



Insights Along the Way

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Chapter 1

The Great Cosmic Joke

The great cosmic joke is that you are what you are seeking. All the religious and spiritual seeking on this planet and you end up back where you started. If that's not a fantastic joke worth a good belly laugh I don't know what is.

We all look for happiness, peace and fulfilment in the things of the world and all along these things are our very nature, our very own centre of being. Meditation masters and mystics through-out history have seen the joke of it, as Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh explains:

"I laugh when I think how I once sought paradise as a realm outside of the world of birth. It is right in the world of birth and death that the miraculous truth is revealed. But this is not the laughter of someone who suddenly acquires a great fortune; neither is it the laughter of one who has won a victory. It is, rather, the laughter of one who; after having painfully searched for something for a long time, finds it one morning in the pocket of his coat."

The Buddhists have been in on the joke for a while, their main training is to not take things seriously. What else is being unattached than a great sense of humour? Buddha realised that all conditions of the world are fleeting and taking any of it too seriously creates suffering.

I'm not sure how humans made such a big a deal out of this simple message but I guess it's because everyone else was taking things seriously and causing a lot of problems for themselves they held up Buddha to be all enlightened, worshipped him, created another religion and over the years have mostly missed the basic point. Another Buddhist master, Longchenpa, realised this simple truth again some two thousand years later and said:

"Since everything is but an apparition, having nothing to do with good or bad, acceptance or rejection, one may as well burst out in laughter."

What about the warning from spiritual teachers that everything you imagine yourself to be is a clever lie constructed by a psychological defence mechanism built up against the existential truth of transiency?

In other words, you are not who you think you are. That's funny isn't it? Laughing about it and not taking yourself too seriously is a wonderful coping mechanism to be able to digest such seemingly harsh truths. As Longchenpa says, you may as well burst out laughing, or as modern Zen master Adyashanti explains:

“We realize—often quite suddenly—that our sense of self, which has been formed and constructed out of our ideas, beliefs and images, is not really who we are. It doesn’t define us; it has no centre.”

I have watched hundreds of spiritual teachers and the best ones have a common trait – they would giggle a lot. Even my main Buddhist teacher, an intellectual giant in the Gelug-pa Tibetan Buddhist tradition, would consistently forecast his arrival into the temple with bouts of laughter. Another favourite teacher of mine is Alan Watts whom you can’t watch for 5 minutes without getting to hear his infectious cackling and the current Dalai Lama is almost famous for his warm giggling at almost anything. Alan Watts once remarked:

“People suffer only because they take seriously what the gods made for fun.”

Laughter and humour are not just frivolous either they can be sharp tools for cutting through the bullshit. Sometimes in society it’s the comedians who are the only ones telling the truth. Not the politicians, not the priests and not even the schoolteachers, instead it’s the people who can step back and see the ridiculousness of current affairs. In fact, more and more people are getting their truthful political information from the late show and from comedians like the late Bill Hicks and George Carlin, who would deliver sobering doses of reality which was actually very true and therefore very funny. Comedians often point to the discrepancy between how we think things are and how they actually are, fortunately that evokes laughter, unfortunately people tend to go back to living a lie after the laughter subsides.

The enlighten fool is the one who sees the ego traps of society and can still find joy and laughter in its midst. The fool is often the enlightened one, the one with crazy wisdom, with laughter and jokes as their weapon, they cut through mundane conformity and bring to light the latent childlike bliss bubbling just beneath the surface of all seriousness. The fool possesses a wisdom that is out of reach of the conformist. A playful attitude in touch with enormous amounts of creativity.

Humour is also extremely healing; they say laughter is the greatest medicine and it’s true. It can also ease the stress and tension of daily life, reduce boredom at work and unite people of different backgrounds. Everybody takes themselves and others too seriously. That’s the way of the ego exists. Start being a little more playful and you will see ego evaporating.

So, if humour can heal, relax, unite people, undo the ego and entertain all at the same time that sounds enlightening enough for me.

Which brings me to the laughable way most people understand enlightenment. There is a common view that an enlightened person is a perfect person with perfect virtue, perfect love, perfect knowledge and even perfectly smelling sandalwood farts. This ideal of the perfect person is a joke

and does not exist in reality. It creates cults of worship around people who are thought of as perfect and just stresses the rest of us out with guilt for not living up to these idealistic fantasies.

If Nietzsche declared 'God is dead' and Zen Buddhists urge us to 'kill Buddha in the street' I would like to add if you believe in a perfect Guru – slap yourself across your face, and see if it doesn't hurt. That's reality. Reality is perfect because it can deliver a wide range of human emotions from sadness and despair to elation and joy, trying to just have perfect emotions and a perfect life only invites a massive come down of disappointment. As Alan Watts says, you cannot have up with down or even right without wrong they imply each other.

All that's left to do then is to just be your natural self. Your authentic, conditioned and messed up self, and always find a way to laugh at yourself. As someone once said if you can laugh at yourself you will never be short of material. Or as one of my favourite Zen teachers Brad Warner says:

"The state of ambiguity – that messy, greasy, mixed-up, confused, and awful situation you're living through right now – is enlightenment itself."

I would add finding the funny side of all that stuff is enlightening up.

Another cosmic joke is that we will all die. This is not scary it is reality. Of course religions have made a business out of promising you that there is life after death and there are consequences to all your actions after death, the fear of fire and brimstone or the desire for virgins in heaven are potent motivators to act responsibly in our lives and also a powerful invocation to take the priests, churches and traditional lineages seriously. It's the oldest trick in the 'book'. But it's time to grow up and be able to act responsibly without the need for fairy tales. We live, we love, we grow, we die. That's beautiful and enchanting enough. As Osho says:

"Life as it is should be enough of a reason to laugh. It is so absurd. It is so ridiculous. It is so beautiful. It is so wonderful. It is all sorts of things together. It is a great cosmic joke."

So where does the cosmic joke lead us? Back to where we started; to the unadulterated pure joy of just being alive – laughing for no reason and grinning like a mad hatter. Life becomes play instead of a chore, a cosmic dance on the needle head of eternity. The truth sets us free to have an enlightened sense of humour and there is no greater joy than sharing this fun, violence becomes obsolete. In contact with the truth of transiency, with the bubbles of bliss and humour now on the surface the true celebration of life can be found in this freedom to love and laugh and experience heaven where it actually can exist, right here on earth.

Chapter 2

Fuck It! The Ultimate Spiritual Way

Fuck it is the ultimate spiritual path according to John C Parkin who after doing Eastern spiritual practices for years realized that the modern equivalent to surrender and letting go can be found in exclaiming Fuck It!. He has even opened a Fuck It! retreat centre in Italy which is proving to be popular for some intensive not giving a fuck. As John says:

“ Saying Fuck It is like a massage for the mind – relaxing you, releasing tension, giving up on things that aren’t working. Just starting to say Fuck It can transform your life. Saying Fuck It feels good – to stop struggling and finally do what you fancy; to ignore what everyone’s telling you and go your own way.”

Giving up and surrendering is exactly the method used in many spiritual techniques that are aiming at getting at something both immanent and transcendent. It’s about the only thing the mind can understand is the giving up and relaxing with the way things are. Your mind cannot get there so it has to surrender all effort. In Zen practice if your trying to get something out of your meditation you’re doing it wrong and the answer to why Zen Masters meditate becomes a riddle or a koan in itself.

As Zen Master Dogen says meditation is simply the expression of enlightenment it is not a cause for enlightenment.

Saying Fuck It stops you from taking things too seriously. I often think this is exactly what enlightenment is, every time there is someone who is angry or suffering it seems that at the heart of their problem is taking something too seriously. And just like the Buddhist talk about not being attached to the world and being free from desire or caring or not giving a fuck is Nirvana. Having this attitude of fuck it or I don’t care what happens is incredibly liberating and stops from getting too attached to things.

This is an easy going way, relaxed, natural and light. Not caring does not have to be devoid of love I just think it can mean not taking things too seriously and enlightening up which allows you to be more joyful and nicer to others because you don’t really have an ulterior motive.

In Tibetan Buddhism the highest meditation practice is called ‘no meditation’. It’s still sitting on the ground silently, but it is giving up all technique, giving up all effort to get somewhere and even giving up the subtle conception that your meditating. This is the final stage and is meant to be very advanced and the Tibetan Lamas say it should only be practised after years of preliminary meditations and study, but I say fuck it, why not start with this ‘non meditation’ if it’s the ultimate practice? Just sit and just say Fuck it, I’ve arrived.

Saying Fuck It! is a gateway into another dimension of being. It is the gateway into a 'not doing' instead of a 'doing' it's an acceptance and surrender to the present moment. This is increasingly difficult for the modern busy person, as a French philosopher says the cause of all people's problems starts with not being able to sit quietly in a room and do nothing. This dimension of non-doing is interwoven with doing things, like the silence that allows sound or the space that allows form. The Buddhist speak of doing things but not giving a fuck about the outcome, that is giving up attachments to results, do the act because it is kind or generous or wise in itself and let go of expectations of reward or benefit.

Another versatile spiritual use of the word Fuck is not 'giving a fuck' , which as people say, is not giving two fucks about what people think of you, or not giving a fuck about what you wear or how you appear to others or anything else that society puts extra pressure on you for. This can be incredibly liberating, and I definitely understand Parkin's when he describes this as spiritual. Being 'spiritual' can come with its own set of assumptions and pressures to be a certain way too, so not giving a fuck and just being your self is often more authentic and dare I say spiritual than anything you can wear, eat or any workshop you can attend.

The Dalai Lama has even come close to saying fuck it when at a public talk he urged people to listen and learn from what he teaches but if something doesn't suit you or work for you he said to just 'fuguet'. He meant forget it but with his thick Tibetan accent this sounded suspiciously like 'Fuck It', and that's how it was even transcribed in the notes, and it's how I will always remember his words of wisdom. If something doesn't work for you then just say fuck it!

Chapter 3

The Art of Simplicity

In a fast paced busy world where every day gets quickly filled with activity and completing a 'to do list' it's very easy to overlook the simple joy of 'just sitting' in meditation and the evidence-based benefits it can bring to your life. Too often we get stressed chasing our tails taking care of business, family and other commitments, meditation then is a Time Out of the daily grind of pursuing our goals and allows the space for stillness to emerge and a chance to remember the simplicity of just being.

I would like to share some simple instructions from a Meditation Master on how to practice the art of simplicity; Dilgo Khyenste Rinpoche says:

"Meditation could be said to be the Art of Simplicity: simply sitting, simply breathing and simply being."

I have found this to be a great description of meditation and one that I take to my cushion every time. Instead of making meditation another thing to do in my day I make it a time not to do anything and remember the simplicity of just sitting. Dilgo Rinpoche goes on to say:

“Meditation is one of the rare occasions when we’re not doing anything. Otherwise, we’re always doing something, we’re always thinking something, we’re always occupied. We get lost in millions of obsessions and fixations. But by meditating — by not doing anything — all these fixations are revealed, and our obsessions will naturally undo themselves like a snake uncoiling itself.”

Meditation can become a pursuit of unattainable goals of supreme enlightenment or relative perfection but by just sitting and just breathing there are no more expectations or craving for any brilliant experience, meditation can then become the expression of simplicity or as Zen Master Dogen taught – just sitting is the expression of enlightenment itself without anything else added.

As Bruce Lee says

“simplicity is the key to brilliance.”

Perhaps this is something we have lost in our modern world, the ability to just sit still and be content. Without trying to achieve something or constantly improve ourselves we can allow simplicity to emerge naturally. This is something foreign to us, but it stirs an ancient reminder of the joy of just being.

I have found the meditation instructions from a Tibetan wisdom tradition called Mahamudra some of the most profound I have ever come across and it’s the simplicity of the instructions that is precisely its brilliance. Mahamudra is finding peace and stillness by letting the mind be as it is without manipulating it or trying to change anything; the awareness of things perfect just as they are. It’s a recognition that things just as they are right now have a certain beauty to them no matter how chaotic or messy it all may seem.

Letting the mind be just as it is, then simply sit still and simply breath and the joy of simplicity and authenticity easily arises. Without forcing anything just relax and notice the simplicity of being in the now. The famous Chinese Philosopher Confucius says:

“Life is really simple, but we insist on making it complicated.”

I think the art of simplicity is allowing things to be without manipulation or fabrication – joy and peace can be found whenever you care to stop, be still and just take some conscious breaths. This is the Way of meditation and learning to enjoy the simple things in life is truly a blessing.

To be able to savour a cup of tea, enjoy looking up at the sky or just smiling to yourself about being alive is wonderfully simple and at the same time totally satisfying. Keeping it simple is keeping it real.

I've tried to make my explanation of simplicity not too complicated because that would defeat the purpose of this blog. Simplicity also implies an ability to not have to intellectually explain every single thing that happens but instead to accept things as they are with a sense of openness and mystery.

It is something that must be experienced rather than talked about, and often to say the words 'I don't know' is the beginning of relaxing into an innocent simplicity. Simplicity is always available when you take the time to notice the sheer openness of the present moment.

After receiving these meditation instructions I mentioned above I asked the meditation teacher at the seminar a complicated question about the psychological details of his instructions, and waited for his admiration in my obviously well studied question, his reply kind of awakened something in me that I will never forget. His reply was to sing a well known Beatles song to me in his thick Tibetan accent, he sang -"Let it be, let it be, let it be, let it be, whispering words of wisdom, let it be."

Chapter 4

Meditation as a Refuge from Suffering

I would like to introduce a concept that's not common in the modern mindfulness movement and probably not very familiar to non-Buddhists and also re-translate the idea for people familiar with it. The idea is about 'taking refuge'.

In Buddhism taking refuge is an entry into becoming a Buddhist and is most commonly taken as refuge in the triple gem – Buddha, Dharma and Sangha which is taking refuge in the teacher, the teachings and the community following the teachings, respectively. This practice is the starting point to escape the conditions of suffering, eliminate ignorance and liberate into freedom and peace. Buddhists usually recite the 'refuge prayer' before any formal meditation session.

The triple gem protects you from negative states of mind and firmly places you on the path to enlightenment but how does it actually do that? My Buddhist teacher whom I studied with for over 5 years full time living in a Buddhist community would always say the 'real' refuge is the Dharma. It is the actual thing that protects the mind, transforms it and opens up the possibility to realise the

deepest nature of your being. Dharma is the actual practice of loving kindness, mindfulness and understanding the real nature of yourself and the world.

A Safe Place

Firstly, I want to mention the safe place that meditation can be. Setting up a beautiful sanctuary in your home where you feel inspired, safe and at home to practice the sacred art of meditation. Adorning the space with spiritual allies like images of the divine feminine, Buddha, Christ, angels and other guides and spiritual helpers that you can call upon to enhance the sense of being protected and feeling safe which are essential for healing and growth. This safe place is where you take the time to look directly at your feelings, emotions and thoughts without fear. A safe place to face yourself and your traumas and stress with gentleness and understanding. A safe place to allow difficult energies to arise out of the dark corners of your mind, where they have been hidden, and release them within the compassionate stable attention of meditation.

Changing Direction

I would say taking refuge in meditation implies we are a bit lost, struggling and our strategies for peace and happiness have fallen short of their mark. From this place of vulnerability and surrender we adopt new strategies and methods to help heal, transform and create the life we want for ourselves and others. Essentially, we turn to something for help.

This first stage is about admitting what you have been doing so far has not created the peaceful, stable and joyful mind you would like. Everybody already naturally takes refuge from difficulties and suffering in something. Whether you turn to friends or partners in troubling times or you reach for drugs or alcohol or even if you distract and overcome negativity through working harder or going to the gym, we all have a 'go to' when presented with suffering.

Taking refuge from suffering should not increase or delay the suffering but should serve to manage it skilfully and eliminate its causes. The Buddha more than 2,500 years ago promised his methods are a pathway leading away from suffering and toward the elimination of them entirely. And today scientific research has conclusively shown how mindfulness, loving kindness and meditation can reduce and eliminate serious mental and emotional distress.

Trusting the Process

Secondly, taking refuge implies putting your trust and faith in something. Unlike unconsciously reaching for a drink, the phone or other distractions when things get tough you reach for a few deep breaths, opening yourself to the experience through mindfulness, transform the situation with loving kindness or come to rest in the ultimate refuge of non-dual awareness. Importantly, unlike blind faith, the trust you develop in your meditation comes from your own direct experience and the more regularly you meditate the firmer that trust becomes.

A meditation teacher or mentor is important as well as a community of like-minded people to support your practice is very helpful too but ultimately it's your responsibility to use and strengthen the tools that will assist you directly to protect yourself from harm and eliminate the fundamental causes of mental and emotional disturbance.

For example, perhaps you might not think to do a loving kindness meditation when you are troubled but I have found loving kindness is actually a powerful refuge from your own suffering and a direct antidote to selfishness and being overly self-focussed which often amplifies and exaggerates the issue at hand. Having loving kindness opens your heart to the fact that others are suffering too, not just you, which gives you a greater perspective and also helps you enter a space of healing and growth that love and compassion provides.

How often have you said things you wished you hadn't or have done things you regret and can't even believe you did? This is usually caused by unconscious or subconscious drives that you were not even aware of at the time. Mindfulness helps to protect the mind from autopilot. Breaking the cycle of being controlled by conditions and allowing the inner space for wisdom to arise helping to make conscious choices based on your values and goals in life. In this sense mindfulness helps to protect you from your own stupidity.

Reliability

Next, taking refuge in meditation is a true and lasting friend that is always there for you no matter what and can always be relied upon. Whenever you feel angry or about to shout or you want to destroy someone or something a few deep slow conscious breaths is always available. Connecting with heartfulness and kindness is a flick of a mindset away to help transform hatred and jealousy and resting in the wide-open spaces of clear awareness is ever present right there in amongst the turmoil. Meditation is the most skilful means available that can be trusted and relied upon.

An essential aspect to mindfulness and meditation practice is being able to detach from thoughts about the past and future and be able to direct and consume your attention into the present moment. This in itself is a huge refuge from suffering because so many of our troubles are not actually happening in the present moment instead, they are often fears, doubts and desires about what could happen in the future or how the past could have been different. Being in the now is a simple and powerful remedy to these types of mental projections.

Simply becoming familiar with present centred awareness protects the mind from negative thought loops and useless ruminations and helps to skilfully manage whatever is happening with clarity and honesty. Mindfulness has become a revolution in psychotherapy known as the third wave after the first wave of Freud's psychoanalysis and the second of cognitive behavioural therapy. Mindfulness is now recommended by doctors, psychologists, counsellors and even psychiatrists as an effective frontline treatment against stress, anxiety and other mental and emotional disturbances.

A Catalyst for Reaching Your Full Potential

Finally, we take refuge in meditation in the same way a mountaineer would trust the ropes helping them get to the top. Ultimately meditation promises to reveal and connect you with your authentic nature. Hatred, greed, ego etc are all apparitions that come and go within your experience but are not one with your true identity. In other words, they can be removed, just like clothes, to reveal the naked radiant awareness that is your real identity and highest potential.

Therefore, taking refuge in meditation is not just to overcome suffering but is also a reliable means to blossom to your fullest potential as a human being. Buddha advised on his deathbed not to worship him when he died but instead to follow the path he presented, and we too can achieve the same results. In other words, the Buddha advised to take refuge in the path of meditation.

I can personally testify to the efficiency of loving kindness meditation to transform your emotions, mindfulness to bring about a calm stable attention and non-dual awareness to reveal an infinite dimension of spaciousness and bliss. The way of meditation is a holistic approach that engages every dimension of your being and everybody can access this refuge at their own level of understanding and practice. This incredible inner technology of meditation is now available to everyone to turn to for refuge, transformation and self-realisation.

Chapter 5. Stop Rushing and Start Arriving

Mindfulness Is Fully Arriving In The Present Moment

Rushing is a habit that is at the core of a stressful life and stops you from fully arriving in the present moment. The image of a Zen monk raking the sand-garden slowly and mindfully is at odds with the western lifestyle of hurrying from one thing to the next but it need not be; calm and deliberate actions are as simple as learning to enjoy the present moment and being your natural self.

Living authentically and fully in the present moment is common advice when it comes to living happily and peacefully. Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh emphasises making the present moment your home and Eckhart Tolle tells us all about the power of now. So how do we live that way?

An easy way to harness the peace and power of now is to make a conscious effort to stop rushing. You will never be able to enjoy being where you are if you're always habitually rushing to get somewhere else. To stop rushing is to stop trying to escape the present moment and get somewhere else and to instead be delighted by the moment you are in. If you make a habit of being delighted to be in every moment, then it will soon become effortless and natural and you can find yourself enjoying the simplest events in your day.

Make a habit of being in the now and your life will slowly reveal the beauty of simplicity.

All too often we use the present moment as a 'means to an end' just passing through to get somewhere else and we never truly arrive home to the present moment. This is the essence of what psychologists have called the 'hurry sickness' – never truly arriving home to the present moment. As Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh warns:

"If you cannot learn to enjoy doing the mundane things in life, you will never truly be able to enjoy what you are looking forward to doing."

Of course, sometimes there are unpleasant situations that we try and hide from and forget or just don't want to experience fully. In mindfulness therapy this is called 'experiential avoidance' and everyone does but it is clear from scientific studies that by fully experiencing these difficult emotions in the present moment we can facilitate healing and recovery from trauma. Stop trying to 'rush away' from unpleasant feelings and arrive staring straight at them, you might be surprised how liberating that can be and how much courage we really do have as human beings. As Zen teacher Brad Warner says:

"You can always improve your situation. But you do so by facing it, not by running away."

I have arrived home and I am complete just the way I am. This affirmation can be repeated every time the ambition to be somewhere else arises, or you try to fix yourself or change something or run away from something – instead you can find yourself being elated to have arrived at your final destination; the now. The only place happiness can ever be found. That messy and chaotic thing called life. This is an eternal moment, it is never not now, this eternity can be directly experienced and by taking 'time' out of the equation you remove the majority of stress from the situation.

By slowing down it's amazing how easy it is to start enjoying what you're doing. Like magic just by giving whatever you're doing your full and undivided attention you become 'zenned out' enabling the ability to find charm and beauty in every detail of your life.

To be in the present also means to offer a calm presence to whatever you are doing and whomever you are with. By offering your unhurried presence to children they are nourished and bloom. To offer your unhurried presence to anyone is the greatest gift you can give. As Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh says:

"Presence is the greatest present you can give"

The point of playing music is not to finish the fastest; the orchestra's members are not competing to see who can get to the end the quickest. Timing is essential in music, not playing too fast or too slow allows the harmonious creative expression of the music. Just like in life – by not rushing through things you can create harmony and bring a sense of grace to whatever you find yourself doing.

Being mindful does not guarantee that life will always be great but as Brad Warner says about the Zen nature of now:

"The state of ambiguity – that messy, greasy, mixed-up, confused, and awful situation you're living through right now – is enlightenment itself."

Athletes don't rush and can be incredibly calm in stressful situations. The best performers are those who master giving themselves fully to what they are doing. In fact athletes often appear as if they have 'all the time in the world' to perform their complex skills, and sports psychologists have called this state being in the zone or finding the flow state. Being in the zone or flow of life is a talent you can learn that can empower you to have the timing of an athlete in day to day living and live life fully in the never ending unfolding of eternity of now.

Moments that we rush through are the small moments that make up our life and they deserve our full attention. As John Lennon once warned:

"Life is what happens while you are busy making other plans."

Arriving home in the present requires more than just mindfulness or paying attention to what is going on; the missing ingredient in modern mindfulness practice these days is the remembering of who you are. It is not enough to just stop and smell the roses, you should also remember that you are the sweetest thing already.

To remember that your deepest self transcends time and is always perfectly complete just as it is helps to relax and be content wherever you are. There is a very important aspect to your being that cannot be improved with time and does not want to get anywhere except to arrive fully in the now. This can be simply called Awareness, there is always a luminous witness behind all events that just like the sky is unaffected by the passing weather of experience. Contacting this clear and luminous nature of ourselves is the purpose of meditation and the intent of mindfulness.

We can learn through mindfulness and meditation that contentment and a calm presence is available in every single moment not just the important moments. This empowers you not be rushed and to find peace in every step. Being mindful and living fully in the now awakens our confidence that the wisdom and compassion that we need are always already within us.

Chapter 6. Principles To Deepen Your Mindfulness

These 9 attitudes that help deepen your mindfulness come from the secular guru of modern mindfulness Jon Kabat Zinn. Jon has been tirelessly working to bring mindfulness into the arena of medicine and healing and the popularity, research and huge movement that mindfulness has become is largely due to his efforts. Jon created MBSR or Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction and it has spawned a whole new era of psychotherapy and mindfulness based health interventions.

Mindfulness has many scientifically proven health benefits including improved physical, mental and emotional health. It is actually a holistic type of therapy and in my opinion essential for sanity and intelligence.

Jon's definition of mindfulness is the current most popular working definition used by health professionals and mindfulness teachers. It is the ongoing moment to moment awareness that arises when observing the present non-judgmentally.

Jon says that this seemingly simple directive found in the definition is an extremely difficult thing for humans to do and therefore these 9 attitudes that accompany mindfulness training are an essential way to deepen your understanding and experience of mindfulness training. These 9 principles are all intimately connected and interwoven. Mastering just one of them you can master them all and therefore you may prefer to just focus on a few and not all of them.

This is my own commentary on the nine attitudes of mindfulness as outlined by Jon Kabat Zinn. I also include the video of Jon explaining the 9 attitudes at the bottom of this blog.

Beginner's Mind

This is a term coined by Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki and is a key element in mindfulness. It refers to seeing the present moment in a fresh and open way. Suzuki said that “in the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities ; in the expert’s mind there are few.” Ironically having an innocent and open attitude helps to cultivate creativity and intelligence. Without labelling or preconceived opinions of the situation your whole being is free to engage with the moment and empower your ability to ‘think outside the box’.

Non-Judging

This appears in the definition of mindfulness and is the key principle that gives rise to a clear seeing awareness. Judging becomes a veil or a filter to the present moment and colours everything we experience and imprisoned us in our own narrow reality tunnel. By not judging we can enlist a type of awareness that clearly discerns the situation outside of our own conditioning. This is an enlightened type of awareness that is not bound by our own experiences but instead engages all perspectives, holds all opinions lightly and allows the widest and wisest scope possible in any given situation.

Mostly we constantly judge by either stamping like or dislike, or love or hate onto everything we encounter. This constant subtle and sometimes not so subtle judging comes from the mind’s search for happiness in the objects of the world. By deepening our conviction that true and lasting happiness comes from our own clear awareness and warm heart undercuts the mind’s tendency to constantly judge and try to move toward things perceived as pleasant and move away from the unpleasant. Therefore, we don’t get as obsessed and addicted by the pleasant or as fearful of the unpleasant.

Acceptance

Acceptance is not passive it is an active recognition that things are the way they are. How could they be any different? Resistance to the way things are is a major cause of mental and emotional suffering and is fighting against reality itself. It also one of the most misunderstood principles of spirituality and mental health. It does not mean you shouldn’t try and change anything, this is the wrong understanding of acceptance. I like what Zen master Suzuki said, “You’re perfect the way you are, and you could use some improvement.” I think the best place that transformation begins is from a clear awareness of the situation and that must include a level of acceptance.

Letting Go

Letting go reminds us that we can let things be. Letting go is letting go of being caught in desires for things to be different. Letting go is the key to freedom because clinging to things is a self-imposed prison. Alan Watts explains that we let go every outbreath and to cling to life is as foolish as trying to cling to the in-breath. By letting go we allow things to flow into our lives. By letting go we don't fight and resist change. By letting go we trust the process.

Trust

Trust is both being trustworthy and trusting. Trust is a recognition that we are not in control of every little thing in our life and many things vital to our survival are going on constantly and we trust that. We can trust ourselves by listening to the subtle signals our body and intuition give us in every moment. And we can trust others by not thinking the worst of people and by not prejudging people based on their looks, age, gender or ethnicity.

Trust is also a type of confidence in yourself and in the world. Trust is not gullible just like being kind is not a weakness. Trust that you are capable of discerning the difference between friend and foe. Trust the process of ongoing non-judgemental awareness to be healthy and healing and you can also trust that you can handle difficult situations with grace and dignity.

Patience

In my blog stop rushing and start arriving I explained the modern illness of the hurry disease. People are so often rushing to get to the next thing that they forget to enjoy and be in the present moment. Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh said "if you cannot enjoy doing the dishes you will not enjoy what you're looking forward to doing later on. Looking to the future becomes a predominant habit in people's lives which cripples their ability to enjoy the present moment.

Patience is also keeping calm when things are not going your way or are going way too slow for you. Patience is actually a major attitude that protects your mind from anger and is highly recommended by Buddhists. Patience enables the ability to keep calm under pressure and reminds us to enjoy the small moments of life, because life is made up a series of small moments.

Non-Striving

In my blog the art of doing nothing I explain the deepest and most profound teaching on meditation which is to just Be. Without manipulating, changing or forcing things in any way which puts you directly into the flow of now. To just be with life without an agenda. Non striving is not about having no goals or to be aimless it is the ability to go with the flow. As Lao Tzu says, "I do nothing and everything gets done." It's a way of acting without trying to act. Action happens by itself, spontaneously – rather than being contrived, it is more direct and natural and therefore more effective and appropriate.

Non striving recognises that happiness is not found in achieving or accumulating things but instead can be found in the stillness of awareness in every moment. Non striving is synonymous with peace, freedom and a deep sense of contentment with the way things are.

Gratitude

Initially Jon Kabat Zinn just wrote 7 attitudes of mindfulness but extended it to include the important aspects of gratitude and generosity. Gratitude is a way to protect your mind from constantly complaining and finding the negative in things. To enjoy the present moment with a sense of reverence and humility. By slowing down and bringing gratitude into our present moment we bring a sense of delight and focus on the positive in life. Even when things are bad, we be grateful for surviving them and learning from those events. Gratitude is always an option and a very healthy option indeed.

Generosity

In my blog Meditation and Generosity, I explain how giving someone your presence is the greatest present of all. In fact, it's often all our children want is our attention. Being generous recognises that there is more happiness found in giving than clinging on to things. Generosity embodies a warm heart and kind attitude. Jon Kabat Zinn describes mindfulness as to also mean heart fulness. An open and generous attitude of being present. Being non-judgemental is also a great gift to others and a foundation of a healthy relationship.

Chapter 7. The Revolution of Meditation

Meditation has the potential to be a catalyst and driving force behind revolution in many areas of life. Meditation teaches the skills and attitudes which oppose and counteract the prevailing forces of authority and inequality of our time and offers a sustainable solution to violence and ignorance. As the Dalai Lama says: "If every 8-year-old in the world is taught meditation, we will eliminate violence from the world within one generation."

The real revolution is in every heart and mind around the world and it is an inner revolution. The revolution that changes the inner seat of power from a centralised ego to an enlightened kind and wise expression of love itself. There cannot be an enlightened society without enlightened individuals, no matter how good the system is it will always be oppressive unless it is driven by the collective wisdom and compassion of the people.

Six Ways Meditation Is A Revolution

1) Civil Disobedience

Meditation can be a catalyst for a political revolution though because it teaches people to be disobedient to thoughts. Where else is disobedience encouraged? Meditation teaches us not to believe in pre-conceived ideas or tradition and asks you to look at the situation with fresh eyes; to see things clearly. This is sometimes all that is needed to spark a revolution, like the story of the emperor wearing no clothes, finally the people realised they were being tricked and indeed the emperor was naked.

Just to see clearly the huge wealth inequality in the world without dismissing it or justifying it can bring about a radical shift in perspective. In fact, today the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' is the biggest gap in history. Meditation can facilitate a political awakening just by the ability for everyday people to look with a fresh perspective and see the naked truth.

2) Economic Revolution

Meditation is an economic revolution because it cultivates contentment. This simple fact undermines the majority of marketing which appeals to a sense of lack or at least to a sense that getting 'more' or 'new' will make you happier. Similar to the stance against cultural pressure, meditation is an armour against impulsiveness and being controlled by excitement and whim.

Fundamentally meditation teaches that happiness comes from a stable mind rather than from acquiring new or better things. This undermines the consumerist model of economics that relies on spending and consuming more and more. Meditation allows for the opportunity to be content with little and find total peace and happiness with very few material comforts. I wonder just how the economies of the Western blocks would cope if people were happier with what they had and could not be moved so easily to frivolously spend? Leading meditation teacher Alan B Wallace says

"A world that truly understands the nature of consciousness could shift away from the hedonistic treadmill of consumerism and toward the infinitely renewable resource of genuine happiness that is cultivated by training the mind."

3) Equality

The Way of Meditation is a social justice revolution because meditation trains people to see the equality and sameness of people. The identity politics of characterizing people by their skin colour, gender or sexual orientation is challenged by the meditation experience of no-self, where there is no fixed or definite self to find following inquiry and deep contemplation. In fact, the realizations of many masters confirm that we all have the same fundamental nature of conscious awareness and that we all suffer similar mental and emotional afflictions.

Buddha taught the revolutionary idea that through meditation enlightenment is available to every person regardless of social position or gender. This threatened the religious authorities of the day and spawned a tradition that has lasted 2,500 years.

At the heart of Buddha's teaching was the idea that every human being has equal potential to become enlightened. The Way of Meditation is a religious revolution because meditation puts you directly in touch with the absolute – a direct line to God without any 'middlemen'. Meditation empowers people to trust their own wisdom and not have to rely on gurus, churches, or government. Of course, instructions and a teacher are important for meditation practice but essentially the source of freedom, wisdom and the ultimate is directly available within all of us through our own efforts.

The ability to calm and settle one's own mind down from neurosis also empowers people to be their own therapist. Meditation Masters say that by stabilising mindfulness a person is not troubled by disturbing thoughts or emotions. These claims have now been heavily tested with scientific experimentation and the results seem conclusive that meditation is a boon for mental and emotional good health. Therapeutically, mindfulness meditation has been nothing less than a revolution in the field of psychotherapy.

Mindfulness-based therapies are heralded as the third wave after Freudian psychology and Skinner's behaviourism. There has been extensive scientific research carried out on meditation and mindfulness practices that clearly suggest that meditation improves a variety of mental health disorders, particularly stress and anxiety related illness. Meditation has had considerable success in drug rehabilitation and is even being used by major corporations like Google to help its employees with creativity, productivity and stress relief.

4) Environmental Awareness

Meditation also fosters a deeper connection with ourselves and with the planet. Meditation helps us to become more sensitive to how our actions affect others and how they affect the world. This is what Meditation Master Thich Nhat Hanh says:

"There's a revolution that needs to happen and it starts from inside each one of us. We need to wake up and fall in love with Earth. Our love and admiration for the Earth has the power to unite us and remove all boundaries, separation and discrimination. We need to re-establish true communication—true communion—with ourselves, with the Earth, and with one another as children of the same mother."

5) Mass Global Meditations

Groups all around the world are synchronising and meditating together in huge numbers. Directing their attention toward unity and peace and coming together to share a vision of hope and prosperity and to stop violence and corruption. This has even been studied scientifically and the research shows that the effects of mass meditations can have tangible results. Reductions in crime and

violence have been measured in some of the most violent parts of the world where groups of meditators have channelled their energy.

There is even an ancient science behind these discoveries that show how tapping into a universal energy field at the source of all things can actually effect the physical world. It is called subtle activism, and everyone can participate. However the Dalai Lama has warned that praying and meditating is not enough and once a vision of peace and unity has been established within the minds and hearts of millions of people around the world action is needed to create the social structures and organisations that do the work of exposing and stopping violence, corruption and exploitation.

6) Attention Revolution

Alan Wallace warns us that we are in the midst of an attention deficit epidemic. Academics are reporting that the average human's attention span has dramatically reduced of the years; in fact, even by 25% in the last 15 years. The rates of children being diagnosed with ADHD (Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) is crazy. Psychologist's suggest 25% of children in Australia have ADHD and we have a large portion of a generation drugged because they cannot pay attention. This is a mental health crisis that requires a revolutionary direction.

Mindfulness meditation training in schools is the key to overcome ADHD and other related attention disorders. Reports show children can not only self-regulate their emotions better, but they also use mindfulness to manage stress and help to relax.

Meditation helps to find a basic sanity, an ability to rest calmly and undisturbed in the present moment. Starting to connect with this basic sanity is the role of mindfulness meditation leading you from confusion to a clarity of mind which is as simple as it lucid.

The bases of meditation is mindfulness training. The literal training in a stable attention. In fact mindfulness meditation's specific purpose is to increase concentration and the ability to manage distraction. From this perspective, it seems meditation is a basic skill necessary to counter-act a scattered distraction attention and potentially a non-pharmaceutical alternate to help children and adults develop clear focus and stable attention.

Conclusion

Might meditation provide the missing peace that helps unite our deeply fragmented and troubled world? Freedom has long been the goal of spiritual seekers throughout history, and freedom is always a revolution. Meditation allows for a complete turning around in your own seat of consciousness to view and experience the world differently through the insights of meditation. The Way of Meditation is a radical re-orientation of perspective, a chance to blow away old paradigms and start fresh, a revolution that can happen every moment, a revolution that offers a direct experience of freedom via inner peace.

Just to be in the present moment and be content is a total revolution. The simplicity of satisfaction watching the next breath. Actions stemming from such a place are peaceful and effective. To be moved in this world by an inner spiritual force of calm and love is the only way to live a good life and truly move forward to create the society we would be proud to leave our children.

Chapter 8. Driving Yourself Sane

‘Wisdom of the ordinary’ is how the old school Zen Masters would describe being sane. Being sane is simply life as it is. Right now. Infuriating to grasp intellectually; the way of meditation is mysteriously simple. Just seeing things as they are before getting caught up in descriptions, evaluations or stories of the present moment.

It turns out sanity is not to be found in conforming to the correct idea of reality but instead in the direct experience of the basic sanity of mindful awareness.

Finding sanity in beliefs or concepts is stressful and leads to the idea that you are insane if you do not believe the correct version of reality.

Wars have been fought over correct versions of religious scriptures and ‘non-believers’ executed; it’s no wonder there is so much pressure to believe the same thing as everyone else and ‘fit in’. But increasingly modern people do not fit into the traditions of the past.

In modern times belief in scientific ‘facts’ as supreme is prevalent but these facts change over time and total scientific consensus is rare. Sanity through believing in scientific ‘facts’ is little better than a consensus reality and is highly problematic. Jiddu Krishnamurti points out:

“The ability to observe without evaluating is the highest form of intelligence.”

Said another way, the more open the mind, the emptier of belief, the more sanity is present. It’s our beliefs and learnt ideas about reality that shape our perception and dictate what we see. Through belief in facts or scriptures, we never experience an event as it is, instead it is viewed through the lens of our adopted interpretation of reality.

Robert Anton Wilson calls this a ‘reality tunnel’ and everyone is living in their very own little worlds. Sanity does not necessarily stop all the different reality tunnels, but it helps put personal perception into perspective.

Certainty is a gateway to arrogance. It is rigid with no room for sensitivity or compromise. Certainty actually reduces intelligence, blocks the wisdom of curiosity and is a subtle type of violence that imposes its own meaning to events.

As Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki says:

“The beginner’s mind has many possibilities, but the expert mind has few.”

Maybe sanity can be found in trusting our senses? ‘I’ll believe it when I see it’ attitude – that must be sanity. But our senses have been shown to be limited to a small spectrum of reality, our ears can only hear certain pitches, our eyes can only see a portion of the spectrum of all light. Also, this small portion of reality derived from the five senses is raw data which needs to be interpreted; as French philosopher Henri Bergson puts it:

“The eye sees only what the mind is prepared to comprehend.”

So where can we look for refuge or sanity if what we sense and how we interpret our senses is limited and biased? The answer awaits in the silence of meditation.

Sanity is the stillness and space inherent in awareness present in every moment. It could simply be called lucidity. Some meditation traditions refer to it as wakefulness.

Meditation master Chogyam Trungpa calls it ‘basic goodness’ and teaches it is the essential core of every person.

Eckhart Tolle claims that when you touch the stillness of the present moment you have stepped out of thousands of years of human conditioning and Deepak Chopra promotes the idea that you always have the choice between mindful awareness or being pushed around by the habits of the past.

The Western idea of sanity seems to be more conformity than sanity; you are sane if you do not deviate from the norms. J.D Krishnamurti was highly critical of this version of sanity when he said:

“It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society.”

Increasingly, to be sane means to ‘fit in’ and psychologists, counsellors and social workers all too often succumb to simply helping individuals adapt and fit into our current social structures. I don’t

want to be too critical of this approach because at the moment there are not many alternatives to fitting in. Deviants in our society have historically been criminalized, medicalized and institutionalized, but that's a story for another blog.

Meditation helps to find sanity through the qualities of detachment, and the wisdom perspective that sees appearances as illusions cleverly constructed through sensual input and conditioned conceptions. Sanity is a resting point, the place we can call home and feel at ease, dwelling as non-conceptualizing natural awareness. The stability of mind to observe without judgement and the intelligence to hold experiences lightly, without compulsively reacting. Being the 'silent witness' as it's popularly known.

Sanity is to see clearly the effects of our actions too and this takes perspective and some psychological distance from the situation, Osho says: 'I'm simply saying that there is a way to be sane. I'm saying that you can get rid of all this insanity created by the past in you. Just by being a simple witness of your thought processes.'

Being sane is to have a 'bird's eye view,' a broadened perspective lifting you above and beyond the current situation and simultaneously connecting you deeper into it by seeing clearly. The more you can observe something without judgment, the more you will learn from it, and an understanding will arise naturally.

Sanity can be this simple. The uncomplicated natural awareness waiting to be noticed and practised in every situation. The radical immanence of this basic sanity makes it difficult to accept for people accustomed to striving and achieving. When meditation teachers say there is 'nothing to do,' it seems ridiculous for most, and then receiving directions to get somewhere, where you already are, is a paradoxical adventure to say the least.

With all the effort that is required in hours of endless sitting meditation, there should be some reward in doing all that, but basic sanity was always there and it's not something newly added. There is nothing you 'get;' it's more noticing and discovering what was there all along; the basic sanity of non-grasping awareness.

The way of meditation is to slowly go sane by absorbing yourself into the simplicity of open awareness, which highlights basic sanity and puts perceptions and ideas into perspective. This is none other than our present-centered natural awareness which is always available. The foundation of experience that is open and spacious, the continuity of expansiveness. The more familiar you become with staying in touch with this expansive nature, the more it will slowly drive you sane.

Chapter 9.

How I Became a Meditation Teacher

In the year 2000 I was living in Brisbane, Australia and steadily growing disillusioned with the goals of our modern society. It seemed ridiculous to work most of your time for food and shelter, desperately looking forward to the weekend and that longer holiday getaway once a year. I also had a growing interest in Buddhism which started when I learned mindfulness techniques to improve my performance and control my emotions when I was training to be a professional tennis player. The combination of these two things led me to a Chenrezig Buddhist Institute on the Sunshine Coast, Australia.

I decided to follow my heart and 'drop out' of the rat race. I gave away what little possessions I had and moved to the Buddhist Community where I soon had the privilege to stay in a retreat hut situated remotely on the 160 acres of land at the centre.

I volunteered (karma yoga) as a receptionist in the Dharma shop and joined the full-time study program the monks and nuns and serious lay practitioners would attend. It was an awesome lifestyle studying Buddhism with the community, doing only 15-20 hours a week work, hanging out in the Big Love Café having profound discussions and meeting some amazing people including other volunteers from all around the world.

I loved the philosophical study which cut to the heart of what reality really was and the best way to live as a human being. I loved my daily practice which focussed on generating great compassion for all sentient beings and meditating. I would often meditate in silence in my retreat hut, accompanied only by the sounds of nature and simply bliss out. My hut used was very primitive without electricity or drinking water but that was its charm and it was an incredible experience to live there for so long. Literally carrying water and chopping wood for the fire as the Zen saying goes.

As many others did living this lifestyle, I made the commitment to become an ordained Buddhist monk. This was a big challenge and perhaps too much of a culture shock going from board shorts to wearing robes and other issues like how to support myself financially as it was not free to live there even as a monk. My time as a monk lasted about a year before putting back on my board shorts and living as an average guy again. Don't get me wrong I loved being a monk for that time and would recommend it to anyone to experience the discipline and the freedom being a full-time spiritual practitioner has to offer.

Things were going great for a few years living that way and then one fateful day in 2002 I was working at reception and a visitor came in and said there were a bunch of people waiting in the meditation room for someone to lead a guided meditation. It appeared the person who was scheduled to do the guided meditation had forgotten to turn up. There was a bit of embarrassment on management's part, but no-one wanted to do it, so I jumped in eagerly and said I'll do it. As a

former tennis coach I was not shy in teaching people or talking to an audience so I borrowed a singing bowl from the shop, ran up the steep hill to the meditation room, turned up huffing and puffing, sat on the meditation cushion and gave my first guided meditation class.

Apparently, I was good at it and started to take regular meditation classes. It soon became clear that I was not leading people strictly in the orthodox Tibetan Buddhist approach. I would always 'freestyle' my classes not reading from a book as others would do but spontaneously guiding people from my own knowledge and experience from my own practice and study. I always prayed and meditated myself before giving a class and when giving the classes I felt like I was channelling a higher/deeper state of consciousness that was not actually 'me'. It was very rewarding and a beautiful experience to have the honour to guide people in that way and I felt like I got just as much benefit from leading the class as others would being guided.

In a debate once I was told by a senior nun that I should be teaching beginners about the hell realms not as a psychological state, as I saw it, but an actual place people will go if they commit negative karmic deeds. I was told people were not there to relax or feel good but to be taught the harsh reality of the human situation. I disagreed.

This tension steadily grew between myself and the orthodoxy until the breaking point came when a woman who had attended one of my guided meditations had somewhat of a mini orgasm doing the breathing exercises. She decided to talk to one of the nuns about her experience to get some clarity about what happened to her and all hell broke loose. I was summoned again by the senior nun and asked exactly what I was teaching people. I told them I was teaching breathing exercises, visualisation and other practices but unfortunately these were considered Tantric in nature and meant to be secret in that Buddhist tradition.

I was told in no uncertain terms that if I wanted to teach my way to leave the property and do it somewhere else and that's what started my pursuit of leading classes my way.

When I say I teach 'my way' it's actually not as unique or original as it sounds. My style of understanding and teaching stems from great meditation masters who have also taught advanced practices to beginner students in modern times and translated ancient teachings into the vernacular of the current culture. One such teacher was Lama Thubten Yeshe who ironically founded that Buddhist centre and many more around the world and he would teach this way. He even wrote a book about the advanced practices and far from being secret it was available to anyone who bought it. When I brought all that up in one of my 'meetings' with the nuns they said he was an enlightened master so he can do it, but I was not allowed.

I do not consider myself an enlightened master in any way but the techniques I taught were also similar to pranayama (breathing techniques) you would find in an average yoga class and actually not that complicated and easy to learn. It was in the easy to learn and the attainment of quick results that Lama Yeshe said were the reason they were perfect for Westerners and I agreed wholeheartedly as I experienced the results myself and saw it in others too.

I still did the guided meditations at the centre, but a nun attended my next few guided meditation classes to keep an eye on me and I was ordered to only teach the basics of mindfulness and other beginner's practices which were not 'practices' at all but more like reading out Buddhist teachings. I wasn't even aloud to turn the lights down or light a candle which I had been doing up until then because that was considered 'new age' and nothing to do with meditation according to the fundamentalists in power at the time. I was also told people could not lay down either and must sit up straight. I would teach the correct meditation posture, but I would also allow people to get as comfortable as they liked even if that meant lying down. One particular person had a back injury and unfortunately stopped coming to classes because she could not lay down during the sessions. So, with the horrible fluorescent lights shining bright and everyone sitting up comfortable or not I attempted to continue leading classes at the Buddhist Institute.

It wasn't until I filled in for a nun running meditation classes outside the Institute that it all took off. The nun had started to lead a regular group close by at Maroochydore and when I filled in for her, as Frank Sinatra said, "I did it my way". It was away from the centre and they were my clear instructions to only teach my way 'off site'. However, when the nun returned to take over the class a few students secretly told me they liked my meditations better. They invited me to lead a guided meditation covertly in one of their garages and that's when my 'career' as meditation teacher really began.

My meditation group soon secured a more suitable location (not in a garage) at a nice hall in nature and the class grew. I left the Buddhist Institute and my sangha (Buddhist community) who I felt rejected me somewhat and I also left behind my beloved meditation hut which I ended up living in for five years in total and re-joined the world. I started to record a few classes and started my own website where I put the recordings and starting writing blogs and that was the birth of The Way of Meditation and my career as a meditation teacher.

I now hold regular meditation classes and retreats around the Sunshine Coast, have a following of over 210,000 on my Facebook page The Way of Meditation where my posts reach a million people a month and I also offer online meditation coaching. I am still finding a place as a meditation teacher balancing the traditional aspects of Tibetan Buddhism with the ever-growing modern secular approaches to mindfulness.

Ironically the meditation the nuns tried to stop me from teaching is now one of my popular guided meditations and blogs. It's called Tummo (Tibetan Kundalini) and I continue to teach it in my retreats and guided meditations.

Chapter 10. The Guru is Dead

Entering A New Era of Self-Empowerment

Friedrich Nietzsche famously said "God is dead" referring to the end of religion and the victory of reason over faith. His declaration first cited in 1882 may have been premature since today religion is still prevalent in western culture and I would like to say something similar about the Guru today. I would like to declare the Guru is dead. The Eastern Guru that is, the one that gives you blessings and just by mere association can redeem sins, liberate people from their suffering and take you alongside them to promised lands. The concept has been abused by charlatans for long enough and is unnecessary even in the traditions that advocate the primacy of the Guru. It's time to evolve.

The fall of prominent Gurus due to sexual and emotional abuse of their students is all too prevalent these days at least in the Tibetan Buddhist scene that I'm connected with. There have been many but recently the two most famous are Sogyal Rinpoche the head of the Rigpa Organisation and Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche the head of the Shambhala Foundation. These two huge Buddhist organisations with hundreds of thousands of members have been rocked by the 'me too' movement where brave women have had the courage to finally stand up and say my Guru is a total creep.

Buddhist Guru Sogyal Rinpoche (pictured above) author of the bestselling spiritual classic "The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying" was a brilliant teacher of spiritual concepts however it appears he was also a scandalous womaniser and abused his power on countless occasions to sexually molest women. There is a huge conflict here of spiritual wisdom and his abusive behaviour. However, if we see these people as just great teachers who are also flawed human beings it can start to make sense.

However, this blog is not about the revelations of those abuses, even though it's an important part of the demise of the power structures of traditional Tibetan Buddhism where the Guru is firmly placed at the pinnacle of the pyramid as supreme leader and spiritual inspiration. Just like the Catholic priests who have been outed for their sexual abuses and rocked the faith of Catholics all around the world the fall of the Tibetan Buddhist Gurus has challenged the faith of many Buddhists around the globe me included. But there is a spiritual path forward without the high priests and Eastern Gurus, one that relies on methods not on association with Gurus.

This blog is not even about the massive power imbalance between Gurus and students that have created cults and the conditions for horrible abuse and misuse of that power, although that power imbalance is a good reason why the Guru should die (metaphorically speaking). This blog is not even about the corruption of funds by the Guru and the luxury they often deem from their role (often inherited). This is all part of it though and others are covering these issues with courage and dignity and books are now being written about these topics.

My point I would like to make is that practising meditation and spiritual methods does not require the worshipping of another human being it requires diligent practice of the methods. Even the Buddha supposedly said, "do not rely on me, rely on the path". And the traditional eightfold path of Buddhism does not mention Gurus anywhere. Instead we find clear instructions on how to live a wise and virtuous life.

My former Guru (yes I was a devotee) has not been outed as an abuser except for an account of a nun friend of mine who told me our Guru had struck her with his heavy wooden mala across the face and had done it often to other women too. That was the final straw for me. I was sick of the Buddhist apologists under the hypnotic delusion that the Guru can do no wrong and accounts like this were often seen as a blessing for the person being beaten instead of the crime which it should have been reported as.

I left that religious institution to teach people the amazing methods I had learned which was the birth of The Way of Meditation. I am very grateful for learning from my teachers and I would like to make a distinction here between teachers and Gurus. Spiritual teachers are invaluable holders of knowledge that impart their wisdom so to empower students with the methods to overcome mental and emotional suffering and to achieve states of health, joy and insightful wisdom. They are invaluable and deserve our utmost respect but not blind faith. Don't throw away your faculties for being reasonable just to follow someone devotedly.

My teacher (former Guru to me) always emphasised the importance of Buddhist methods to overcome suffering and just knowing about them was never enough you have to actually practice them regularly for them to take effect. Daily meditation and spiritual practice has been the cornerstone of spiritual traditions for thousands of years. My teacher would make the analogy of a doctor prescribing medicine. He said it was no good just getting the medicine from the doctor you must take it as prescribed which is the most important thing. Taking this analogy further you don't need to worship the doctor as a supreme lord for the medicine to be effective, you should respect their knowledge but it's the taking of the medicine that is the active ingredient in this equation.

My teacher would also dislike people coming to him with their everyday problems. Just because a person knows about and has actualised a certain method of spiritual training does not mean they know everything about everything or are even good at everything. Just because a person can sit in deep concentrative meditation does not mean they know how to run a company or manage family relationships or even how to cook. They are not the all-seeing wise men people think they are.

I often thought experiencing the petty politics and bickering of the Buddhist centre I lived at for six years that if all these devotees worshipped each other the same way they worshipped the Guru this place would truly be an enlightened community.

I have been a tennis coach in the past and the highest compliment for a teacher is for the student to transcend your own skills and become superior. The passing on of knowledge and seeing it flourish in another is by far the greatest reward as a teacher. But can that ever be said for a Guru? Do Gurus want to be superseded by their students or do they generally maintain their power and authority until they die? I think we all know that a Guru having played the role as the superior person never relinquishes that authority or admits a student has surpassed them and this is also a part of the disempowerment of a student that can never become the master.

The real source of power, love and wisdom is not from the Guru or sitting at their feet praying for redemption, healing or enlightenment. The real source of power is from within the hearts and minds of every person. An untapped reservoir of peace, love and deep insight and the key to unlock that potential is meditation. The mysteries of consciousness are only just starting to be understood and the limitless potential of human beings begun to be realised. To fully empower the individual, we must kill the external Buddha (famous Zen saying) and find the real Buddha within.

Spiritual teachers are people too. They are not avatars or perfect human beings or Buddhas incarnated. They fart, make mistakes and have bad days too just like the rest of us. Seeing human beings as infallible and perfect is a sure-fire way to create unnecessary power imbalances ripe for abuse, disempower the individual from their own truth and the blueprint for a cult.

There is inner technology that comes from the Tantric tradition which utilises the power of the mind to project positive qualities onto another (the Guru). In psychology this is called transference and it's utilised as a spiritual method within eastern traditions. However, you do not need another person to use this technology. You can use the power of the mind and project onto yourself an image of an enlightened being made of light. This is an extremely useful tool ironically for ego transcendence and transformation of our usual mundane and self-defeating perceptions of our self. You can also unite with higher states of consciousness through visualisation of radiant light and merging with it, you don't need to project all of that onto another person for this inner technology to work.

The practice of entering a Guru relationship has been abused by the Guru, taken advantage of by charlatans, disempowered devotees from their own source of wisdom, undermined the confidence of devotees and created numerous cults and fostered cult mentality. Is having a Guru worth it when there are other far safer and more effective methods for spiritual transformation in line with modern values of individuality and equality?

I realize I will offend many people with this article. Saying the Guru is dead to devotees is like telling Christians Jesus was just an ordinary man. But I write this for my own self-expression, to help others who are confused about the role of the Guru and to offer an alternative.

Since my journey began on the spiritual path, I have challenged tradition and authority and forged my own way as I advocate others to do as well. As a meditation coach when people do inevitably ask me for life advice my response is always to try and guide people to trust themselves and their own intuition and not follow the norm or expectations.

There is absolutely no need to put a human being between you in your divinity. If you want to worship something worship your own inherent potential for spiritual enlightenment, worship your own capacity to love others deeply and worship your ability to be your unique self.

Just like the movie Kumare where an average guy pretended to be a Guru by telling people the Guru was within them, but people still worshipped him as a cult leader. It seems to be ingrained in humans to idolise and to follow but perhaps we can get past that, evolve and truly empower and support each other as equals. I too have been seen as a Guru no matter how much I emphasise I am just a teacher and a spiritual friend travelling the path alongside anyone I teach. It also seems people just don't know any other way than to idolise, or they project qualities that simply are not there, or it's been conditioned into them through the spiritual tradition they follow.

In conclusion the Guru is dead because we all need him to die. We need to move past antiquated power systems that maintain imbalanced hierarchies. To fully be empowered to find the abundant inner resources we all have and not be distracted by the personality cults of the Guru. Kill the Guru and find out that the Guru will always live on inside us all, not one person or one group but in all people.

If the Zen saying goes "if you see the Buddha in the street, kill him!" I would like to say, if you see a Guru in the street don't bow, shake their hand as an equal. You can learn from them but also teach them. Everyone can be a teacher, and everyone has something to offer.

The real power is spiritual knowledge together with the methods that work to overcome suffering and find the balance, peace and wisdom latent within everyone. Don't rely on others to transform your mind and heart. Rely on your own diligent effort to make it happen. Learn from teachers and remember the highest respect you can give your spiritual teacher is not to worship them as Gods or perfect human beings but to put into practice what they have taught and fully embody the wisdom you have learned.

Chapter 11. The Power Of The Tantric View

A Zen Master once said: "To be enlightened is to be intimate with all things."

Even though this is from Zen, which is not often associated with Tantra, it's the essence of the full power of tantra; both simple and profound. The Tantric path is becoming whole, fully uniting with all of reality realising the completed perfection of the present moment.

When I started studying tantra at a Tibetan Buddhist centre I came across the idea of a quick path to enlightenment. I was told Tantra is a high-powered vehicle with incredible spiritual technology to propel you to the highest human potential within just a few years. Well I don't know about all that anymore but I know the Tantric meditations are powerful methods that have helped me enormously and are worth sharing with others.

I took Tantric initiations which gave me permission within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition to practise Tantra and later I discovered that included never ejaculating. This seemed crazy at the time but it's part of the power of tantra for men. The usual way of having sex is for orgasmic satisfaction, so what's sex like without coming? I discovered it can be very rewarding. The journey of making love becomes the focus rather than the destination therefore there's no rush which also fosters mindfulness and tenderness which I found to make a huge difference to how I would make love. Every moment of making love from foreplay to the woman's fourth orgasm is ecstatic and instead of falling into a slump and sleeping after sex I was fully charged with what I can only describe as cosmic bliss energy, sometimes known as kundalini, which stays with me for days.

I've never been big on the idea of a pre destined soul mate because I feel every woman I have ever been with I have shared my soul. Tantra makes that connection even deeper, as Osho says:

"Tantra is the science of transforming ordinary lovers into soul mates. And that is the grandeur of Tantra. It can transform the whole earth; it can transform each couple into soul mates."

There is more technique to tantra which I won't go into here but it involves, on an easy level channelling the sexual energy up the spine or more advanced to open up the 'central channel' to explode open the heart chakra and third eye which brings a different kind of inner orgasm, healing and can even bring on psychic abilities. Eventually this work leads to the appearances of a brilliant type of clear light state of consciousness usually only experienced at the time of death. This type of Tantric energy work can also be done through deep breathing and other techniques like mantra and visualisations. You can practise these without sex, one such breathing method is called Tummo which I explain in more detail [HERE](#).

The art of Tibetan Tantra was started by normal folks, non-monks practising their spiritual path through the act of sex, which was forbidden for the ordained community. It is harnessing arguably one of the most powerful forces in humans, that is the sex drive as Mantak Chia says:

"The human being has a powerful sex drive – and just like you cannot keep ping-pong balls under water. Sometimes, somewhere, they pop back up, maybe as disease, maybe as emotional problems, causing energy blockages, leading to illness."

I believe the problems in the churches and monasteries often has to do with this suppressed powerful energy, it has nowhere to go and often comes out in inappropriate ways and can even cause mental illness. Not just the paedophilia plaguing the Catholic church or the raping of boys in Tibetan monasteries but also the subjugation of woman in religion as well. Instead of worshipping the female energy and all the natural healing it can bring, men have twisted a powerful natural energy into a violent and repressive force toward women.

Also religion turning sex into a sin, or in Buddhism is often seen as a desire to give up, demonizing it and bringing untold guilt into the lives of millions of people for a purely natural and healthy energy which holds huge potential for self-development. Of course, becoming addicted to sex can lead to problems and the misuse of sexual energy but the problem is not the sexual energy; as one Tibetan Buddhist master says:

“Contrary to what some people might believe, there is nothing wrong with having pleasures and enjoyments. What is wrong is the confused way we grasp onto these pleasures, turning them from a source of happiness into a source of pain and dissatisfaction.”

The Dalai Lama has said that everyone is equal in wanting happiness and wanting to avoid suffering. That's a reasonable thing to say, it has been said that contentment is the highest form of happiness but that's a bit boring for me, I think bliss is the highest form of happiness. It's ok to want pleasure and bliss, the problems arise when we mistakenly believe the pleasure comes from the object and we can become addicted to that object or person causing jealousy and addiction – instead of realising that the bliss actually comes from unleashing the natural energy of love and bliss from within ourselves by uniting so totally with someone.

The spiritual path has been seen as turning inward away from materialism and modern consumerism. Tantra helps to turn your attention inward toward an incredible storehouse of bliss and happiness. As Lama Yeshe says when you discover the bliss of the internal kundalini energy, chocolate and other addictions pale in comparison. This is so true and has helped me give up chasing bliss in drugs and food and other things by learning to cultivate this internal energy through the path of Tantra. In Hinduism there is Satchitanada which is our fundamental nature at the deepest level. This nature is filled with untold bliss, which is unleashed through the power of tantra, revelation and other spiritual methods.

I have pondered that tantra would be a fantastic method to teach recovering drug addicts, who already have great desire for pleasure which is actually what is needed to be successful at Tantric practise. Having worked with people in rehabilitation I once remember the counsellors telling people in recovery to take up hobbies like gardening or surfing and just thinking to myself 'that's so lame'. But if you offer an addict more bliss and pleasure than any other drug without the comedown and with the side-effect of immense love, well that's a rehab I believe would be both popular and effective. It's at least worth a try when the current success rate of non-relapse for addicts is around 5%.

This internal blissful energy cultivated through tantra is not just sexual it has amazing love and intelligence with it as well and once you have generated it through the art of sexual tantra you can use it all day to fall in love with everybody and anything. Intimacy with all things, merging with the current situation in a Tantric embrace of unity and wholeness. Tantric union does not finish when you leave the bedroom. You can harness the raw animal instinct of sex and channel into the heart centre exploding away barriers between you and the world.

“Each one of us is a union of all universal energy. Everything that we need in order to be complete is within us right at this very moment. It is simply a matter of being able to recognize it.” ~ Lama Yeshe

Everything we need for fulfilment and happiness is already within us Tantra just helps to expose it.

In *The Lazy Man's Guide To Enlightenment*, Thaddeus Golas says the short cut to enlightenment is to love everything even the bad stuff; love your bad side your good side, everything. This is getting close to a Tantric relationship with everything, instead of the slower approach of getting rid of anger and jealousy etc which often seems impossible you transform these energies by embracing them and holding them within a sphere of universal bliss and love. Oneness is just that- One without exclusion. Embracing everything. Becoming whole.

“Tantra is a pathway, not just to sexual ecstasy but to personal healing and fulfilment.” ~ Andrew Barnes

A lesser known meditation practice of Tantra is changing your view of yourself from ordinary flesh into a divine vision of your body made of light, love and bliss and everything in the world made of the same. Love and light everywhere. It may sound cheesy, but it has correlations with reality. The reality that everything IS energy.

The visualisations are united with the understanding that everything is moving and in relationship, there is no fixed or permanent anything. The whole world is a dance of emptiness and bliss. Seeing yourself as a divine being is called divine pride, creating the noble feeling that you are a being of love, light and bliss but without any ego of a fixed self you are an expression of cosmic or universal life force. Without the conceptual boundaries of separation, you are freed to experience the continuity of everything – the seamless unity of the now.

“The feeling of being alive and at One with everything is available through the path of Tantra. When your heart is open and you are making love, there is no separation between you, your partner and God. This is healing sex. This is connecting with the Divine. And the important thing to develop is the sense that this sacred experience is available in all instants. It is not limited to sex.” ~Philip Smith

There's an element of 'fake it until you make it' with Tantric visualisation. You may not be able to generate the actual kundalini energy to begin with but through imagining yourself as an unbounded being of love, light and bliss you start to slowly bring that energy to the moment and it is far better than our mundane egos filled with opinions and expectations.

This blissful current of energy cultivated through Tantra also has a deep love and intelligence and it begins to guide your life into ever increasing heights of synchronicity, healing and joy. The ego has gone and there is nothing left but a divine bliss leading the way transforming everything it encounters.

Tantra is becoming whole, re-embracing all the scattered and fragmented aspects of ourselves. In fact, the root of word tantra in Sanskrit actually means 'thread' or 'woven together' or 'continuum'. The word actually means that you are connected with everything in a seamless unity. When we learn to love everything about ourselves, we can embrace the negativity in others with the same blissful acceptance and loving warmth which has the potential to transform every situation into Tantric wholeness. As Osho says:

"Find ecstasy within yourself. It is not out there. It is in your innermost flowering. The one you are looking for is you. You are the traveller and you are the destination. In experiencing the ecstasy of your own being, you have achieved the final goal."

The Tantra path is ultimately about union, the union between you and the world so the boundary is forgotten. This is the vision of one-ness, the vision of unity. Other's suffering is your suffering; that's compassion, others happiness is your happiness; that's love. What you do to others is what you're doing to yourself; that's karma. The illusory world of separation drops away and the full radiance of the divine shines through, that's your true Self.

Chapter 12. The Bliss of Inner Fire Meditation

The title is not click bait, the instructions I am about to share with you are actually considered secret in the Tibetan Buddhist Vajrayana tradition. I studied the teachings of Inner Fire Meditation or Tummo in depth during my five years living and studying at a Tibetan Buddhist centre and got into a lot of trouble when it became known I was giving these instructions to beginners in my guided meditation classes. But this method is too good to keep secret and has enormous potential to heal, clear the mind, calm the body and bring tremendous joy and confidence into people's life.

I was reprimanded by the senior nun at the Buddhist centre I was living and teaching at and told not just anyone can learn these techniques because she said it was dangerous and years of preliminary training was necessary which included making ritualistic offerings to the Guru, thousands of prostrations and recitations of thousands of purification mantras. I pleaded with her that these simple instructions are so beneficial for people and anyway they are freely available on the internet and in bookstores these days and are also very similar to the Pranayama breathing exercises I have learned doing general yoga classes.

I also argued that the founder of the centre where we were at said that inner fire was a perfect practise for westerners, but it all fell on the ears of a fundamentalist traditional Buddhist nun and I was told to stop. This began my journey of teaching the Way Meditation outside of tradition and in a way that helped and appealed to modern people.

I learned Tummo or Inner Fire meditation directly from a Tibetan Dzogchen Master Karma Lhundrup who was also breaking with tradition and teaching it to beginners. I also learned the details by reading extensively the works of Meditation Master and revered Tibetan yogi Lama Thubten Yeshe , he taught that inner fire meditation is a perfect meditation for westerners because it brings very quick results and it is like a recipe, when you put all the ingredients together it just works.

I have had great results practising inner fire and it has been one of my main meditation practises for over 10 years. I have in no way mastered the skills to the level of Tibet yogi's who can withstand extremely cold weather scantily dressed, but I have had humble results of improved concentration and focus, more energy and confidence and experiences of blissful inner pleasure.

More experienced adepts of inner fire meditation have been studied by scientist and the results were remarkable and unexplainable in western scientific terms. Herbert Benson is an associate professor of medicine at the Harvard Medical School and president of the Mind/Body Medical Institute at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Centre in Boston. He has studied extraordinary human potential since the 80's and:

“During visits to remote monasteries in the 1980s, Benson and his team studied monks living in the Himalayan Mountains who could, by g Tum-mo meditation, raise the temperatures of their fingers and toes by as much as 17 degrees. It has yet to be determined how the monks are able to generate such heat.” – See the Harvard Tummo Experiment for more info.

In Alexandra David-Neel's book *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* , contains her early-twentieth-century accounts of inner fire meditation being performed by Tibetan Buddhist monks. Alexandra described what she saw in a midwinter encounter:

“The meditators sit on the ground, cross-legged and naked. Sheets are dipped in the icy water; each man wraps himself in one of them and must dry it on his body. As soon as the sheet has become dry, it is again dipped in the water and placed on the novice's body to be dried as before. The operation goes on [in] that fashion until daybreak. Then he who has dried the largest number of sheets is acknowledged the winner of the competition. Besides drying wet sheets on one's body, there exist various other tests to ascertain the degree of heat which the neophyte is able to radiate. One of these tests consists in sitting in the snow. The quantity of snow melted under the man and the distance at which it melts around him are taken as measures of his ability.”

Benefits of Inner Fire Meditation

Improved Clarity & Concentration. Inner Fire Meditation requires visualisation, incorporating focussed attention and breathing exercises. In Tibetan Buddhism this is known as a fast and secret way to develop concentration because you utilise your breath, imagination and attention all in the one practise. It also develops a sharp and clear awareness through raising the vitality and energy levels to heightened states of awareness.

Improved Health and More Vitality. Inner Fire Meditation uses what is commonly known in India as Prana, or in Japan it is known as Reiki or in China it is called Chi. These mysterious forces within us are associated with health, healing and a long life. Usually we waste our energy through stressing and dissipating this energy in the pursuit of external satisfaction, but Inner Fire Meditation harnesses this energy, grows it and uses it for spiritual development with the side effect of improved health and vitality.

Opening the Chakras. Many people ask me how do I open my chakras? well, Inner Fire Meditation is a brilliant way to do this and is one of the main reasons for this practise. The main goal for the practise is to achieve enlightenment through clearing the chakras, entering the central channel and giving rise to special bliss and clarity which very easily understands that enlightenment is already our true nature. But even beginners have remarkable results.

More Confidence and Power. Practising inner Fire Meditation connects the practitioner with the power centre of the second chakra which in yoga is associated with physical power, sexuality and creativity. It helps to focus and use nervous energy in a positive way to help build confidence and dispel confusion. In martial arts this is the centre where martial artist's draw their strength from to perform amazing feats of balance, strength and busting through cement blocks with their strikes. And in Tai Chi this is where all the focus is held to develop graceful and perfectly balanced movement. Harnessing this inner power is harnessing the power to achieve all your goals and dreams and to gain the energy to reach your full potential.

Inner Bliss and Joy. The energy you are cultivating is very joyful and blissful. This brings an enthusiasm for the practise that is not found in your usual 'just sitting meditations' which can become very boring. This inner bliss can even help to overcome addiction. If addiction is chasing pleasure, then as Lama Yeshe says the bliss of inner fire makes all other pleasures pale in comparison. This inner bliss is the cultivation of the famous Kundalini energy which is a mysterious inner joy unlike that of external pleasures such as sex or eating chocolate. Also you can cultivate this energy anywhere at any time; I like to practice while driving and it's also useful for when you are feeling cold or nervous as the inner bliss really does bring a real and tangible heat and confidence with it.

Enlightenment. The ultimate goal of this practise is enlightenment -that is the union or Oneness with a divine nature. In Tibetan Buddhism the time of death is a very important time to practise meditation to achieve enlightenment because the clear white light naturally appears for everyone at the time of death. If through practise you can recognise that light as your own essence; enlightenment is easy. Inner Fire Meditation is a method to generate this clear white light during your lifetime, so you don't have to wait till death and merge with it while you are an individual to bring enormous benefit to your yourself and for others.

Removes Obstacles. Inner fire meditation awakens a powerful inner energy which overwhelms the ego and takes over. It is said that practising this meditation regularly quickly removes obstacles to spiritual and worldly success. This meditation comes from the completion stage of Vajrayana which

is a fast track method to enlightenment. Even though this has traditionally been kept secret and only given to the most advanced students many respected teachers are now saying that in this time of powerful negativity there needs to be powerful practises like this one given to the general public to help combat those negative forces.

The Beginner's Practice of Inner Fire Meditation

Firstly sit in an upright and comfortable meditation posture- [click here for tips on a great meditation posture](#).

Visualise yourself as hollow, like a balloon. Your skin is glowing and brilliant and on the inside there is only empty space. Take a few moments to strongly establish this visualisation.

Visualise a 'central channel' about a 1cm thick from your perineum to the crown of your head and two 'side channels' going in through the nostrils up to the third eye or eyebrow level and then going down either side of the central channel merging at just below the navel. All the 'channels' are hollow like plumbing pipes. Take a moment to establish this visualisation, it does get easier and even instantaneous with practice. See image below.

Even if you cannot do the former visualisation this next step is the most important in generating the blissful energy: Imagine your breath energy going down the two side channels and merging into the central channel just below the navel (about a few cm in front of the spine). Imagine a very small and very hot ball of light in the central channel and your breath ignites this fiery ball and makes it extremely hot. Now hold the breath there in that ball of heat at the navel, for 5-15 seconds (experienced yogis can hold the breath here for several minutes) **WARNING: stop immediately and breathe normally if you get dizzy.**

This next step is optional but helps to generate even more heat and focussed attention: As you are holding the breath inside the central channel at the small ball of heat just below the navel, draw energy up from below and down from above and lock and trap it in the ball of heat. Draw it up by activating the perineum muscle (like you are holding back from urinating), hold this muscle and lock it in. Simultaneously swallow some saliva down to get the feeling of pushing down on the ball of heat at the navel and lock it in. Experiment with this. You may wish to lock it in by drawing up from below first and then push down from above, or vice versa. Do what feels best for you to get the sense you are locking in a tremendous amount of energy in a tiny space at the navel.

Now release all the energy you have created - straight up through the central and bursting out the top of your head like a fountain. As the energy rushes up through the central channel it blows away

any blockages in all the chakras from the solar plexus, the heart, the throat, the third eye and crown chakra. this energy cleanses and purifies your entire body mind system. You can also imagine releasing the energy into parts of your body you need to heal.

Repeat steps 2-6 ...try Inner Fire Meditation for 2-5 minutes to begin with. Do not practice for extended periods of time until you become familiar with the practise and feel confident and strong enough to do so.

This may have sounded complicated, but it is incredibly simple to practice. For an easy and modified version simply take long slow breaths right down into the navel area and hold it there for a short time and release it, this can also be enough to generate heat and bliss.

This has been a brief and beginners overview of the Inner Fire Meditation method, but it can still bring all the benefits listed above if done regularly. For more detailed information and instructions including how this practice can lead to subtle clear light and enlightenment; I would highly recommend the book by Lama Yeshe “The Bliss of Inner Fire”

NOTE: This is a practice using your own energy, your own breath and your own mind, that can bring speedy and remarkable results, in my opinion it should not be kept secret. Experiment to see what works for you – Notice the inner calm and space you can create whilst holding the breath. Notice the heat energy build up when you hold your breath and lock in the energy. And notice the relaxation and healing response when you let go of the breath. Even just taking long slow breaths and holding and releasing activates a calming response in the body and mind. I generally practice this meditation to clear my mind and relax my body before I settle into simply sitting meditation practise.

Chapter 13. Meditation as a Way of Life

The Way Of Meditation

The way of doing anything is a word used to describe your style or approach to life. There are many ways of doing things and everybody has their own unique way. A master once said there are as many spiritual paths as there are people on the planet. Even though many before us may have travelled the same road it is still up to us to walk the path. The Way of Meditation is a compass to help guide you along your own individual path.

Meditation is as old as humanity, it's an ancient spiritual practice probably dating back to humans sitting silently around a camp fire and contemplating their existence. It has been formalised and structured by Indian religions like Hinduism and Buddhism, it has been adopted as a spiritual practice by Christians and Muslims and now in the modern world mindfulness and meditation are being practised everywhere from schools to businesses and even in the military.

The Way of Meditation is so much more than just sitting cross legged on the floor, it permeates your whole life, gives you direction and informs your decision making. It is not a religion or belief system, it is a direct experience. I genuinely hope people can use meditation as a tool for freedom, happiness, healing, understanding and genuine enquiry rather than an oppressive dogma, dry ritual or set of rules. Meditation is done sitting still and this is a vital component to remembering our core and finding stillness, but the real challenge is integrating meditation into every moment of our lives; it is then that it becomes a way of being. Also it's good to remember what Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki says:

“Don't fall into the trap of getting ready to drop everything and spend the rest of your life meditating on a mountain. A much better – and more challenging – path is to remain rooted in a normal life, faithfully practicing a daily hour of meditation.”

Joyful Peace Comes from Within

The first principle of the Way of Meditation is a re-orientation of where happiness comes from, a new place to look for fulfilment and satisfaction. Modern society is somewhat hedonistic pursuing goals of material wealth and sensual pleasures but coming from the mouths of those who have achieved modern standards of success it does not make you happy or satisfied. We've been conned by the economic pressures of business to want more, consume more and to acquire more, but so many people are now waking up to the fact that material success without spiritual connection is shallow and incomplete. Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki once questioned:

“What if society's priorities are all wrong, and the goal of achieving a certain social status, job title or income bracket is misguided? What if you could bring your focus back to the activities that make up your day and find peace and contentment from them, with no motive beyond that?”

The Way of Meditation points towards a spiritual happiness regardless of circumstances however this can become an extreme. Being in abject poverty without proper food or shelter is certainly not an ideal. I have gone through the journey of giving it all away, having nothing and sitting still meditating for ridiculous amounts of time during the day, but just like Buddha I soon realised that was an extreme and a balance must be struck. Maslow's hierarchy of needs places self-actualisation at the top of the pyramid after material and emotional needs have been taken care of, so even though ultimately an inner connection to spirit is necessary for happiness and freedom a certain level of material needs must be met first. This balance is up to each of us to find.

The Way of Meditation is to at least balance our efforts between material comfort and discovering and familiarising ourselves with our inner resource of natural peace. Natural peace is actually the nature of our minds. When we can come to rest by not getting captured by thinking, planning and material desires our minds settle into a natural state of contentment and even bliss. You could call it

spirit, Buddhist just call it mind or awareness, but whatever you call it it is fundamental to our being but all too often it's forgotten and ignored in the pursuit of other quests. Meditation is a way of remembering and coming home to our natural state of being and finding a sense of joy there.

The Way of Detachment from Thoughts

Eckhart Tolle says it's not the situation that makes you unhappy it's your thoughts about it, and mindfulness guru Sharon Salzberg says all suffering comes from believing our thoughts, so what is it that is so dangerous about the thinking mind? Put simply it's that thoughts are always fiction. There is no such thing as a true story, it's just a story. But our minds have a weird mechanism where they cannot tell the differences between thoughts and reality and get the two mixed up.

We live our lives in our own story, and whether yours is a drama, an adventure, comedy or even a tragedy these stories or explanations for our lives stir up the natural clarity of our awareness and our natural state of peace and happiness is temporarily lost.

It is temporary because as soon as you drop the story and rest in a fundamental open awareness the peace returns and equilibrium is restored. However, even though it is temporary, it can last a lifetime, from the moment you learn to talk and create stories of right and wrong, worthy and unworthy you can end up living your whole life trapped in this mind fiction losing sight of your natural ability to be happy.

Therefore, a major component of the Way of Meditation is detaching from thoughts, not believing them or at least taking them with humour and lightness. This in itself relieves the stress thoughts and believing in them creates. Having a belief is inherently disturbing. To live without beliefs is to be spontaneous, fluid and lets face it mysterious.

The Way Of Not Knowing

I once had a huge debate on a Facebook thread, before I realised how useless that was, with a Christian who insisted you must believe in something. People often use their beliefs like their favourite sports team. Who do you go for? is a similar question as what do you believe in? I have learnt that in some Asian cultures they hedge their bets, fearing to get it wrong, so they believe in it all and have a rather crowded altar with all the major religious figures represented.

A respected Buddhist teacher of mine, Lama Yeshe, once pointed to a thing in front of him during a teaching and asked the audience "what is that?" the replies forthcoming where "it's a table" "ah ha!" Lama Yeshe said "you do believe in something." The psychology of labelling something is that we think we know the object because we have a name for it, but that's the same trickery as before.

If we are satisfied with the label, we are confined within the story that label implies. Separating the label from the raw experience of viewing something is an important aspect to the way of meditation.

So where does that leave us? not believing in anything and not naming anything, it would seem a bit prehistoric, maybe we should go back to grunting and pointing. The answer is the same as before using the skill of detachment to not get captured by labels and names and see things openly, freshly and with curiosity rather than with the certainty that labels bring. True knowing does not come from the conceptual content of our minds it comes from the clarity of the mind itself.

Certainty is actually a clinging to knowledge that gives us a false sense of security, it limits our perceptions and makes us rigid and inflexible. Being certain even limits our natural intelligence as a Zen Master once said

“In the beginners mind there are many options in the experts there are few.”

The Way of Meditation is to be open, curious and non-judgemental. Trusting the skill and balance of present centred awareness, comfortable and secure enough to be able to say I don't know. There's a type of violence in imposing your views and certainty on others and also there is an innocence and gentleness in the open flexible stance of using what Alan Watts calls the wisdom of insecurity.

The Way of Intuition

By detaching from thoughts, beliefs and certainty we can rest in a natural and open presence. It is empty of believing in thoughts and beliefs and is also empty of being anything material so is often called spiritual, but it is not empty of wisdom. The Way of Meditation uses this clear awareness to navigate life and it is rich in knowing and understanding. By dropping all judgements and thoughts and truly being present with something and somebody you have access to all the information of the moment and not just your story line. This is the start of intuition and also real love.

It is love because without the limitations of judgements and beliefs you literally merge with people and the moment. The Dalai Lama has said that love is the absence of judgement. Uniting directly with what your focusing on is called Samadhi in ancient Indian terminology. It is a natural intelligence not born from language but instead arises due to this mysterious uniting. It is love because you become one with what or who you are with which fosters a deep sense of understanding and empathy.

This all boils down to trusting yourself and being yourself. The Way of Meditation is natural and ego-less (without a story). There is no middleman to your redemption or happiness because everything you need is waiting for you within. Not distracted by thoughts you can discover your own natural

peace and wisdom. This is not a belief it is the experience of millions before you and does not rely on a church or organisation, just the self-empowerment of learning to meditate .

The Way of Meditation can be brought into every moment of your life changing your perspective and responses to the world. The way is easy for those who are comfortable using mindfulness and a spontaneous presence in their daily life but start to rely on your beliefs and judgements and the way is lost. The way opens up the creativity of infinite possibilities, maintains the wonder of living and helps to connect deeply with a natural sense of joy and stillness.

Chapter 14. The Art of Doing Nothing

Recently my mother met a friend on the street. “How’s your son doing? the friend asked. “Is he still unemployed?” “Yes,” my mother replied, “but he’s meditating now, so at least it’s better than sitting around doing nothing.”

That was actually a joke, but it’s pretty close to the truth for me. The funny thing is that after years of studying and practising advanced meditation techniques, I have come to the conclusion that ‘doing nothing’ is indeed a key factor in the Way of Meditation and also a way to not suffer as 16th French Philosophy Blaise Pascal says:

“All of humanity’s problems stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone.”

In the context of a meditative way of life, doing nothing can be experienced as the stillness of sitting meditation, as a form of mental surrender, as effortless performance, intuitive action, open receptivity to constantly changing circumstances or at its peak as an experience of immanent completeness without anything to be done and nothing to be sought after.

The art of doing nothing is not a passive state; the Taoist term for the art of doing nothing is ‘wei wu wei,’ which means:

...the ‘action of no action,’ a way of acting without trying to act. Action happens by itself, spontaneously – rather than being contrived, it is more direct and natural.

The Zen masters of old would speak of a non-intentional movement inspired by ‘no-mind,’ a way of being that is not driven by thoughts or contrivance but instead initiated by spontaneous intuition. In modern Western terms, I think an example of this type of action can be found in sport. Athletes have described a performance state of effortlessness and no-thought called being in the ‘zone’ which

unlocks their fullest potential and allows athletes to perform amazing feats with a sense of grace and ease.

Alan Watts describes doing nothing superbly in his book "Tao: The Watercourse Way" where he describes the predicament of the average person as being like someone trapped in a river, clinging to the riverbank. The average person is kept prisoner by holding on, flailing around in the mud around the edges and trying to escape. Watts explains that doing nothing is akin to letting go of the edges and literally going with the flow of the river.

All that's necessary to access the 'zone' or 'no-mind' or 'wei wu wei' is to let go and go with the flow; trim the sails and go with the wind. The art of doing nothing, does not cling or grasp but instead moves along effortlessly and smoothly with the current. No effort is required once you have initially made the effort to let go of the bank, but really, letting go is not "doing" something, it's more like undoing something. By letting go you achieve everything. As Lao Tzu says in the Tao Te Ching:

"I do nothing and yet nothing is left undone."

During formal sitting meditation, doing nothing with your thoughts is the main component of a powerful technique at the core of Buddhist practice. Tranquillity meditation involves detachment from thoughts, not following thoughts and also not pushing them away. Just letting thoughts be, the skill of doing nothing with thoughts and being able to rest naturally. 'Zazen,' the core Zen Meditation practice, literally means 'just sitting,' which is pretty close to just doing nothing. This just sitting is not a means to an end like creating a cause to achieve enlightenment, but as Zen Master Dogen implies just sitting is the expression of the realisation that enlightenment is already here and there is no 'there' to get to.

"If you cannot find enlightenment right where you are, where else do you expect to find it?"

Tibetan Meditation Master Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche explains how 'doing nothing' during meditation can heal and purify our minds:

"Meditation is one of the rare occasions when we're not doing anything. Otherwise, we're always doing something, we're always thinking something, we're always occupied. We get lost in millions of obsessions and fixations. But by meditating — by not doing anything — all these fixations are revealed, and our obsessions will naturally undo themselves like a snake uncoiling itself."

Doing nothing is also a way to become intimately connected with all that is because there is no resistance to anything you experience. There is no agenda, nothing to be changed and nothing to be done, simply open receptivity to the now. Not having to change anything to achieve peace is the

radical and powerful way of meditation. In fact, meditation master Tilopa, in a famous 10th-century meditation teaching given by the Ganges in India advised that the best action is free of action, that the highest of all types of conduct is no-action. In the same way that action can exist within 'no-action,' stillness can exist within movement as the balance point out of which movement occurs. Eckhart Tolle describes two types of action in his book Stillness Speaks : "one operates through thought, the other through stillness . "

...It is precisely this operating from stillness that is the art of doing nothing, the art of stillness in motion.

Doing nothing is not a static state of affairs, because that's impossible. Everything is moving, including our own mind and body; doing nothing means you flow effortlessly and harmoniously with the unending circumstances of life with the flexibility to accept constant fluctuation. Surrendering to the unpredictable flow of life brings with it the capacity to love easily as you recognise your connection with all that is. Of course, this does not mean that your life will suddenly be perfect. It does mean that you can find grace and freedom in any situation because the art of doing nothing is inherently harmonising and as Bruce Lee says:

"Simplicity is the key to brilliance."

Once you are skilfully 'doing nothing,' you are moving along life effortlessly and learning to trust the essential practice of non-grasping and non-contrivance. This allows you to maintain an ongoing, meditative, natural state of ease, whether the river current is tumultuous or gentle. The trust in the flow comes from our direct experience of doing nothing and just being, discovered in the silence of meditation practice. This is where we uncover the silent 'nothing' within that is actually full of love, bliss and wisdom. There is nothing to do because we are already that which we seek. Meditation master Chogyam Trungpa calls this discovering our 'basic goodness.' The art of doing nothing, then, is the art of letting go into the flow of basic goodness.

Chapter 15. Aussie Zen

The word spiritual is a highly loaded word that I have struggled to define and understand. There is no agreed upon definition and if you ask a group of people you would probably get lots of different responses. I would say that spirit means something like soul or psyche or even the mind, in Wiki they talk about an intangible self, that part of yourself that is not material but something that not only moves and motivates you but is the core or centre of your very being. So being spiritual is being self-aware of the intangible you; what moves and motivates you, what attitudes shape you and what core values guide you.

Being spiritual can simply mean being kind, the Dalai Lama has famously said his religion is kindness and not so famously but a huge influence on me, my father once said that his religion was being a good bloke. A good bloke in Australia is a strong Australian archetype, a man who is strong but kind, always ready to swear and poke fun at the elite except if it's an elite sportsman who are Aussie blokes idols, and a good bloke above all has a fierce sense of humour making fun of himself as much as he relentlessly teases others. It turns out that being brought up in Australia admiring the ideal of a good bloke is actually quite spiritual in its nature.

After having a regular middle-class upbringing in Australia I thought it was a good idea when I was 28 years old to sell off all my possessions, there wasn't much, and move to a Buddhist centre and become a monk. Not your usual vocation for an Aussie bloke but I was disillusioned with the 9-5 grind and thought training my mind to be happy, wise and compassionate was a meaningful thing to do. Since then I have studied Buddhist wisdom in-depth and become somewhat obsessed with meditation as a way of life and it is here that my two paths of being a good Aussie bloke and a Zen Practitioner collide.

Zen can be quite mysterious but the Word Zen actually just means meditation in Japanese. The practice of Zen as a way of life is more difficult to describe but it has a major component of irreverence. That is the equalising of the ordinary with the divine. A cup of tea enjoyed with total mindfulness and presence becomes an experience of Zen.

A famous Zen saying is when I'm hungry I eat, when I'm tired I sleep, so here Zen becomes the experience of being natural and divinely ordinary not trying to escape to some enlightened ideal or a perfect self or become super human but instead just being present on a morning walk is enlightened enough. Zen Master Suzuki said

"If you can't find enlightenment right here in this moment where else do you expect to find it?"

Certainly, Zen and being an Aussie bloke share an irreverence for ceremony and tradition but what I find the most similar is the Australian attitude of 'she'll be right mate'. An eternal easy going mentality that can laugh in the face of any adversity. In fact an Aussie bloke is apt to say in the most difficult of times, for example loss of a job, relationship break up or even a death the good ol' Aussie bloke will often announce, 'she'll be right mate'.

There is even a Buddhist deity called Samantabhadra which translates as 'the all good'. This idea far from being cruel or dismissive is actually a recognition that at the heart of every experience both good and bad is a divine essence a Buddha nature and it's the role of meditation to be mindful of this enlightened essence in every situation as primary and the flux of the world as a secondary apparition – like ripples on the ocean of eternity.

'No worries mate' is another Aussie saying that I'm fond of. Firstly Aussies love to call everyone mate. It's like calling everyone friend, everyone is your friend and deserves a smile, even the Dalai Lama once advised to greet everyone you meet as if you were meeting an old friend. Secondly no worries is not making a big deal out of anything, not adding suffering to suffering. Sometimes shit happens but no worries mate, she'll be right. This rings of Zen where the mind is not moved by circumstances but remains calm and centred in its recognition that the moment is enough, Zen masters have called this the imperturbability of the original mind, but as an Aussie I just call it 'good as gold'.

"All experiences are made of the same substance but appear differently, just like all gold jewellery is made of gold but takes many shapes and styles."

A sense of justice or 'fair go' is another quality that both Zen and being an Australian good bloke share. After-all Zen is a Buddhist tradition which respects all beings as equal displays of an essential Buddha nature. As an Aussie we believe in a fair go for everyone. Although we are famous for chopping down tall poppies, we are also known for giving a mate a hand up, never kicking someone when they're down and a real Aussie bloke would never ever hit a woman. Because an Aussie bloke loves sport so much there is a pervasive attitude that if you train hard enough and put in the work no matter who you are you deserve a shot at the title and in Zen the same applies to enlightenment, man or woman Japanese, Indian or African everyone has Buddha nature and has the potential to realise it.

There was an Australian tourist advertising campaign a few years back that showed an attractive Australian woman in a bikini on a beach beckoning the world "where the bloody are ya?" This actually can be a great Australian koan, a deep question that elicits a profound realisation. Many spiritual types are aware of the spiritual attitude of always being in the now, most famously written about by Eckhart Tolle in his book the Power of Now, but a lesser known stanza is the 'power of here'. So often we are striving to get some place else, some elusive place in the future where things will be better and you'll be happier, but a key to Australian Zen is to be right where you are and make the most of it. According to Zen 'right here' is where enlightenment is found and is the only place you will ever be. Australian Zen is being present and mindful right where you are no matter how difficult it might be. Where the bloody hell are you? I am always here mate.

Therefore, Australian Zen is above all relaxed and easy going, cheeky and irreverent, humorous always making light of the situation, it believes in a fair go for all and has an impenetrable optimism. Going with the flow and smashing down egos at every turn. Laughing in the face of adversity and exposing your buttocks to royalty, tough and resilient and ready to share a beer with the next person you meet or get in a fight defending a woman's honour. Whatever the situation requires is what is done. Not trying to escape to anywhere else, happy in a sense of mischievous abandon in whatever is happening. This is a type of spirituality I can have fun practising and a spiritual lineage I would be proud to hand down to the next generation.

Chapter 16.

How to Master the Illusion

Everyday life is an important time for a meditator, in Tibetan Buddhism it is called the post meditation period and is seen as just as important as formal meditation, if not more important. After all the time spent on your meditation cushion is only a fraction of the time you spend in life. A powerful method for keeping an enlightened meditative composure throughout the day is to be mindful that everything experienced is dreamlike and illusory.

Masters of illusions are people who can move through the world while staying detached whilst still keeping their compassion for all the dream-like characters that they meet. Or as Meditation Master Milarepa says:

“Know that the world of appearances are illusory, and have compassion for those who don’t understand.”

To remain in the ‘Unborn’ was Zen Master Bankei’s advice for avoiding straying into the illusory appearances of the world. Dwelling in that which does not arise and does not die as a personal experience of unmoved naturalness. Nothing else needs to be practiced, he would say. No need to follow the dream-like appearances, simply remain in the perfectly still awareness which was his way of pointing to that permanent presence at the heart of all experience. Another great meditation master Arjahn Chah hints at the same thing when he said:

“Just this is the aim of all this difficult practice we put ourselves through; is to discover the natural purity of our mind and not get lost in sense impressions.”

Getting caught up in our sense impression is getting caught up in judgement about them, getting caught in the never-ending matrix of comparisons and desire and looking for completion in the ever unfolding relative world. That is the very cause of suffering, trying to be complete in what by nature is incomplete and constantly changing. How can we find satisfaction in things that are constantly ending?

A master of illusion is a meditator who can remain in awareness and ‘dream’ lucidly during waking hours, continuing through normal everyday life but with a distinct impression of events being ephemeral and dream-like. This enables spiritual practitioners to navigate the world while keeping connection with the natural presence of awareness and simultaneously experiencing the ebb and flow of constantly changing events. This is closer to the actual reality of things than our normal impression of things being fixed and objective. Buddha himself described the reality of things with several metaphors and warned that things do not exist the way they appear and therefore he said reality is like:

“A mirage, a cloud castle, a dream, an apparition, without essence, but with qualities that can be seen.”

So who is the deceiver that tricks us? is it the Buddhist demon Mara? is it the temptations of the Christian Devil or is it the Hindu idea of the great trickster Maya? Well they could all be symbols of what seems to be just the limited apparatus of the human mechanism. We are not designed to witness the totality of reality, it's just too enormous, our brains are designed to filter out most of reality so what is left is the essentials to survive in our limited dimension. It's ourselves that conjure up illusory appearances with our own minds and then believe them. Or put more crudely people tend to make shit up and then believe it to be true.

When a person gets drawn into the seemingly real dramas of life, the sense of a dream-like existence fades into the background and the predominant experience becomes one of being contracted, serious and confused. We get drawn into an illusory dream searching for love and security but we forget that nothing is really substantial we pursue unattainable goals and therefore get frustrated time and time again. Like the Christian analogy of being lost in the shadows of the valley of death. Or like Plato's allegory of the cave where prisoners in a cave mistake shadows on the wall for real people and start to name them until one brave person stands up and goes outside for the first time and discovers the truth of the illusion. Ironical he has a tough time convincing the people still in the cave that the shadows are not the whole picture.

“Don't sweat the dream stuff, and it's all dream stuff.”

The practice of viewing life in a dream-like way also undermines our usual selfishness and egoic pursuits that usually lead to harming ourselves and others. By viewing life in a dream-like way illuminates the moment with a light-hearted presence which helps to be easy-going, relaxed and not take things so seriously. This is more than just relaxation though; if letting go is complete, the enlightened ground of our being is touched and activated.

Letting go from controlling the dream and surrendering to just being brings with it an immense freedom and a flood of good qualities. There is nowhere else to get to, the infinite is not an experience neither is enlightenment, all experiences are conditioned and come and go in the flux of the dream.

When you are no longer distracted by fear or desire for a dream like world; the natural awakened qualities of love, wisdom and joy can shine through unhindered. Being a master of illusion is detaching from believing in the dream and connecting with the pure energy of an eternal wakefulness. What's left to do but to plunge right in and enjoy the show. Or as a Great Meditation Master once said:

“Since everything is but an apparition, having nothing to do with good or bad, acceptance or rejection, one may well burst out in laughter.”

Chapter 17. Awakening from the Dream of Thought

Once I heard a meditation master describe awakening with a metaphor about watching TV. He said awakening is like when you are watching a movie and also being aware of the room around you and with the knowledge that the movie you're watching is just a movie and not real.

It's like watching the drama of your life but knowing you are more than your drama. This type of detachment has been taught by meditation teachers through-out the ages. Detachment naturally offers a broader perspective and more space to make wise choices. And ironically the more detached you are from thoughts the more connected you are to the reality of the moment.

To enjoy watching a movie we 'suspend disbelief' identifying with the characters and losing ourselves in the drama of the story. We also enjoy the emotional responses of excitement, love and even fear from the safety of our lounge chairs.

I could never really enjoy watching horror movies with my dad because he would continuously point out that it's not real – that's tomato sauce not blood or he'd tell me that person didn't really die he is only an actor. I would plead with my dad – I know it's not real but I'm trying to enjoy the movie.

Spiritual awakening is not for everyone. When I first heard this I thought it must be wrong but awakening can be challenging; it's like when you're rudely awakened by an alarm clock from a nice dream, sometimes you just want to go back to sleep and enjoy the dream. Or when you're trying to enjoy a movie and an annoying person keeps reminding you it's not real. It can be difficult coming to terms with spiritual truths about your life being just a dream or an illusion or empty of any inherent meaning. Most people, myself included would like to think their life is important, special and have a deeper meaning but how do you confront the reality of it all being a projection of your imagination onto the infinite play of existence?

However, what if reality was way more special than you could ever imagine or dream up? what if you are a part of a deeper mystery that is interconnected with all things? As Meditation Master Tenzin Palmo says:

“Meditation is for you to realise that the deepest nature of your existence is beyond thoughts and emotions, that it is incredibly vast and interconnected with all other beings.”

This is common theme amongst the great meditation traditions that reality lies beyond our normal thinking minds and is vast and actually one with everything. Since the universe is so incredibly enormous, were the Earth is like a sliver of a grain of sand in the ocean of infinity, it is no wonder that it's impossible for us to imagine. I often think expecting humans to be able to conceptualise with their thinking minds the infinite nature of the universe is like expecting a fish to understand algebra – it's just not possible with the equipment we are using.

In mindfulness therapy they make the distinction between being fused with thoughts and being the observer of thoughts. Being fused with thoughts is characterised by confusion and no separation between your identity and your story. When you are fused with thoughts you have suspended disbelief and are living the life of a movie character in your own movie, which can be fun as long as you know it's not real and it's just a movie. When you are the observer you can choose to engage with the thought or to let it go and therefore you are in control instead of your thoughts being in charge.

Getting caught in thoughts during meditation and in life is like a watching movie, we engage in the drama so fully it's the only reality happening, and it has control over our emotions. But if we can detach from our thoughts, notice there is more going on than just the thoughts and they are not real we can have a chance of experiencing the spacious stillness of a broader perspective which is always available but mostly overlooked and awaken from a hypnotic trance. Like Eckhart Tolle says:

“Spiritual awakening is awakening from the dream of thought.”

Awakening is waking up from the dream of thought into the vastness of a direct experience of the totality of the universe.

The Way of Meditation is to integrate this awakening into every aspect of our lives. To follow our bliss instead of our stories, to put down the need to know things with the mind, to give space for the intuitive whispers over the noise of our conditioning and to flow with the spontaneous wisdom and compassion that is always there when we drop the last thought and enter into the river of infinity.

Chapter 18. How the Self Exists

Does the Self Exist According to Buddha?

There are a lot of people in the spiritual community who talk about how there is no self so there are no problems, and everything is basically an illusion. Why should we be concerned about anything when there is no-one that it happens to? but this is not the whole story and not what Buddha taught and it leads people to huge misconceptions about exactly what the self is and how to live a good life.

I would like to offer a middle way which is what I believe Buddha taught 2,500 or so years ago. I notice in spiritual communities the idea put across about an illusory self or a non-existent self and they often teach that when you look for a self through self-enquiry you cannot find one so there must not be a self. This is exactly the conclusion that is warned against in ancient scriptures. To say the self does not exist at all is a big mistake on many levels.

“There is a self but it’s just not what you think it is.”

What you think the self is, is exactly what an ego is, an imagined story of who you think you are based on social conditioning and this is what’s eliminated through spiritual practice, a false notion of the self. In fact, it is not eliminated because it never existed; it is imaginary. What happens is the false imaginary self is ‘seen through’ and not believed in anymore. But there is a real self that cannot be eliminated and there is a real individual despite what so many self-proclaimed awakened spiritual teachers try and teach.

The middle way is the middle ground between two extreme views. Saying the self exists as a separate and permanent thing is an extreme. But it is also an extreme view to say the self does not exist at all. The self is neither permanent nor non-existent. The middle way is somewhere in between these two extremes. There are two mistakes that are made with Buddhist negation of the self. Negating too much and not negating enough.

Buddha taught a specific type of self does not exist – that is a permanent and separate self. BUT the Buddha did not say the self does not exist at all. This misconception leads to the gross error of thinking karma does not exist and actions do not have consequences. The hardest thing in Buddhist philosophy is to match the two teachings of no self and karma together.

In our experience there seems to be a fixed, separate and autonomous self that is different from everything else and goes through life having things happen to it. We believe in this self and create stories about it. This is the self that is negated using either of the two main types of Buddhist meditations: either using ‘direct looking’ or ‘logical analysis’. What is revealed is reality.

As Alan Watts describes

“The doctrine of sunyata, or voidness, asserts only that there are no self-existent forms, for the more one concentrates upon any individual thing, the more it turns out to involve the whole universe.”

The path of a simple meditator is to turn your attention around and 'look' directly within yourself and see if you can find this separate self. Upon looking all that is found is a clear and open awareness but not a personality or something separate with boundaries.

The second method uses logical analysis. The parts of the self are intellectually separated, and logical questions are asked like: is the self the body alone? or is the self the mind alone? does the self own its parts? or is the self found in its parts? After logical reflection the self cannot be found as a separate entity or found within the individual parts. Upon conclusion the self does not exist in its parts or separate from its parts.

So where does that leave us? For a meditator this question is left wide open. Literally wide open without the need to come up with an intellectual answer but to simply remain present and mindful of passing experiences and not attaching to any thoughts about yourself or the world. This is the way of meditation, the ancient way of Zen or the position of 'no position'. A simple and open-ended way to live trusting in present centred awareness. Everything is transient, contextual and immediate. And it's not even that because they're all just more ideas and philosophy.

For a person using reason and logic or a scientific approach the best way to describe the self is interdependent. Logically speaking nothing exists apart from anything else. Everything is relational. The self is a contingent entity constantly in flux and always relating to other things. There is no self separate from the body, emotions or mind. The self is labelled dependant on those things which are constantly changing and never fixed.

The great Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh says if the clouds did not exist we would not exist either. He explains beautifully how interrelated we are with our environment, in fact the very next breath you take to survive is totally dependant on a healthy atmosphere created by the interactions of countless variables like trees, the sun and the ocean. Thich Nhat Hanh calls this self 'interbeing' and suggests if you look deeply enough into the back of your hand you can see the whole world there.

There should be a good dose of common sense in our ideas of the self. To say there is no self so there is no need to buy food or pay the bills for our self is obviously an extreme. These days even enlightened beings need to pay the bills. As the old Zen saying goes "before enlightenment chop wood and carry water, after enlightenment chop wood and carry water." Or a modern version of that saying by Jack Kornfield is: "after enlightenment, the laundry."

To sum it up – meditating and spiritual practice can reveal a timeless and unbounded dimension to our being, but this is not exclusively who we are. The best analogy is we emerge from a vast ocean of consciousness as a time bound individual wave of existence. Whilst we are always connected to the ocean and an expression of the whole ocean we also live simultaneously as individuals swayed by conditions and circumstances.

To enjoy the ride as a wave but to realise you are always the ocean.

To live life is to live on our own individual wave of existence. Being mindful of all the connections that make our existence possible and cultivating positive and healthy relationships to everything. To totally thrive is to be aware of the timeless dimension within, what Buddhist might call Buddha nature, which is where we came from and are constantly connected to that reveals the most profound truth of our complete existence and allows access to deep wisdom, intuition and guidance. That wisdom includes the ability to clearly know what's healthy for the interdependent self and what's unhealthy and follow the path that leads to a good healthy life.

Chapter 19. The Ego Traps of Meditation

Spiritual Ego

With so many people joining the meditation revolution what are some of the pitfalls to be avoided? Generally speaking meditation is meant to eliminate an ego or self-centred attitude which always wants more and more and replace it with a serene and content, dare I say enlightened way of being, but is it possible that meditation can increase your ego and contribute to your emotional and psychological suffering? A Tibetan Buddhist Meditation Master Chogyam Trungpa claims that it can do just that, and he warns of meditation being an ego trap and called it spiritual materialism

Here are the five ego traps to avoid in meditation:

1) The Identification Trap

This is probably the most obvious trap, or at least it is obvious to others if you go around claiming you are enlightened, but it is also the most subtle and hard to understand. To believe there is some fixed separate person that is enlightened is exactly what the ego does. The ego is believing in some fixed identity that endures over time, instead of the ever-changing relationships and processes which life actually is.

“As for enlightenment, that’s just for people who can’t face reality.” ~ Brad Warner

This trap also includes believing other people like Gurus or Masters to be enlightened; to see them as perfected beings and you as a lower or lesser type of being is exactly how the ego operates; by solidifying and comparing. Believing in others identity as perfect is actually just the ego projected outward.

Thinking you are better than other because you are a 'meditator' is of course caused by identifying and then comparing. This is an obvious pitfall to be avoided. Try to meditate regularly without labelling yourself a meditator or spiritual or anything else. Live without a story; simply fresh and awake in every moment without an identity.

In meditation we don't let the mind stick to anything, not identify with anything, remaining free. Don't make an 'I dent' in any appearance or any thought just stay open and aware.

The key mistake of this trap is thinking relative appearances can be perfected or completed. Relative appearances will always be changing through stages of birth, temporarily abiding and dying. These natural cycles are perfect in themselves, but they are never finished or complete and they certainly don't stop. To be in the flow with life is the perfect way but there is no fixed identity doing it.

The key realisation of meditation is there is no-self. The light is on, but there is no-one home, no fixed ego doing everything. This is not philosophy; this can be discovered through meditative introspection. Right now, look inward for the thing you call 'you' and see what you find. There is spontaneous awareness sensitive to the moment but no one there to do it or gain reward, that is why Buddhist practice nonattachment to the results of actions.

This is difficult for the rational mind to accept, it challenges notions of free will and independence but there are other conceptual alternatives to either thinking there is an enlightened person or not; like what Zen Master Suzuki suggests, "there is no such thing as an enlightened person only enlightened activity." or what the non-dual Master Nisargadatta says:

"Wisdom tells me I am nothing, love tells me I am everything, between the two my life flows."

2) The Permanency Trap

"Ah Ha! I've finally got it, I've finally arrived" said the ego, "I've finally found that perfect philosophy the right answer and the meaning to life." This is the permanence trap. As soon as you think you've got it, you've gone astray, you've missed the point of impermanence and you are grasping at something conceptually secure to hold onto in this ever-changing world. The ego grasping onto permanence is so often an intellectual grasping, you think you've got it, the answer to your problems, the final conclusion. This is a trap. This dulls the sensitivity to the present moment. It breeds arrogance and ultimately brings huge disappointment. As Zen Master Suzuki says "...the mind's readiness for anything is wisdom." He goes on to warn "that in an expert's mind there are few possibilities but in a beginner's mind there are many."

It is also very wise to always remember the first line of the Tao Te Ching when you think you've finally got the right answer:

"The truth that can be named is not the real truth."

Thoughts and concepts are actually kind of permanent they do not change like material things do, they may be replaced quite readily but once you've decided on an opinion or a conclusion, that thought remains permanent and herein lies the problem. Reality is constantly changing, there is no blanket belief that will cover all events and situations. Alan Watts says it best:

"There is a contradiction in wanting to be perfectly secure in a universe whose very nature is momentariness and fluidity. But the contradiction lies a little deeper than the mere conflict between the desire for security and the fact of change. If I want to be secure, that is, protected from the flux of life, I am wanting to be separate from life. Yet it is this very sense of separateness which makes me feel insecure. To be secure means to isolate and fortify the "I," but it is just the feeling of being an isolated "I" which makes me feel lonely and afraid."

3) The Centralization Trap

This ego trap I am happy to finally talk about because it is a major mistake people make when practising mindfulness meditation. People often withdraw to a centralised point of observance or witnessing, and it feels like there is an isolated and separate thing watching everything else. The problem is so many meditation teachers teach this way of meditating (including me). It is taught to be detached, to be the silent witness, to let things come and go without being moved from a non-judgemental awareness, but this is just a small stepping stone toward the truth of things. The next step is to understand there is no separation between your witnessing awareness and what it is observing.

Samadhi is one of the oldest forms of meditation practised by many in ancient India from all different religious sects, and it was what Buddha was training in when he discovered deep truths about things. Samadhi actually means to become one with what you're observing. It does not mean to remain separate and aloof; it means to unite fully with your object of observation – there is no difference between you and it. It is total absorption in the moment, actually losing yourself in what you're doing, not gaining or adding a new witnessing self.

Instead of centralizing inward the idea of meditation is to decentralise outward, disperse yourself into everything. Everything in the moment is you. This is what is meant in a famous line in the Buddhist Heart Sutra when it says form is emptiness and emptiness is form. Your empty awareness is not separate from anything it is actually one and the same with everything.

This is exactly how mindfulness enables ethics, wisdom and compassion; you unite with things so as to understand them, you are them, this is the deepest kind of empathy and the subtlest type of sensitivity. Buddha taught to listen to things and all that you hear is just sound, or to watch things and all that appears is just appearances, no separate person seeing the sights or hearing the sounds, just sounds, just appearances. Once again this is not philosophy this is the experience found in meditation.

*Try it now just listen to whatever is happening and see if you can find a boundary between you and the sound.

This wisdom has been lost in modern McMindfulness as taught by so many of today's teachers.

4) The Accumulation Trap

This is a trap warned about by Buddha and later by Zen Master Dogen. When you try and gain something from your meditation you have gone astray especially if your trying to get enlightened. There is nothing to add and nothing to take away. Gaining or resisting is exactly the attachment and aversion Buddha warned was the cause of all emotional suffering, and what Dogen says is the major mistake of meditation practice.

When you try and accumulate merit or knowledge as taught by religious versions of Buddhism you are developing a super strength ego. Any type of wisdom or virtue that is accumulated falls under the natural law of death and decay, it is not a reliable refuge. Anything that is born will die. It is only in the perfect wisdom of a spontaneously present and open mind that enlightened activity can take place. Be in the moment and leave no trace.

It is the ego's modus operandi to try and gain and benefit and get something from every moment. There is never any contentment or peace in that approach. The Tibetan Buddhist master Sogyal Rinpoche once said that meditation was simply the practice of contentment. That sounds too simple, but it is extremely profound and a lot more difficult than you think.

This pitfall includes the ego trap of developing yourself. Self-development needs a timeline, a past and a future and this is exactly the state of mind we are trying to overcome in meditation by being in the eternal now. Forget about ideas of getting better, be totally yourself today and tomorrow be totally yourself. Each day is complete, each moment is complete, don't compare moments. Your past self and your present self may look different but only when you solidify and compare, solidifying a concept of yourself, comparing and improving are all ego traps to be avoided in meditation.

The greatest instructions I have come across in my 20 years of study are the ones that say don't try and change anything, don't manipulate yourself, don't try and achieve enlightenment, simply allow this moment to be as it is. One famous Tibetan proverb says, "this moment as it is, is enlightenment."

5) The Happiness Trap

Chogyam Trungpa said that "Enlightenment is ego's ultimate disappointment." Why would he say that? It seemed to me for a long time that enlightenment meant I could be happy all the time impervious to whatever was happening, and it was the most natural thing in the world to pursue this worthwhile goal. How wrong I was. The Happiness Trap is a title of a fantastic book which outlines using mindfulness as personal therapy and it explains very clearly that the biggest trap, we face is wanting to be happy all the time. It just completely goes against reality. The reality of change, the reality of disappointment, the reality of trying and failing. It is the ego's greatest victory when it convinces you it can protect you from all this stuff. The only realistic way is acceptance.

"The more we try to avoid the basic reality that all human life involves pain, the more we are likely to struggle with that pain when it arises, thereby creating even more suffering."

~ Russ Harris, The Happiness Trap

Eckhart Tolle echoes what many great spiritual teachers have said – resistance to the present situation is the root of all suffering. Unfortunately, that includes resisting unhappiness, or pain or even depression. As the old saying goes, "what you resist persists." Allowing space for these things to be and move, allows them to pass right on through, it doesn't mean they won't return, life is full of suffering, but the good news is nothing is permanent. There is no need to tell ourselves sweet stories or sugar coat reality, as Brad Warner says:

"Real wisdom is the ability to understand the incredible extent to which you bullshit yourself every single moment of every day."

Trying to be happy all the time you end up like Ned Diddley Dandy Flanders, that Simpsons character that always tries to be happy and positive and comes off just a little bit scary and neurotic. Perhaps like a happiness junkie addicted to seeing the bright side of every situation. But it's ok to be sad, it's ok to grieve the loss of loved ones and it's ok to not be perfect, that's just being perfectly human. Meditation is not about trying to escape or transcend into something otherworldly, it's being intimate with reality, seeing things as they are not how you would like them to be. It is from this place of acceptance that effective changes can be made because you are perfectly aware of the situation.

Chapter 20.

Ultimately Meditation is for Discovering Your True Self

Ultimately all meditation is for discovering your true self. All relative meditation training is all a lead-up to the great leap into your true self, the union with the truth of your being. Once all doubt has been resolved, one is ready to accept and see one's ultimate identity as simple, lucid and complete. Your actual nature is perfect empty awareness, naturally imbued with wisdom, love and harmony.

There is nothing that can harm it and nothing that can improve it, because it is formless and boundless; all experiences, both 'good' and 'bad', have at their base this perfect empty awareness and, in reality, all experiences are never separate from it in any way.

All appearances are the luminous display of empty awareness. A primordial unity appearing as a symphony of possibility. Our true self has been known by many names throughout different times and cultures, but as a simple meditator it is not necessary to speculate or intellectualise about the indescribable; it is the Way of Meditation to just let it be and rest in natural presence.

It is only a journey because we have left our real home, therefore it's a journey back home to our real selves.

We start our journey rooted in our false identities and, through meditation training, we keep going and keep going to the treasure that has always been waiting within.

"Meditation, then, is bringing the mind home, to our true self."

The easiest and most effective path to spiritual awakening is effortless presence. Just Being. Not moving from natural presence of awareness. Not seeking. Not objectifying. Not fabricating any states of mind. Stop all effort altogether and rest. Rest in the great natural peace of awareness and be your authentic self.

As Meditation Master Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche advises:

"Banish all hope and fear and rest in the unshakable certainty that the eternal simplicity of awareness is itself all that needs to be done to be an Awakened Being. That is the Perfect Way of Meditation, in which peace, love and wisdom will flourish without effort."

If our natural state is already perfect and complete, why practice meditation at all? The key is that recognition of our true nature of Pure Presence is utterly indispensable. If you do not know who you really are, it won't benefit you in the slightest. In fact, because your ego's self-image and actions are a vicious cycle of self-reinforcing perceptions and habits, you can exist endlessly within ignorance and turmoil constantly seeking peace and fulfilment elsewhere.

Without meditation, contemplation, and looking within, you may never know your ultimate identity. Your true nature is always the same whether you realise it or not; the difference is, it only benefits your life if you recognise it and stabilise within it.

Therefore, your natural state is found by just resting, letting go of any effort to try and attain something extra and just being yourself 'as you are'. In some meditation traditions they say enlightenment is found in our ordinary mind right now as it is. Nothing to add, nothing to remove just naturally perfect right here, right now. What a relief.

Chapter 21. Self Confidence Through Self Realisation

The Dalai Lama says that nothing can ever be accomplished without confidence in yourself, but which 'self' should you have confidence in? your personality, your abilities, your intelligence? Or is there something greater to put your trust and confidence in?

There is plenty of information around about the 'law of attraction' where you can achieve all your dreams and desires through setting your intentions, attention and states of mind to 'attract' what you want easily. Also modern psychology can 'pep you up' with solutions of a healthy ego that sets reasonable goals and moves diligently toward them or maybe you're a Tony Robbins fan where belief in your self becomes almost religious and the sheer power of single pointed motivation to obtain what you want is all that is necessary.

I do not want to misrepresent any of these systems of confidence because they all have their relative value and benefits, but they all contain the seeds of their own demise. Why? because they all require effort; the maintenance of your 'vibration' or the feeding of your 'healthy ego' or the sustaining of your enthusiasm. Within the Way of Meditation from the viewpoint of Eastern philosophy comes the idea that nothing you build can last, everything that is created will be destroyed and nothing in this world will bring you any lasting satisfaction. You can just keep setting new goals and adjusting your attitude again and again but is there another way?

Maybe there's something more ultimate like God, Allah or Buddha that can be relied on with perfect confidence? There is a good case that people who have faith and confidence in these things have a lasting happiness and peace that is more sustainable and reliable than worldly egos or enthusiasm. But I contend that most of this is based on a 'healthy religious ego' – another type of ego which is

just more beliefs; a construction of fake confidence built on the foundations of concepts and ideas. This is why in Zen there is a saying

“...if you see Buddha in the street, kill him!”

This popular Zen saying points to killing any concept of something outside of yourself that can be relied on.

So this brings me to what I would like to introduce you to that can be relied on, that can bring a fearless confidence and a way of being that is available to everyone regardless of what country you are from, what religious background you have or how much money you earn; this is the universal confidence of discovering your own consciousness with all its miraculous qualities.

Since I have just somewhat criticised religions I would like to mention these teachings, which are referred to as the ‘perennial philosophy’ are found, sometimes hidden or secret, within all the major religious teachings of the world and discovering or uncovering this hidden truth is the key to unshakable confidence and the goal of meditation.

The perennial philosophy points to a ‘true self’ which when contacted heralds the dawning of a new identity, a new understanding of who you are and an unshakable confidence. This is not an arrogant type of confidence that believes it can achieve all goals or have whatever it wants, on the contrary it is a humble confidence that realises deeply the futility and vanity of reaching for fulfilment within the temporary appearances of the world. A humility built on a grandmother like wisdom that knows the temporary and fleeting nature of things. This is not depressing, instead it is liberating, and deeply realizes the value of each sunset, each smile from another human being and the richness of every day. Each day is seen as more precious than ever and should never be taken for granted because it simply will not last.

It is a confidence in the already complete eternal present moment – the only place happiness and fulfilment can ever be found.

The type of confidence I am alluding to ironically starts with a giving up or surrendering. This surrender is called renouncing worldly affairs which is giving up the temporary and unreliable fluctuations of ‘goal achieving’ happiness for the lasting and greater happiness available from knowing who you really are in the present moment.

So, who are you? The first thing I can say is who you are not and very simply this means you are not who you think you are. Thoughts are just ideas in your imagination they are not real. Thoughts about who you are usually based on arbitrary things like your job, sexual orientation, country of birth or particular talents – all these things are temporary conditions labelled by thought with no lasting truth to them. Surrendering these thoughts of yourself is the first stage of meditation when you are taught to just watch your breath and not take your thoughts seriously, let them come and let them go, they are of no significance to your real and lasting identity.

*Try it – pause right now and contemplate who are you in this moment if you do not believe your thoughts?

Ok so this blog is going a little bit longer than I hoped so I will 'cut to the chase'. Who are you really? SPOILER ALERT:

You are an eternal unbounded consciousness that is the primary and fundamental source of the universe.

That means from this perspective our bodies, brains and everything else comes out of this consciousness like a wave coming out of the ocean, rather than the other way around. Before you argue; you must understand that modern science including neuroscience has not yet explained their theory that consciousness arises from the brain and nervous system it is still a mystery to them and known as the 'hard problem of consciousness'.

Mystics and contemplatives on the other hand have been telling us for millennia that our true selves are an unbounded consciousness imbued with intuitive intelligence, unconditional love and immeasurable bliss and joy. In Buddhism it is called Buddha Nature and it is taught that this nature is already perfect, enlightened and complete with positive qualities. The goal of all Buddhist schools is to realise this nature.

Self-realized beings have told us that worldly happiness pales in comparison to the self-realisation of consciousness and the East's ideas of liberation and enlightenment are founded on realizing this universal truth for yourself. Unfortunately, this realisation is ego's biggest disappointment. It is not a personal self but a universal self shared by every living being. You are not better than anyone else you are just a reflection of this divine self within the conditions of the world. The term Namaste – the divine light in me recognises the divine light in you – is a great way to remember this when you meet others.

This consciousness or Open Awareness I am pointing to is fearless, what Zen Masters call indomitable – which means it is not moved or swept away by present circumstances; it is indestructible like the sky and contacting this inner space can bring tremendous courage and

fortitude into our lives. The realisation that the passing weather can never harm the sky is just like how passing thoughts and emotions no matter how strong can never harm your true inner sky like conscious self.

Your true self or Open Awareness does not come and go, you do not create this Awareness in meditation and you cannot make it better and you cannot harm it either, it is at the heart of all experiences, it is here right now, it is the open space that is allowing you to read this blog. It is the effortless ground of your being, the unchanging presence that has been with you all your life. As Deepak Chopra explains:

“Meditation is not a way of making your mind quiet. It is a way of entering into the quiet that is already there – buried under the 50,000 thoughts the average person thinks every day”

Zen Master Bankei calls it the great ‘Unborn’ because it does not arise newly or from causes it has always been there – it is what the ‘big bang’ emerged from. It has never been born in the normal sense and therefore it can never die, it is the only ‘thing’ like it, everything else will be born and die and cannot be relied on. If you try and gain confidence in anything else, it will be unstable and unreliable.

Another metaphor is your true self is like the calm stillness in the centre of a storm or tornado, even when chaos is swirling around us there is a calm centre, a quiet place within that always has a cheeky inner smile that knows this too shall pass.

Consciousness has a quality of watching and noticing without reacting or being affected. We could simply call this Awareness. Being aware of things without reacting is a doorway into this consciousness and a major style of meditation as taught by many traditions. As Osho says:

“...just keep on being more and more aware and you will be amazed at how your life will transform.”

There is so much philosophy to discuss about this unbounded consciousness, hopefully I have pointed toward it enough to give you a glimpse just by reading my words. But there is no substitute for the self-realisation of contacting this naturally clear and unbounded consciousness through meditation. I would like to conclude with a meditation method for discovering your true self. This method points to and notices three qualities of Consciousness as the ultimate refuge for everyone. The three qualities are stillness, silence, and space. This is a very simple and effective method to contact this ever-present consciousness however there are many different paths to self-discovery.

Contacting Unbounded Consciousness

* Right now:

- 1) sit still
- 2) be quiet (no matter what noises are around – YOU be quiet) and
- 3) allow thoughts the space to move through your mind without reacting to them.

Notice these three things: being still, being silent and being spacious. Notice they are qualities that are already present within you. They ARE YOU. Contacting these three qualities allows you a refuge from fear and suffering at all times even when you are moving, making noise and thinking the underlying fabric that allows these things to happen is inner stillness, silence and space.

This empowers an incredible self-confidence. You don't have to do anything or avoid anything to be confident simply find confidence in Being you. Sit still and silent and just be for a short while. Just be without trying to change anything. Just sit. Just breath. And just be your natural self.

You are already complete and fulfilled and this can never be taken from you. What is there to fear?

This is what can be relied on – being relaxed in the now with unshakable confidence in your natural self – unbounded consciousness.

Chapter 22. The Jewell of Abundant Love

The Love Found Within

Having been meditating and studying Buddhism for over 15 years the question of how meditation and love go together has always intrigued me. In the practices I've learnt they are often presented as separate in theory and somehow are meant to fit together. Buddhism is abundant with meditations on loving kindness and compassion and then there are techniques that empty the mind or single pointedly concentrating. So how do they fit together?

My intellect battled with this question looking for answers but it wasn't until I finally rested my mind completely and found a thought free experience that I discovered it was actually filled with warmth and bliss and an abundant amount of love pouring out. It turns out that the empty state of mind is not empty at all but is actually full of radiant love.

Meditation Masters have described the essence of mind as being like space because it has no boundaries and it is immaterial. But unlike outer space, inner awareness is full of good qualities like intelligence, intuition, love and bliss.

In the ancient Indian Vedic scriptures, our true self is described as Satchitananda which translates roughly as pure being, consciousness and bliss. In Buddhism the closest thing to the true self is Buddha Nature which is luminous awareness filled with unconditional love and wisdom.

So, the empty space of awareness is actually pure love. Love is in the inner space. The Dalai Lama has said that love is the absence of judgement. When you can be with someone without judging them, you give a chance for the deepest type of love to arise. This is what I'm getting at here, when you can still the mind to such a subtle state, naturally occurring love is ever present.

This not the type of romantic love between two people. It is the very essence or heart of ourselves radiating into the world. When you touch the essence of your own being you touch the essence of all beings. Oneness, without separation. Without the dualistic thinking mind covering it, the essence is free to shine unhindered.

It is our thinking mind that divides and separates us. Identifying with the surface stuff like the colour of our skin or our gender or our political beliefs divides humanity. But it is our core awareness which actually unites us because it was never separate in the first place. In other words, the core of ourselves is a unified field of clear awareness or universal consciousness that connects all living beings.

Just like the expression Namaste means – 'the divine essence in me recognises and honours the divine essence in you' what I am explaining is that the divine essence is the one essence, it is not two different things it is the one universal essence of being.

As Zen Masters have said it's only when you are completely empty can you be filled. When the mind is empty it can love every sentient being without holding back. The space to accept others however they are with all their imperfections. This is letting go of all concepts not trying to conjure up love or manufacture kindness but resting into complete openness; a non-conceptual type of love that requires no effort and has the ability to radiate out for every single being. Exactly as Rumi said:

"Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it."

To touch this source of ever-present love within is the aim of all meditation training. To find the true Self; the unconditioned awareness within which does not see the world through beliefs but instead sees clearly by not seeing differences. By not judging or trying to explain the situation but instead having a certain amount of faith that things are perfect just the way they are. You are not firstly separate and then have to unite with everyone, simply by not dividing and judging things Oneness is

naturally present. You are already united with everyone from your very core and love is just what happens.

Chapter 23. The Six Principles of the Natural State of Meditation

The natural state of meditation also known as effortless meditation or non-meditation stems from non-dual traditions like Tibetan Dzogchen and Mahamudra, Japanese Zen , Chinese Chan and Indian non-dual traditions like Shaivism and Advaita. The common view in these traditions is that we are never separate or distinct from being whole and complete as we are.

The view is important. The third patriarch of Zen, Master Seng-Tsan wrote a classic text translated as Faith In The Original Mind. Meditation is often seen as a method beyond the realms of faith but in effortless meditation faith in an inherently perfect nature is extremely useful at the beginning. It's faith until a direct experience of what teachers are pointing to is realised then it becomes knowledge or Self-awareness.

The direct experience of what the teachers are pointing to is the reason for meditation. Therefore, I have included one line instructions at the end of each foundation to help you give it a go and see for yourself.

In the natural state the meditator is connecting with something beyond the realm of the mind. Zen master Bankei called it the Unborn Mind because it is never born or created; it's eternally present. Effortless meditation is resting within a perfection and wholeness that is already present, it is not created through meditation practice it is discovered.

The Six Foundations

1. Non-Grasping

Non-grasping means you cannot grasp or comprehend the natural state of meditation with concepts. The paradox is we are discussing the topic with words and concepts. That's why teachings like this blog are often called pointing out instructions. Teachers can point to something for you to see for yourself but as the Zen saying goes don't get caught looking at the finger pointing to the moon look at what's being pointed to. Experience it for yourself don't use this information to create more philosophy.

It's not your mind that understands the natural state it's a whole being experience. What some call a direct experience unmitigated by words or concepts. In this way it's sometimes referred to as naked awareness; a non-conceptual awareness not clothed in judgements and mental constructs.

In meditation non-grasping is facilitated by a constant letting go of thoughts. More than that it's a consistent disbelief of thoughts. One Tibetan master states "thoughts are not the problem; it's grasping at them that causes suffering". Therefore, a deeper abidance is necessary, accompanied by a profound relaxing and an opening to the totality of immediate experience.

It's very important to mention that non-grasping also means not grasping onto this is the 'right way' and that is the 'wrong way'. This makes it difficult to fathom at all but that's the point. Complete openness to what's happening without any internal commentary.

The wisdom of the natural state cuts through all illusions laying bare reality as it is.

Any attempt to grasp the natural state with your thinking mind will not only fail it will become a big obstacle to resting in the natural state. When your mind says "I've got it" it hasn't. What it boils down to is best described in the first line of Tao Te Ching "the Tao that can be named, is not the real Tao".

INSTRUCTION: Allow thoughts to pass by without attaching them to your experience.

2. Stillness

Stillness is a great pointing out instruction and one of the few direct methods. The only thing to do in the natural state of meditation is to sit still. Of course, this is not even necessary but for the sake of 'practicing' this type of meditation sitting still is extremely useful and a cornerstone of meditation training.

Meditators are often told about the monkey mind. A mind that is constantly jumping from one thing to the next. In fact, it seems we are hardwired to notice movement above and beyond all else. So, pointing to stillness is really getting at what is not moving, what is peaceful.

All impermanent things move. In fact, all things move but what is being pointed to is beyond that which is either created or destroyed, in other words the natural state is not a thing or an object to focus on. The natural state of meditation is transcendent of our usual conceptions of time and space. Some have called it primordial as in Dzogchen, others have called it eternal, one Tibetan master calls it "the essence of nowness".

As modern spiritual teacher Adyashanti often points out the natural state or what he calls pure meditation is not a 'state' at all. Any experience that newly arises in meditation is not it. Anything that moves or changes is not it. In Vedic meditation there is practice called 'neti neti' which means not this, not that. Essentially anything that appears to awareness, is not it because it is not complete or the whole picture.

As Eckhart Tolle says "Wisdom comes with the ability to be still. Just look and just listen. No more is needed. Being still, looking, and listening activates the non-conceptual intelligence within you. Let stillness direct your words and actions."

INSTRUCTION: Sit still and rest in the unmoving awareness of the present moment.

3. Non-Fabrication

This is an important point that can quickly connect you with the natural state of meditation. It's important because it's easy to think that meditation creates the natural state but the truth is meditation helps to discover the natural state not create it or fabricate it through a technique. That's why it's called non-meditation it's not a technique that produces a result.

Non-fabrication means to stop trying to manipulate your experience in any way. This explains why it's called natural because it's not created through effort it already exists, naturally.

Non fabrication means you don't have to make any effort to fabricate or create any state of mind or any particular emotion. It also implies that you let things be without interfering in your experience in any way. You don't have to create good thoughts and you don't have to get rid of negative thoughts; you simply let all thoughts pass by themselves.

This level is also associated with not being attached to pleasant, relaxing or even mystical experiences in meditation. Often when we've experienced awesome meditations, we try to re-create that experience and become disappointed when it doesn't happen. This can be a big obstacle especially for experienced meditators.

This also relates to another aspect of the natural state which could have been its own category and that is being aimless or goal-less. That is not trying to create a certain outcome, not having an aim in mind. You're not doing something to create a result you are simply being.

In Zen there is a central meditation practice called Zazen which generally means 'just sitting' which is a way of saying non-fabricated sitting. It's the 'just' that's important. There's nothing else left to do in meditation other than just sitting.

INSTRUCTION: Just sit without making any effort at all to create a particular experience.

4. Non-Resistance

Along with not trying to create any experience during the natural state of meditation you also don't have to resist anything either. This is a powerful method to let go of stress and come into alignment with what it. Eckhart Tolle goes so far as to say "Non-resistance is the key to the greatest power in the universe."

Non-resistance is another way of saying acceptance. This is very therapeutic when it comes to difficult emotions and troubling thoughts. It's normal to want to fight with them and get rid of them but the ancient sages and now the modern mindfulness movement are both saying the same thing; by allowing and accepting difficult thoughts and emotions they lose their power over you and you provide space for them to pass by.

Fighting and resisting thoughts and emotions adds fuel to the fire and can actually double the amount of suffering you are experiencing. For example, you can get angry about being angry, sad about being sad or increasingly fearful about being afraid.

There's the old saying "what you resist persists" and there's definitely truth to that. In fact, stress, anger, anxiety and even depression come from wanting the present moment to be different than it is. By not resisting and instead simply allowing the present moment to be as it is you undercut the basic struggle with what is and allow a sense of openness and freedom to emerge in its place.

INSTRUCTION: Notice your current state of being and accept it as it is without trying to remove anything.

5. Simplicity

I was once at a teaching with a Tibetan meditation master who was teaching the natural state of meditation and I asked an intellectual question related to Buddhist paths of purification and karma etc because I was immersed in those studies at the time. I thought my question was very impressive and would even test the teacher, but he answered by saying it's like the Beatles song "let it be, let it be" and he sung it to me.

The teacher's response did not directly answer my question, but it has stayed with me ever since as a brilliant antidote to my overly analytical mind. So often we want reasons, explanations and intellectual certainty but the natural state of meditation is related to being a simple meditator not a scholar. Just let it be.

It's a huge freedom not having to know everything. Not having to explain everything in complex terms and scientific rhetoric. Instead the freedom of not knowing and simply being is a pure pleasure only found in the simplicity of the natural state. Alan Watts even calls it "the wisdom of not knowing".

In Zen, unanswerable Koans were given to students to help break free from the tendency to always use the thinking mind to navigate life. A Koan snaps the thinking mind wide open and reveals the open spaces of awareness, intuition and spontaneity. As Zen master Suzuki famously said, "in the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's mind there are few."

Returning to simplicity is returning to pleasure of just being, which encourages a child-like natural joy. Simplicity is embodied by living in the breath instead of dwelling in the constantly agitated and problem-solving thinking mind.

Simplicity is not stupid it's humble. Simplicity isn't avoiding problems it's approaching life with a gentleness and openness that is well equipped to enable our innate intelligence to shine forth.

Great scientists like Einstein have admitted that some of his greatest break-throughs in science were not while he was obsessively thinking about a problem but instead came when he was relaxed and not thinking about anything at all.

INSTRUCTION: Follow your breath instead of following your thoughts and you will soon be abiding in the simplicity of just being.

6. Self-Luminous Awareness

There is something to be aware of, something to recognise. It just cannot be grasped by the mind, it doesn't move, it's not newly created, it's not produced by resisting anything and it's so simple it's difficult to accept.

Self-awareness is the key ingredient and is often overlooked in meditation instructions. I'm talking about the self-radiance of non-dual awareness because it's not one thing looking at another it's simply the source of light illuminating itself.

Self-luminous awareness is effortless. It's not like you turn the light on in meditation it's actually always shining you simply stop casting shadows with your mind and allow the light to shine on all aspects of experience. That's what light does.

It's like a lamp that illuminates the room and also illuminates itself at the same time. They are not two separate lights.

As Dzogchen master Lama Surya Das says the natural state of meditation is "bringing your entire being into complete, unified presence".

When you are practicing normal types of mindfulness practices you become naturally aware of your surroundings and what you are doing. During the natural state of meditation, you become naturally aware of who you are in the deepest and most complete sense.

You are simultaneously aware of your surroundings 'as they are' and you also gain deep insight of your total being. You are both the source of light and intimately connected with what it illuminates.

In meditation this is called a realisation of your true Self or knowledge of the absolute nature. I don't want to pretend it's easy to understand because it's not. That's why there are six foundations to support the skilful practice (non-practice) of the natural state and allow the dawning of your sky like nature to emerge through the clouds and shine brightly and unmistakably.

It's like your real home, your true resting place. You can immediately recognise it and feels very familiar.

INSTRUCTION: Notice that there you are unbounded awareness with no dividing lines and rest in the totality of that beingness.

Chapter 24.

The Five Obstacles That Stop People from Experiencing Pure Meditation

The pure state of meditation is beyond time because it is eternally present. Discovering and realising this 'hidden in plain sight' natural treasure is the purpose of meditation. Zen master Dogen advises to sit with the confidence that you are already Buddha, Tibetan yogi's suggest to just sit and not change or fabricate anything and the highest non-dual teachings of Indian Advaita tell us you simply have to stop seeking anything else and realise you already are what you're searching for.

Countless other spiritual teachers say we have a divinity within us that surpasses human conditioning. It has been called by many names, in Buddhism it's known as Buddha nature: an empty luminous awareness which is ever present at the very heart of all moments and the ground of all experiences. In Hinduism it's been known for thousands of years as Brahman, the universal consciousness which is the source of all things and the essence of being.

The naturally joyful light of awareness is always shining it merely gets covered over by repeatedly grasping at thoughts and chasing after instinctual and socially constructed desires. Nirvana is the elimination of that never-ending cycle of pursuing happiness in outer conditions and the name given to the intense peace experienced after the extinguishing of that fruitless project.

The natural radiance of our essentially divine nature is love, bliss and wisdom. As experienced by so many mystics through-out the ages and even found by everyday people who have come to a cathartic enlightened experience in various ways, including near death experiences, complete surrender, moments of awe fully connected with the majesty of nature or any experience which directs attention completely and undisturbed deeply into the present moment.

“Meditation is nothing but a device to make you aware of your real self—which is not created by you, which need not be created by you, which you already are. You are born with it. You are it!”

Ok I've mentioned this is the pure state of meditation, not mindfulness, not concentration and not energy manipulation. All those things are great, but they are not pure meditation which is beyond all fabricated or manipulated temporary states of mind. In Vedic terms people are often directed to look for what is permanent which is a great way of finding the ultimate pure nature within. I don't mean to be dogmatic or arrogant about meditation saying what it really is, I just want to point out what I have found to be the highest ultimate meditation and separate it from the many different types of relative meditation practices out there.

The pure state of meditation is simply abiding as that which you already are without any attempt to look elsewhere or manufacture any specific states of mind. This mind as it is right now is enlightenment. Even though its available and waiting for you to discover, not everyone can find it and there are 5 main things that get in the way and cover your radiant true nature preventing you from experiencing it. I also included simple instructions at the end of each section to help experience the pure state of meditation.

The 5 Things That Block the Pure State Of Meditation

1. Too Much Concentration

Too much concentration restricts and narrows the mind onto an object and can temporarily bring states of bliss and relief, but this level of concentration can never be maintained. Concentration is useful as doorway into the natural state but it's a poor substitute. Too much one-pointed concentration leads into a trance like state which again is pleasant but not what we're looking for.

“Effortless doesn’t mean no concentration; effortless means just enough concentration to be vivid, to be present, to be here, to be now. To be bright. My teacher used to call this “effortless concentration.” We each need to find out for ourselves what this means. Too much concentration and we get too tight; too little concentration and we get dreamy. Somewhere in the middle is a state of vividness and clarity and inner brightness.”

Too much concentration takes too much effort, too much force and leads you away from the natural state of being. Not enough concentration and you will become dull and fall asleep. The pure state of meditation is effortless and natural so trying to concentrate too much and relying on concentration can inhibit and block this natural state of being.

“In true meditation all objects (thoughts, feelings, emotions, memories, etc.) are left to their natural functioning. This means that no effort should be made to focus on, manipulate, control, or suppress any object of awareness.” ~ Adyashanti

Instruction: Not too tight, not too loose without anything to concentrate on you are nevertheless undistracted.

2. Goals and Expectations

This is a major stumbling block for many people which prevents the pure state of meditation. Of course, meditation has deeply healing properties just like sleep restores the body and mind, meditation has many scientifically proven health benefits which stem from the deep rest and stress free states that arise within a naturally pure meditation. However, to sit with these goals in mind strangely stops you from achieving them.

The pure state of meditation cannot be created through causes or is ever an effect of a technique. It’s more like you set up the right conditions and remove all the obstacle like the ones I’m pointing out in this blog and then meditation arises by itself, you cannot force it or will it to happen. As explained by the great Tibetan Buddhist master Dilgo Khentse Rinpoche

“We should realise that meditation transcends effort, practice, aims, goals and the duality of liberation and non-liberation. Meditation is always perfect; there is no need to correct anything.”

When you sit in a pure state of meditation there is nothing left to add and nothing to take away. Timelessly perfect as an embodiment of the entire universe.

Many people I have coached in meditation have had amazing mystical experiences in the past and this can become a major obstacle to ongoing meditation because these people have huge

expectations of their meditation to bring about these mystic experiences again. But no matter what amazing experiences you've had in the past the resounding advice from all meditation masters is to let them go too and just rest in your natural state.

Also, it's important to take time out of the equation when sitting in meditation.

Instruction: Do not look to the future, do not dwell on the past and do not expect anything in the present moment. Just sit in the clarity of the here and now.

3. Being Overly Controlling

This is such an important blockage to dissolve because it's at the heart of an egoic mode of being as opposed to an authentic way of being. An ego is always trying to control and manipulate situations for its perceived benefit. But pure meditation arises due to genuine authenticity. A fierce determination to be yourself, warts and all.

A naturally pure meditation is not about controlling your breath or your body's energy or even trying to control your thoughts, it's releasing your hands off the wheel and taking a mental step backwards and allowing things to be as they are.

"Real meditation is not about mastering a technique; it's about letting go of control."

Trying to control your meditation is sure fire way to ruin your chances of revealing your naturally pure awareness. This can be very frustrating because we are so used to exerting our will power to get what we want but natural meditation is a complete reversal of this process. Put in another way:

"...the pure state of meditation is a state of being not a state of doing."

One of the best ways to gauge your ability to not be in control is to use the classic observation of the breath as a gateway to a naturally pure meditation. Because of our conditioned ways of doing things we always try and control things we observe, and it becomes evident when we watch our breath. It's difficult to let go of breathing intentionally and just watch the breath do whatever it is doing. The Buddha's advice is: if it's a short breath observe a short breath, if it's a long breath observe a long breath etc.

Because we can both control our breath and let go of control and just observe the breath it's an awesome tool for entering into the natural state. Allow your breath to breathe itself, on automatic

just like it is for most of the day and night but in meditation we calmly notice this automatic process without controlling it in any way. Try it. It's radically peaceful.

Extend this noninterfering type of witnessing to the entire moment of meditation. Including thoughts. Don't try to suppress or control thoughts, allow them to arise and they also dissolve into nothingness all by themselves. This is the naturally liberating freedom of just being.

Instruction: Let yourself be as you are; don't change anything, don't fabricate anything allow and open yourself into being the silent witness.

4. Pretending

When sitting down to practice real meditation it's important not to pretend to be anything other than what you already are. Don't add anything extra. Don't clothe your naked awareness with accessories. Especially don't think that now I am meditating, that's just more pretending. Pure meditation is just a name given to the natural state of being, don't adopt it as a new identity that will cover the real state and don't think it's something special either.

"When engaging in meditation practice, we should feel it to be as natural as eating, breathing and defecating. It should not become a specialized or formal event, bloated with seriousness and solemnity." ~ Dilgo Khentse Rinpoche

Don't replace the authentic state of meditation with the knowledge of meditation. The natural state is not a philosophy it's a state of being.

Also don't fool yourself that being high is meditation. No matter how blissful, insightful or even therapeutic taking different drugs can be it's a poor substitute for the natural state of being which is timelessly present and not reliant on any substances.

Pretending can take many forms including acting spiritual, pretending to love everyone, wearing spiritual clothes and even adopting a new spiritual name. There's nothing particularly wrong with those things I'm just warning to not get so caught up in them that you cannot just sit and be your true authentic self as you are.

I'm certainly not claiming to be perfect here I'm talking about the ability to just sit with yourself as you are. I think a good dose of humour is essential in the pursuit of meditation to not take yourself too seriously. If you haven't seen JP Spears YouTube clips take a look where he makes fun of being ultra-spiritual.

Instruction: When sitting in meditation completely relax all your face muscles, let go of all pretence and masks and rest back as simple and authentic as you can be.

5. No Trust in Your Real Self

This is the crux of it. If you don't trust that your essential nature is pure, wise and all fulfilling it's difficult to truly let go and just be yourself. As one Zen master advises "just be your yourself, not the one you imagine yourself to be but your true self before any descriptions."

This lack of trust that you are already complete and fulfilled drives the compulsive chasing of satisfaction in the conditions of life which can never fully satisfy you completely because life is ephemeral and constantly changing. This lack of trust in the satisfaction of just being is a major hindrance and blockage of being able to rest in a state of pure meditation.

It's in this trusting of your own nature that real freedom can be found, and a natural simplicity of being can easily emerge, as Adyashanti says:

"All that is necessary to awaken to yourself as the radiant emptiness of spirit is to stop seeking something more or better or different, and to turn your attention inward to the awake silence that you are."

Of course, this should not stay on the level of blind faith or trusting someone else, once you have directly experienced this naturally abiding peace for yourself it becomes real confidence. Zen master Bankei said:

"...conclusively realise that what's unborn and marvellously illuminating is truly the Buddha Mind"

It is necessary at the beginning to be inspired and trust the words of others until you have realised it for yourself.

"Only those who have the great capacity of genuine trust can enter this realm. Those who have no trust are unable to accept it, however much they hear it." – Zen Master Dogen

Hopefully this blog has inspired this type of trust or at least enough curiosity to find it and have a go at experiencing for yourself a naturally pure meditation. Diving headfirst into the empty abyss of just being to reveal what was always there waiting to be revealed. A luminous natural clarity unstained by ideas or judgements, free from all stress, artifice, the original authentic wakefulness

that easily manifests when all effort and control are dropped and there's nothing left but this moment just as it is.

Instruction: Trust that your nature is all good and simply resting back without anything to do peace, joy and clarity will naturally emerge.

Chapter 25. The Ultimate Buddhist Meditation of Mahamudra

Mahamudra is the ultimate Buddhist meditation which started in India and flourished in Tibet which teaches to rest naturally in the essence of your own mind. Mahamudra is the highest form of meditation in Tibet, it's an advanced meditation practice from the Tibetan Buddhist School of Kagyu. It came into Tibet via the Mahasidhi tradition from India which focussed on meditation and self-realisation. Which means it emphasised actual personal experience in meditation rather than scholarly or intellectual understanding of the process. In Tibet the Kagyu tradition where Mahamudra meditation is embedded is often called the practice lineage.

Maha-mudra is usually translated as Great-Seal but that's boring and doesn't say much. My translation is the Ultimate-Meditation which is closer to the truth in my opinion. Some master claim that mahamudra contains within it all the other meditations and is the most complete and powerful meditation there is.

Mahamudra changed my life. Not in the way that the hyperbole click-bait titles of everything on Facebook claim that "this will change your life forever", it actually did change my life.

I was a Tibetan Buddhist monk living in a Buddhist centre on the Sunshine Coast Australia diligently practising my meditation and ritualistic routines every morning and night and studying with my Guru the rest of the day, until one day while on Library duty I was looking through a box of old books that had been hidden away. I was told they were from another tradition and too advanced for most people. But the forbidden fruit was too enticing for me and when I was alone in the library, I began to eagerly read them, and even smuggled one back to my retreat cabin to read the contraband material.

One line from a famous Mahamudra text made me question my whole spiritual practice and planted the seed for me to eventually hand back my robes and continue on a completely different path. It's often called the path of no action which I wrote about in my popular blog the art of doing nothing. That one line that changed everything was from a teacher called Tilopa a 10 th century mahasiddhi who is meant to be the first teacher of Mahamudra was:

“The truth that transcends the intellect will not be seen by means of the intellect. The point of non-action will not be reached by means of deliberate action. If you want to achieve the point of non-action transcending thought, sever the root of mind itself and rest in naked awareness!”

That might not seem that fantastic or life changing but it has two things that completely contradicted my current focus of spiritual attainment. Firstly, I was studying a lot, and I mean a lot. People often don't realise the extent to which Buddhists study and dissect the teachings for greater clarity, understanding and to be able to fully achieve what's written, and then I found these words by a revered Tibetan Master that said the intellect can never understand the truth.

Secondly, I was doing a lot of accumulation of good karma or what we called “merit” which I was being taught is absolutely essential to achieving enlightenment. This accumulation of merit involved reciting Buddhist prayers, paying homage to former masters, bowing to Buddha statues, bowing to my teacher, being compassionate to others, lighting candles on the altar etc etc. There was so much to do to get your good merit. My good friend Sean Wardell and I often joked about the merit system being like a rewards card that you swiped to get your merit when you performed a virtuous action but the statement by Tilopa said that actions will never get you there.

So that above line I quoted said that you cannot get to enlightenment with intellectual study or with good actions all you needed was to rest in naked awareness. So of course, I became very interested in exactly what this naked awareness was.

Another point that changed my whole way of thinking was the idea of instant enlightenment. Up until that time I was obsessed with accumulating merit with the idea that sometime in the very distant future usually you were told thousands of lifetimes later I would have enough merit to create the causes of my enlightenment, so the idea that I could get it straight away was very appealing, especially to someone as lazy as I am. Another passage from Tilopa reads:

“Though darkness gathers for a thousand eons.

A single light dispels it all.

Likewise, one moment of sheer clarity

Dispels the ignorance, evil and confusion of a thousand eons.”

This made complete sense to me and I didn't have to believe in future lifetimes or anything that was slightly dubious to my Australian upbringing. I just had to turn the light on to get rid of the darkness. What could be simpler? There is even a line that because there are no specific actions to be done you may as well stay home and enjoy the company of your wife, which is what I do these days.

Mahamudra is a spiritual practice for everyday people who have not got the luxury of living in a retreat.

Mahamudra offers the spiritual path of a simple meditator, in Tibetan it's called the path of a Kusali as opposed to the path of a scholar called a Pandita in Tibetan. A Kusali's practise is the art of simplicity and is uncomplicated and above all relaxed. Even though I kind of enjoyed the Buddhist studies and still do as a hobby, this new approach suited my Australian Zen like easy going nature and also suited my animosity toward religion and all the rubbish they teach is necessary to be happy and fulfilled. It seemed to me that this simple approach was the Way to go and eventually The Way of Meditation website and Facebook page were born to cut through all the religious non-sense and teach simple truths and meditation methods that can actually help.

Mahamudra is the ultimate Buddhist meditation because it cuts to the heart of the matter. One of the main teachings and central themes of Buddhism is the idea of no-self. All of Buddhists mindfulness meditations are based around realising no-self or what later became known as emptiness. The made up and constructed idea of a separate and autonomous person is just a fiction so when you see through the false identity you are free from all the trouble and suffering that's caused by believing in something that's not true. Mahamudra naturally rests in the truth of no-self.

Mahamudra says that the truth of no-self or the truth of emptiness is actually who you are before you fabricate a false identity so just relax and be the truth of who you are and stop making stuff up. Relaxing in the truth of your being cuts the root of all the ignorance that causes suffering and liberates you without effort. There are no other added ingredients required.

As Rumi says, "What you are seeking is what is doing the seeking." You are what you are searching for. Just learn to stop fabricating stories about who you are and rest in the unfabricated truth. Advaita also teaches a similar thing but that's another blog. Stop selfing and start being. Selfing is the ongoing action of creating a false self-identity.

There are several methods to discover your own nature. Mahamudra uses self-enquiry to look inquisitively at your nature to see what you can find by turning your attention around and asking yourself questions like what is the colour of my mind? what shape is it? does it make a sound? these questions help you to discover it's actually formless and space like without any boundaries what-so-ever. Another method is by gazing into the sky which triggers the experience of inner space, your actual true nature, which I taught about here in my sky gazing blog.

Mahamudra is also a new orientation to time and space because usually we try to make effort for a result and we are always so familiar working with forms and materials but Mahamudra is actually your immediate and immaterial true nature and always has been, therefore just like space it is taught that:

Mahamudra has no causes.

Mahamudra has no conditions.

Mahamudra has no methods.

Mahamudra has no path.

Mahamudra has no result.

There are some pointers to actually what this feels like or looks like. Unlike the total negation of something Mahamudra points toward the luminous nature of your mind as the truth. This something is actually nothing which is slightly paradoxical but it's not completely nothing, it's the actual knowing and aware aspect of yourself that is being pointed to which is so obvious and so close it is easily overlooked as insignificant or irrelevant but in actuality this luminous or naked awareness is the very essence of Mahamudra or the truth of being a Buddha. Adyashanti who is a favourite modern non-dual Zen teacher of mine calls it radiant emptiness. If you look anywhere else for Buddha, you will not find it.

Mahamudra is the unfettered experience of the union of emptiness and awareness.

So as a meditator you notice that without even trying there is a natural awareness present and then upon a little more probing and self-reflection you notice that this luminous awareness is completely space like or invisible. Boom! That's it! That's Mahamudra. Rest in that luminous space like aware emptiness and the masters say there is no other practice necessary and nothing else left to be done. Like the great Buddhist master Dilgo Kynste Rinpoche says:

“Banish all hope and fear and rest in the unshakable certainty that the eternal simplicity of awareness is itself all that needs to be done to be an Awakened Being. That is the Perfect Way of Meditation, in which peace, love and wisdom will flourish without effort.”

Another point is that this recognition is not just done sitting down in meditation, it's meant to be remembered all day long, approaching situations with a new and fresh perspective by simply resting in the naked luminous awareness which as it turns out is very adept at handling all situations. It has wisdom, compassion and sensitivity to the present moment which when you learn to rely on and trust it takes care of everything.

A Zen master discovered the same truth and called it the great unborn, which just emphasises the naked and not newly created aspect, it is never born because it has been there forever. Therefore, look within to what has always been there and is there right now. Unborn is another way of saying eternal. Zen master Bankei urged us to:

“...conclusively realize that what’s unborn and marvellously illuminating is truly the Buddha Mind”

Mahamudra is often described as resting in the natural state. It is natural because it’s not ‘man made’ it is the natural essence of our being. Therefore, just rest loose and without effort and be yourself. This can be accomplished both on and off the meditation cushion but becomes truly transformative when you can bring this relaxed natural state into every part of your life.

I don’t want to detract from the original translation when I call Mahamudra the ultimate meditation. Mahamudra means the great seal and it is like a seal in the sense it is present in every single moment. You can seal every moment with the recognition of the ever-present empty luminosity. In fact, every experience you have implies a naked awareness at its core. The luminous naked awareness is actually impossible to see directly, like an eye cannot see itself but when you are conscious of any experience whatsoever, whether it’s something you are seeing, hearing or even thinking those very experiences imply that there must be awareness behind them to even be conscious at all.

Another radical aspect to Mahamudra is that just like it is not created through any actions not even through meditation, it also cannot be destroyed or tarnished through bad behaviour. Milarepa was one of the most famous and respected Tibetan Buddhist Mahamudra masters and he started his life as a ‘black magician’ who would harm and even killed lots of people. He went on to learn Mahamudra, become enlightened and actually travelled around Tibet teasing and laughing at people who were making effort through study and religious practice telling them those practices will get you nowhere. Teasing and laughing at people may not sound very enlightened but when you read his teachings, they have a powerful effect on you to give up all effort and just rest in your own nature. Even though he was a killer and did all sorts of misdeeds his Mahamudra nature was waiting for him to awaken to. This gives hope to all of us normal everyday people who have not had perfect lives but still have a shining luminous awake nature waiting to be discovered whenever we are ready to realise it.

I hope these ideas inspire you as much as they do me and enlighten your meditation practice and daily life so as to gain confidence to rest in your true nature of empty luminosity which has its own wisdom and love built in. Relax, stop stressing and just be at ease within effortless presence and realise your nature is already perfect and you simply have to stop torturing yourself with fabricated ideas or opinions of what’s expected of you and realise you are totally enough already; you are complete and whole.

I will finish this blog with the simple Mahamudra instructions from a great modern master Sogyal Rinpoche:

Not moving from natural presence of awareness.

Not seeking.

Not objectifying.

Not fabricating any states of mind.

Stop all effort altogether and rest.

Rest in the great peace of natural awareness.

Chapter 26. Meditation is Just the Beginning

I've been promoting meditation as a way of health, sanity and spiritual connection for many years now. Meditation and mindfulness are becoming increasingly mainstream and popular and I think that's a great thing. I also think it's great that meditation has emerged from its religious context and people from all different backgrounds can practice meditation and get the benefits.

The benefits of meditation are numerous, mostly because so many health problems these days are caused by stress, therefore something that promotes relaxation and a calm clear mind goes a long way to help heal the body and the mind from many stress related diseases. However now that I have been teaching meditation and doing one on one coaching sessions for hundreds of people, I have to say that meditation is just the beginning. Overcoming stress, anxiety and depression to create a healthy mind is just the beginning. What's also needed is using the wisdom and clarity developed in meditation to make conscious actions of love, compassion and a healthy life for ourselves and others.

Meditation is the beginning of a good life which is engaged in transforming your own mind and heart and making the world a better place to live in for yourself, others and future generations. The Buddha taught as his central path to enlightenment and ending suffering the eightfold path which includes meditation and mindfulness but is also founded on ethical principles of non-harm, love, compassion and even includes doing work that does not harm others. In other words, Buddha taught not just sitting but also engaging wisely and compassionately with the world.

Wisdom is developed through meditation not for the purpose of winning arguments on Facebook or even for astral travelling but to clearly know what skilful actions will bring peace and happiness for yourself and others.

"Meditation leads to the wisdom to make the best choices in life for your own and other's happiness."

In Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which is a mindfulness based therapeutic model, firstly you use mindfulness to accept the present situation without fear or neediness and then act by expressing your core positive values into any situation. It is not goal orientated in the sense of future

goals but aims at bringing positive values like kindness, equality, justice into the present moment. In this mindfulness model first is mindful acceptance and then valued actions which will definitely help to create a better world.

Positive action is needed in today's world where corruption, pollution, social injustice and inequality are all too prevalent. McMindfulness is a term used to criticise modern mindfulness techniques of just being aware and accepting of all situations. This depoliticises mindfulness from being a revolutionary force of awakening and political awareness to a creator of obedient zombies reducing their stress levels with mental awareness techniques.

However, mindfulness can be revolutionary when it includes seeing the big picture and connecting your actions with the effect they have on others and the bigger picture. Buddhist Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh is a firm believer in being engaged in the world and has even started a new Buddhist movement called engaged Buddhism which adheres to 14 principles. This is what Thich Nhat Hanh has to say about mindfulness:

“What is mindfulness? Is it just taste and sensation? If I eat at McDonald's or purchase Nestle's chocolate, am I mindful of the McLibel case or the shameless exploitation by Nestle of breastfeeding mothers in poor countries? Go deeper. If I eat a banana grown in the Caribbean am I aware of the struggle for better working conditions by Caribbean workers against the fruit cartels? Do I reflect on the way American and Caribbean economic development, which also helped fuel the industrial revolution, was in large part based on the trans-Atlantic slave trade?”

Connecting our actions to the big picture and being mindful of being a part of an interconnected world we can begin to use our wisdom to make choices in what we consume, how we spend our money and how we act. Conscious and wise individuals collectively united can make a huge difference in the world without relying on politicians to change things.

Violence, corruption and exploitation have a common cause of somewhere someone acted without concern for their effect on others. This kind of selfishness can first be stopped within ourselves by breaking the habitual reacting from fear, selfishness and ignorance and replacing it with reacting or better yet responding with kindness, non-violence and concern for the welfare of others. Meditation and mindfulness help to put a break in the chain of habitual reacting and give you some inner space from a situation so as to be able to choose to act consciously and wisely. As Deepak Chopra suggest:

“Every time you are tempted to act in the same old way ask yourself; do I want to be a slave to the past or a pioneer of the future?”

We don't meditate to become great at sitting still, meditation creates sanity, inner stillness and peace of mind but not as the final goal but as a resource to use in everyday life. Meditation does not

stop thoughts happening in our everyday life, but it can give you the space to choose which thoughts you listen to and act upon. The inner stillness becomes the calm wise starting point of every interaction where we are free to create beautiful relationships and bring forth our inner light into the world.

Acceptance of a situation is always the best place to start affirmative action. Acceptance does not have to be passive like in McM mindfulness instead acceptance becomes the clear seeing of a situation to effectively transform the moment to achieve your goals, manifest your dreams and make the world a better place.

The Beginning of A Special Kind Of Attention

Meditation in its most basic form helps you to pay attention properly. I guess my teachers were right when they yelled at me in class to “pay attention!” Paying attention is the foundation of learning and is absolutely necessary to develop understanding and wisdom.

Meditation teaches you to pay attention in a skilful way which includes the focus and concentration of what we normally expect attention to have but also teaches us to be relaxed and completely open without any pre-conceived ideas. This is essential to take in new information without corrupting it with what we already know. To be able to receive to new information without judging it or placing it in a familiar category we are like children learning for the first time and we can truly develop what Zen masters call a ‘beginner's mind’.

To look at things freshly is to experience awe and wonder and avoid the jaded cynicism that can come from information overload.

Paying attention is the beginning of science. To look objectively and to notice patterns, see how things work and develop theories that can be tested. All of scientific enquiry starts with a pure type of observation.

Paying attention to your life and noticing what works and what is not working is essential for personal development. To bravely look and notice things and then act responsively and with your own best interests at heart. It sounds easy enough, but this type of honest self-enquiry is lacking in so many people who just do the same things they did yesterday swept along in the same old patterns without ever stepping back and simply observing.

Even enlightened experiences in meditation are just the beginning. As Jack Kornfield talks about in his popular book *After Enlightenment the Laundry*. Jack says that merging with oneness and other mystical experiences must be followed by periods of integration into everyday life. Another

meditation master says that spiritual practice is whatever you are doing right now and anything else is fantasy. As one Zen master puts it:

“Enlightenment is just the beginning, is only a step of the journey. You can’t cling to that as a new identity or you’re in immediate trouble. You have to get back to the messy business of life. Only then can you integrate what you have learned.”

From a place of deep meditation and stillness we can break free of all the habitual patterns in our life and touch a creative resource within that can see things in new ways with fresh innocent eyes. We need creativity, courage and great love to overcome our personal difficulties and to help tackle the bigger problems we face as a society. Meditation is the perfect place to start but it is just the beginning.

~ THE END ~

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