see, then, is precisely what her mind is occupied with—what, presumably, her mind is doing day in and day out when she's not paying attention. We

become a witness to the internal chatter that is unconsciously driving our behavior in every moment. Transpersonal psychologist and author Michael Washburn describes this discovery succinctly: "In attempting to be a silent witness, the mental ego realizes what a nonstop talker it is."[2]

But what is this "mental ego," this ordinary discursive mind, talking *about*? This is not good news. In fact, it can be downright dismaying. I remember on my first meditation retreat being shocked as I stood in the lunch line waiting for my turn to dish up the one solid meal of the day. As I hovered over the food with my stomach grumbling, watching my mind, I couldn't believe what I witnessed: A plethora of nasty, anxiety-driven grumbling: "Why doesn't that person move more quickly?" Plenty of judgmental, homicidal thoughts: "Oh my God, look how much food that guy is putting on his plate. He is a real pig. I'm glad I'm not such a hog." And an abundance of greed and aversion: "If that woman takes the last piece of coffee cake, there won't be any for me. I hate her."

Were these thoughts really me? Egad. When I watched my thoughts in that first retreat, I discovered that they were full of concerns about food, sex, comfort, and aggression. Was Sigmund Freud right? It appears so. Many of our thoughts are driven by craving and aversion of the most primitive kind. Decades of social polishing and the various finishing schools of life create only a thin veneer over this activity. Ordinary mind is more like our three-year-old nephew than we would like to think. As Joseph Goldstein, the American Buddhist teacher, has said, "The mind has absolutely no pride."[3]

Paradoxically, there is good news here: the very discovery of the primitive quality of this internal dialogue—and the concomitant discovery of our inability to control it—is itself the first, and most important, lesson to be learned from the technique. In order to learn it, we must simply be willing to continually bring attention back to the object of awareness—however infrequently it seems we can do so. This repeated action *provides a new point of view for the observing self*—some solid ground to which we can return again and again, giving us

an entirely new observational base for what is called in yoga "the Witness." In the process, we get to see how tiny this observing self really is—especially at the beginning of our practice. Then we get to see how this still, silent Witness actually gets bigger, stronger, with practice. Eventually, we'll discover that that little Witness is the seed of Illumined Mind—the very kernel around which will develop all the remarkable fruit of practice.

DIS-IDENTIFICATION

The Noble Failure teaches us many interesting lessons. Among them is this: through watching the flow of our thoughts, we see, perhaps for the first time, how very identified we are with those driven, primitive, grasping thoughts. Lacking any other perspective, we have naturally assumed *until now* that our thoughts are who we are.

The second lesson of the beginning meditator is simply that this is not so. *We are not our thoughts.* We are not our internal chatter.

At the end of the second day of the retreat, I walked Jake home to Rudi's cabin—Acorn Cottage—where Jake had been renting a small upstairs bedroom. Acorn Cottage was a tumbledown Italianate cottage, built originally as a caretaker's cottage on an isolated part of Maggie's old family estate. (It was about a two-mile walk from Kripalu, and also about two miles through the woods from my house and the neighboring Tudor manse where Maggie now lived.) The old cottage—named Acorn Cottage by Maggie's grandmother—perfectly suited our friend Rudi, who had it stacked around with gardening equipment, tools, and neat piles of firewood for the winter.

It was a soft evening, just at dusk. Crickets still hummed loudly, and the leaves rustled as we shuffled down the dark path to the cottage. Jake was quiet. I had rarely experienced him like this. He was present. Not leaning into the next moment. Not trying to devour this

moment with his usual obsessive examination. Jake's silence was full of presence. I mused to myself about the way in which seeing through thoughts gives us this little distance. A little breathing room.

Later, as the moon rose, we sat in big green Adirondack chairs and sipped tea on the porch of Acorn Cottage. We talked about Jake's experience of meditation over the previous two days, and about the power of dis-identifying with thoughts.

"A meditation teacher of mine used to have a wonderful drawing of this dis-identification with thoughts," I said. I drew the little diagram for him on a crumpled piece of paper I fished out of my pocket.

My teacher would draw a rectangle of pure blue, framed with a line.

"What is that?" my teacher would ask me. Well, of course, who knew what it was? Anybody's guess. Maybe it was the deep blue sea. Maybe it was just blue.

Then he would put a little triangle of green in the bottom right-hand corner of the picture, just above the frame.

This little patch of green in the corner, this teeny patch of ground, gave context to the blue. Suddenly it was clear: "Oh, of course I see now. It's sky." This little bit of ground allows us to see our thoughts for what they are: Oh, this blue is just the sky of mind. Maybe crystal blue, maybe cloudy and stormy. But sky.

A regular meditation practice is just like this, my teacher would say. "It gives you a small patch of ground to stand on, every day. So you know where you are, and what's what."

To know that we are not our thoughts is the first step toward freedom. Eliade makes this important point in his essay on meditation: "As long as we are unconsciously and automatically identifying with the changing contents of consciousness, we never suspect that our true nature remains hidden from us. Contemplative traditions affirm in one metaphor or another that our true identity lies not in the changing contents of consciousness but in a deeper layer of the self,

mind or soul. To reach this deeper layer one must slowly disentangle oneself from automatic identification with the contents of consciousness."[4]

While the first confrontations with the stream of thoughts can create some anxiety, there may arise, even quite early in meditation practice, a sense of the spaciousness that comes from this dis-identification—a sense of relief in not having to react to thoughts. The meditative self simply has a more spacious world in which to be.

I remember noticing early on in my practice that with the daily anchor of meditation, the chaos in my external life calmed down noticeably. As I brought my mind and body back to the meditation cushion every day, I grew less identified with Puppy Mind, and acted less frequently on its promptings.

Ego psychologists like Michael Washburn sometimes refer to this as "uncramping." Eliade calls it the "interruption of automatized behavior." But in many religious traditions it is referred to simply as "emptying." "God cannot fill a heart or mind that is already full," says Thomas Merton. There are images in every contemplative tradition that point toward this kind of self-emptying: One finds them in John of the Cross, in Teresa of Avila, and in the work of the anonymous author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*—who calls it "self-forgetting." The beginning meditator sees just how full the mind actually is, and how we're constantly bounced hither and yon by our automatic identification with this tumultuous river of thoughts.

The first step in crossing this river is discovering the nature of its process, and appreciating its vastness and depth. The "wedge" of dis-identification that happens early in our experience of meditation begins to give us perspective on the mind's nature. Eliade reminds us of the importance of awaking to this reality: "Without this realization no progress can be made, for one must first know one is in prison in order to work intelligently to escape."[5]

In the first phase of meditation, this insight creates a new sense of spaciousness, of freedom, and of equanimity. And with this comes a first glimpse of an altogether new kind of mind. Deeper levels of the

mind are revealed to lie underneath the flow of ordinary discursive thought. What yogis call "awake mind" emerges to the forefront of our experience. Our intuition, our knowing, and our discernment are heightened.

There is one more fruit of the Noble Failure available to the beginning meditator: Once we have begun to dis-identify with the current of thoughts on the surface of the mind, concentration automatically deepens. We can allow ourselves to stay with the object (the breath) precisely because we realize the ultimate futility of following the stray dog of discursive thought. This insight begins a process of ever-deepening cycles of concentration paired with the emergence of new, and often astounding, discoveries. The simple process of resting in the object, as we shall see, will eventually accomplish nothing less than the restructuring of the mind itself.

DRASHTRI: THE "SEEING" WITHOUT A "SEER"

The meditation class was circled together in the center of the Sunset Room at Kripalu. Jake was sitting near the back, looking relaxed (finally) and at ease. It was the morning of the last day of our retreat, and we had just sat again for thirty minutes (after an hour and a half of practicing yoga postures). The day had dawned brilliant, blue and still—and the air was cooler and drier than the previous day.

In our final discussion, I wanted to draw the class's attention to a small but very persistent piece of good news in their experience of meditation—and one of the central pillars of Patanjali's view.

I asked them to go with me to that endlessly repeating moment in concentration meditation when we notice that awareness has slipped off the object. When Lassie has wandered off to play in the fields.

"Relive this moment with me," I said. "You've noticed that attention has slipped off the object, and you've brought awareness back to the breath. Here's the question: Who was it that noticed mind had wandered? Who was it that brought mind back?

This gets them to thinking.

What part of the mind is this? Is this also Puppy Mind?

Slowly the truth dawns.

"There is someone watching," said a tentative voice from the front row.

"Exactly!" I said. "There is someone watching the whole thing—the whole storm of thoughts, feelings, and sensations. We're not constantly aware of this, but every now and then we're aware that We, or Some One or Some Thing or Some Alien Force, is watching, witnessing, seeing the whole bloody mess."

And now, of course, the fascinating question posed itself to the class: Who? Who is watching? And who is being watched? Are these two different parts of our mind? Seer and Seen?

The mysterious presence of this Seer is good news to those of us first encountering the Noble Failure. The storm clouds of wild mind lift for a moment. And there it is: a little island of presence. An island of solid land in the stormy seas. A still point that seems to be unmoving. Bali Hai! The ghostly but undeniable presence of this Seer is extremely reassuring. This silent Witness is always present. Even in the worst storm—a reliable presence.

Yogis have called this silent Witness *drashtri:* the Seer, or Pure Awareness. We know that *drashtri*, this Seer, will be an important part of Patanjali's treatise, because he puts it at the very beginning of his first chapter—in the third *sūtra:* "Then, Pure Awareness [*drashtri*] can abide in its very nature," he says.

> ***Now, the teachings of yoga.***
> ***Yoga is to still the patterning of consciousness.***
> ***Then pure awareness can abide in its very nature.*** (1.1–3)

The nature of this Pure Awareness, of this *drashtri*, is hard for us, at first, to comprehend. Early on in our understanding of Patanjali's teaching, we may find ourselves referring to Pure Awareness as a Seer

or a Witness—as if it were a person. At first, this personification of the Seer must stand in for a more subtle and difficult truth. For by the end of his treatise, Patanjali will have taught us that Pure Awareness is not a thing or a person or even an "it" of any kind. Pure Awareness is without form, time, change, location, or mass. It does not even behave. But not until the end of the path will we fully know the nature of this *drashtri* to which Patanjali alludes at the outset of his teaching. For now, we have no choice but to let it remain something of a mystery.

Almost all transformational psychologies begin by imagining some kind of Observer: an "observing ego." A Witness. A Seer. Carl Jung struggled to describe the function of witnessing. Marion Woodman, one of his students, and now a great feminist Jungian analyst and writer, describes it in a helpful graphic form. She draws a line across a big white sheet of newsprint. And then she draws a teeny little circle just in the center of the line.

Beneath the line (because Woodman is a Jungian) is the dark sea of the unconscious—completely unavailable to our awareness most of the time. Above the line is the conscious mind. Available to awareness. (But Puppy, nonetheless.) And right at the center of the line is the little seeing eye of the Witness. The still point at the center of the storm. Small. But maybe getting bigger as we practice. And no matter how small, always, always there.

The presence of the Witness is a source of reassurance and comfort for meditators and Jungians alike. A companion on the path. But is witnessing really always present? Can this be true? Sometimes ordinary mind becomes so entirely chaotic that it seems that the Witness is gone. Lost at sea. Entirely absent. Completely off the radar screen. But yogis discovered a deeper truth: the Witness IS the radar screen.

Ram Dass (the former Harvard professor Richard Alpert) often

told a wonderful story about the ever-present Witness. Throughout his years as a spiritual teacher, he had a great number of friends and students all over the world who stayed in touch with him by phone. One evening while he was at home on the East Coast, he received a desperate call from one such student in California. She was apparently "wrecked" on LSD—she was psychotic, hallucinating, hearing voices. Terrified. In the storm of her drug-induced psychosis, she was having a great deal of trouble being coherent. (Wild mind times ten—with chemical intervention.) Ram Dass couldn't connect with her.

Finally, he said to her, "I'd like to speak to the person who dialed the phone." This was brilliant. I'd like to speak to the person who picked up the receiver and dialed an eleven-digit phone number from memory. He knew that she had called him. He knew that it was the Witness that had made the phone call. The seed of a Witness was in there somewhere. And this was precisely the part of her mind with which he had to connect in order to help her.[6]

Our first experiments with meditation are often more difficult than we hope they will be, but they are also wonderfully productive and important. Very often, they yield all of the raw information we need to explain the entire path of yoga. In the first three days of practice, with some luck and a bit of perseverance, our beginning meditation class had directly experienced the three central building blocks of *rāja-yoga*:

1. The problem of Puppy Mind
2. A few mind-altering seconds of stillness
3. The presence of the Witness

These are precisely the three components with which Patanjali begins his terse description of the path of yoga.

As our morning session drew to a close, the class seemed settled, reassured. A cool breeze wafted through the Sunset Room. No one seemed eager to move. To end, I read the first three *sūtras* to the class, using the translation and commentary I had come to prefer—that of yoga teacher and scholar Chip Hartranft's *The Yoga-Sūtra of Patanjali.*

Now, the teachings of yoga. "Now" refers to the moment when we're finally willing to lift the lid and look inside. Now means, perhaps, the moment when we've finally had enough pain and insanity and suffering—when we're tired of being driven hither and yon by that crazy stray dog of mind. Our puppies have gnawed enough on the meatless bone. We're ready to sit down in a room and negotiate. Now, the teachings of yoga will have some meaning.

Yoga is to still the patterning of consciousness. There's a promise in this *sūtra*. Wild mind can be tamed. Stilled. And this stillness sounds good. It sounds like rest. Like happiness. Like an afternoon in the hammock. Like we could stop living at right angles to life.

Then pure awareness can abide in its very nature. Then the Witness abides in its very nature. Just seeing. Just knowing. Just Bali Hai and calm seas all around.

When consciousness is disturbed, Pure Awareness cannot be distinguished from the waves of mind. The restlessness of the mind, like a choppy pond, fractures the reflection.

When consciousness is stilled, however, a great mystery is revealed: *Pure Awareness abides in its very nature.* And what is this nature? This consciousness, when stilled, has two remarkable characteristics: it is *reflective,* reflecting Pure Awareness back to itself; and it is *transparent,* allowing itself to be completely seen and penetrated.

It is one of the glories of this technique that the end of the path is present even in the beginning. For even from the first days of practice, the meditator begins to "know" and "be known." And to understand that knowing and seeing is what it is all about.