

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE MONK AND THE PSYCHOLOGIST

Theravada Buddhism elegantly lays out the progressive stages of Insight that each meditator must experience on her journey from the unreal to the Real. It is a fascinating blueprint of mental development, leading to a pivotal moment in the process of transformation: The mind begins to see. What an anticlimactic sentence! The mind begins to see Truth – things as they really are. It sees what it has relentlessly denied for so long: Every experience is impermanent; every experience occurs without a “me” in it; and every experience is ultimately unsatisfactory.

No wonder few humans reach this stage of mental development - a stage where the mind’s eye opens to the Dharma. Who wants it? Reality sounds like nothing but bad news. But for those who do reach this level, something extraordinary occurs. The mind begins to long for liberation, to be released from this endless round of thirsting for pleasures that never last. It begins to seek an alternative reality, a place where restlessness will disappear forever.

In the movie *War Games*, a young Matthew Broderick plays a game of tic-tac-toe with a giant computer named Joshua. The stakes are high indeed, because if Matthew loses, the computer is set to unleash thousands of nuclear missiles over the major cities of the world. They play the game over and over, 10 times, 20 times, faster and faster, until Joshua goes into hyper drive – calculating at blinding speed every possible move in the game. The computer finally comes to a grinding halt, ending the game. It learned the lesson it needed to learn: There is no way to win this game.

Computers – from Joshua to an Ipod - can do one thing vastly better than any human. A computer puts the totality of its capability into whatever program it is running. It is not distracted by the thought, “I’m bored,” or “I’m hungry.” It is not driven by desire, or paralyzed by ambivalence, and a computer does not have to deal with the sorrow, envy or loneliness of an inner child. Joshua was not distracted by a hungry baby needing to be fed at 3 AM or dreading the meeting at work in the morning, with a possible layoff looming. He simply applied the totality of his megabytes to the job at hand, going through all the possible moves

involved in winning a game of tic-tac-toe. He came to the only conclusion possible: The best you can do in this game is come to a draw.

We don't have enough time in the span of one lifetime to do what Joshua did, process and eliminate the millions of "winning" possibilities in the game of life. Indeed, what better argument for reincarnation exists? In one lifetime, there simply is not enough time to process the vital information necessary to turn away from the siren song of desire.

There is, however, an exception to the hard reality of fleeting time. The Buddha saw a pathway through this maze of random experience. That way is through mind training, *bhavana* in Pali. Through meditation, we can train the mind to cut through the distractions of thinking, feeling, doubting, dreaming, planning, hoping and worrying. Through meditation, we can harness a computer that is faster than one hundred Joshuas, allowing the mind to see and eliminate all the "winning" scenarios that, in truth, only keep us stuck on the game board. Finally, the mind will come to the same conclusion as did Joshua: *There is no way to win this game*. Just as a caged lion longs to break free and roar its song of power, the mind begins to desire liberation.

Did someone mention *desire for liberation*? Are we to conclude that Theravada Buddhism posits desire for liberation as "good" while labeling craving, or *tanha*, as "bad" desire? One can just imagine our Zen brothers and sisters shaking their non dual heads in disapproval.

Paradoxically, the scriptures point to a state of desirelessness as the goal, but who can imagine life without desire? In the West, we view the absence of desire as pathological, not only according to the world of psychotherapy, but as a universally accepted fact. If a person has no desire, he is in a state of anhedonia, the primary symptom of depression. This person needs medication, not meditation. Even in the West, however, there are exceptions to the rule that the absence of desire indicates pathology. For instance, the brilliant English psychoanalyst, Wilfred Bion, suggested that an analyst must have the capacity to suspend both memory and desire in order to be completely present during a session with a client. Could insights such as Bion's be a foreshadowing of a gradual psychological maturation in our Western consciousness? Suffice it to say that most of us are unable to imagine enlightenment as a state of desirelessness.

In the previous chapter, we learned that *tanha* leads to suffering, and surely we can label craving as “bad” desire, but what about a mother’s desire for her child to be safe and secure? Is that bad? In our sangha, we chant the beautiful Metta prayer each Sunday, “may all beings be happy and safe from harm.” Mahayana practitioners are even more ambitious, vowing to “save all sentient beings.” Surely these intentions fall under the heading of “good” desire, do they not? And what of the Buddha’s own story? His desire for deliverance led him to leave his young wife and newborn son one late night, leaving the comfort and security of his home to become a wandering ascetic. Call his choice magnificent or call it selfish, his choice was motivated by a tremendous desire to escape the endless wheel of *samsara*.

The Buddha taught his disciples that desire is like a forest fire. It burns as long as it can find fuel. So is a forest fire necessarily “bad?” Perhaps it depends on which side of town you live. The fire of desire burns in each of the six sense doors: eyes, ears, nostrils, skin, tongue, and thinking mind. The objects that come into contact with the six sense doors are the fuel, while desire is the spark that keeps the fire raging. This process of combustion is occurring every moment of our waking lives.

We don’t think of our eyes as greedy, do we? But they are constantly searching, gazing, looking here, looking there, making visible contact with outside objects. Well over 99% of this activity is beyond our conscious awareness or will. Even the act of sitting on the cushion and closing the eyes goes against the grain of our deep need to *see*. This is the meaning of “eye desire.” There is also “ear desire” to hear sounds, “feeling desire” to feel touch, and surely we are intimately aware of this restless mind that is ever seeking fresh experience.

Clearly, this is a radical departure from the way most of us think about seeing, hearing, touching, etc. With this view of desire in mind, let us ponder a most remarkable encounter between a monk and a psychologist that occurred many decades ago. There are a number of reasons why I want to recount this meeting, not the least of which is that it involved one of my true heroes, Carl Jung. And believe it or not, you are reading something that, as far as I know, has never been reprinted in the West.

In the early 1930’s, Carl Jung traveled to India and the island of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), where he met a Buddhist monk named Cassias A Periera. The dialogue that occurred between the brilliant monk and noted

psychologist is fascinating. Here is how the monk described his encounter with Professor “Charles” Jung:

Prof. Charles G. Jung of Zurich, who was in Colombo lately, told me that ‘as a student of comparative religion he believed that Buddhism was the most perfect religion the world has even seen. The philosophy of Buddha, the theory of evolution and the law of karma were far superior to any other creed. But even so eminent a psychologist not knowing our Abhidhamma, stated that, ‘in every religion the powers of the subconscious mind were represented by gods and demons.’ ‘The actual psyche’ said Jung, ‘is really unconscious, and greater experience would impress us of the fact that the consciousness of man is like a little island floating in an ocean.’ Greater experience with the facts of Buddhist philosophy would shew Prof. Jung that actuality is something very different to what he dreams. And the consciousness of a being is more like an octopus, at the bottom of an ocean, grabbing and grasping now this, now that, its suckerel tentacle ever seeking to feed that greedy mouth.

(Forward to *Guide Through the Abhidamma Pitaka* )

Jung’s metaphor of the conscious ego as a small island floating in the vastness of the ocean is well known. I have always loved his metaphor because it evokes in us, at least potentially, a measure of humility. Indeed, I am inclined to say that an attitude of humility in the presence of the Infinite is one of the gifts Jung offered those who followed in his footsteps. He believed that Self (the psyche) exists beyond the boundaries of the conscious ego, residing, as it were, in the vastness of the infinite sea of unconsciousness. Jung’s dichotomy of consciousness and unconsciousness is unquestionably Western, which is to say, it is the logical consequence of processing through the lens of duality.

In the West, we tend to conceptualize consciousness as benign, or perhaps more precisely, as neutral. We don’t have the same attitude towards the unknown, however. Most of us view the unconscious as some alien, dark, “thing” lurking in the basement. Modern man and woman, or at least modern Western man and woman, regard the unknown with suspicion, if not outright fear. The unconscious is the land of Id, a veritable cauldron of desire.

It was inevitable that Freud would come to the conclusion that the goal of psychoanalysis is to make the unconscious conscious, and that

psycho-neurosis is “cured” by bringing all that bad stuff into the light of consciousness. Why inevitable? Because Freud’s genius is a reflection of our Western Judaic-Christian culture that posits good and evil as separate entities. Thus Freud’s psychological universe is filled with opposites such as Id and Ego, Eros and Thanatos, etc. While Jung was the product of a provincial, Swiss, Christian background, Freud was the product of a much older and more sophisticated Jewish culture. Ultimately, both men were utterly Western, each in his way. Please understand that there is nothing wrong or inferior about the fact that these giants of our culture conceptualized reality through the lens of duality. It is our nature to divide reality into good and bad, love and hate, up and down, in and out, left and right, ad infinitum.

Consequently, we are bound by our conditioning to divide every experience into an object and a subject that observes the object. Thus, we make desire an object and consciousness that which observes the object. From this point of view, consciousness is like clear water which becomes colored by the “dye” of desire. It follows that the job of consciousness is to decide whether a certain color is good or bad.

Far from agreeing with Jung’s analogy of consciousness as a little island surrounded by the vast sea of unconsciousness, the monk refers to consciousness as an octopus lying on the bottom of the ocean, “*grabbing and grasping now this, now that, its suckerel tentacle ever seeking to feed that greedy mouth.*” What an amazing analogy. Consciousness and desire, in other words, are “not two.” I suggest that this analogy is powerful enough to shake the foundation of one’s perspective.

The monk suggests that consciousness is not a benign state (a little island) that exists *above* experience. It is absolutely and inextricably part of experience. It’s down there on the bottom of the ocean! William James says, “The passing thought is itself the thinker.” In other words, reality can not be divided into two. In a letter to one of his students, the Chinese master Ta Hui tells a student not to “divide emptiness into two.” His finger points toward the moon. He puts into words that which is beyond words. How is it possible to divide emptiness into two?

I have wondered many times how Jung would have reacted had the monk shared his analogy face to face rather than waiting for the eminent psychologist to read what he had to say in the forward to his book on the Abidharma. Unquestionably, Jung would have been intrigued, and perhaps more than that. Also, isn’t there more than a hint of

condescension in the monk's response? Although his analogy brilliantly describes the non dual perspective of the East, one gets the impression that the monk is somewhat stuck on his side of the mighty thin plank ("It's a mighty thin plank that ain't got two sides"). To the extent that he was locked in a *belief* in Buddhism, as opposed to Jungism, or any other -ism, he was as stuck in duality as was "Charles."

The question of desire, and whether or not one can imagine desirelessness as a liberated state transcending some psychological "condition," is extremely challenging. Perhaps the best we can do here is to tolerate the ambivalence of the question, and to feel the presence of fragile truth. Krishnamurti says that any truth repeated becomes a lie. Hard indeed! We must constantly try to tolerate holding the question as opposed to answering it.

As promised in the previous chapter, here is my favorite one-liner from the queen of burlesque, the incomparable Mae West. In response to a question about how she maintained her legendary youth and beauty, she said, "Honey, the only way to beat nature is to show the bitch who's boss." Now isn't that a supremely human statement? It is defiant and woefully arrogant. Who but a human animal would proudly say that it intends to "beat nature?"

What I so love about Miss West's proclamation is that, with hands on ample hips, she shouted it out loud. The rest of us quietly head for the dentist to have our teeth whitened, or to the surgeon to have our face lifted or our behinds liposuctioned. But Miss West just proclaims it to the world. You gotta beat the bitch. We humans regard this earth as something to control and manipulate. The Chinese move millions from their land to build vast dams and factories, we drill for oil in virgin lands and threaten the fragile ecology off our shores. In other words dear friends, Mae West uttered an attitude that may truly be universal: *The only way to beat nature is to show the bitch who's boss!*

Here is a question that may raise a few Buddhist eyebrows: How was the Buddha's quest different from Mae West's? Didn't he also try to show the bitch who's boss? At the beginning of his spiritual quest, he studied meditation with two of the greatest masters in India and developed powers of concentration that enabled him to reach the deepest jhanic states. He experienced the fifth jhana of boundless space, and the sixth jhana of unlimited consciousness. But still, he was not *changed*.

Later, he experienced the seventh jhana of emptiness, and even the eighth jhana of “neither perception nor non-perception.” We are told that this last stage touches the very gate of nirvana, but still, when the ascetic Gautama “came down” from these sublime states *he was not changed by the experience*. In these jhanic states, we are talking bliss of the highest order, or if you prefer, religious ecstasy. And one must conclude that he had gained tremendous control over his mental process. Indeed, Patanjali’s definition of Yoga is “the control of mental thought waves.” But after all of his accomplishment as a meditator, he was still Gautama, which is to say, he still believed that he had a name and a form. This does not describe an enlightened being. He was still caught in the trance of personality; an itch still seeped into the fabric of his existence, however subtle it had become.

One can imagine that Gautama was very frustrated, and at this point he embarked on the traditional Indian path of asceticism: the complete mastery of *body* as well as mind. If he could not eradicate that damned itch through the practice of meditation, he was determined to do it by controlling his body. In other words, the Buddha tried to beat his own nature. And, as a result, he very nearly succeeded in killing himself.

After six years of every ascetic practice imaginable, he literally had conquered hunger itself. We are told that eventually, he was eating only one grain or seed a day. His hair was matted and his fingernails were long and yellow. His eyes sunk beneath protruding sockets and he was nothing but skin and bones. His stomach was so completely shriveled that one could see the outline of his vertebra through his emaciated body.

The Buddha gained complete mastery over his own nature. He conquered the desires for food, sex, mental stimulation, and he even lost the desire for life itself. If ever a man or woman succeeded in showing the bitch who’s boss, surely it was Gautama, the prince of the Sakyas. And as he lay on the ground in a stupor, having fainted from starvation, what did he gain from such mastery of his own nature, *other than anhedonia*? Surely, by this point he was in a state of profound depression.

But this dark night of his soul was the turning point in his great quest, and the beginning of the Vipassana Insights that took him home. He saw the two poles of indulgence and mortification, and began to imagine a Middle Way. He must have realized that freedom cannot exist in a life where desire is relentlessly attacked as one’s mortal enemy. Indeed, spiritual practice takes enormous energy, and surely that requires physical health. How can one ride a horse that has been starved and beaten half to

death? What horse that has been ill-treated – without love and mercy – will carry a rider through the terrifying terrain of the spiritual journey?

In a dream, a horse can symbolize our instinctive, animal nature, and a dream about a horse being mistreated or badly injured can be a dire warning from the psyche. I think this is an insight that the psychologist, in our story mentioned above, knew far more deeply than the monk who seemed to have little interest in dreams.

What was it that caused the Buddha to nearly kill himself in his quest to control desire, *if not desire itself*? Gautama's trap was infinitely more subtle than Miss West's, but it was still a trap. I believe this is the truth that he eventually saw and that ultimately set him free. He realized that, in his attempt to beat nature, he was still in the service of desire, however lofty his spiritual ambition might have seemed to himself and others.

As the Buddha gazed to the bottom of the well – perhaps more deeply than any human has ever done – he saw something extraordinary: the face of *tanha*, masked as spiritual desire. What a supreme irony: He had abandoned the pampered life of a prince, leaving his family and friends behind, only to be ensnared in the web of desire's ultimate trap, the longing for enlightenment. This must be a warning for all of us who become enamored of the Vipassana Insights. No matter how “spiritual” our desire becomes, the desire for liberation has a fox in the henhouse.

In that darkest moment, as Prince Siddhartha lay near death, I believe that he realized that there is no way to kill desire without killing yourself. There is no way to kill the animal nature of a horse without completely breaking its spirit. And after all, how does the word “kill” apply in a philosophy of nonviolence and love? Surely, the Buddha embraced this truth: No true path exists without love.

The Buddha had a second insight – one that was already wired deeply into his Indian psyche through generations of rishis: It is not desire that we must renounce, but our *attachment to its fruits*. This is the classical, age old truth of renunciation, and with this insight, the Buddha's mind opened to the third noble truth: There can be an end to suffering, in this very life.

The Buddha teaches us that the bottomless human desire for pleasure and experience must come to an end if we are to make the mid-course correction that turns us toward the spiritual life. This much is clear. But

what happens if our desire for worldly things simply morphs into the desire for liberation? To use the analogy of the horse once more, perhaps the best we can do is to tend to it, care for it, and yet never let it take over our lives.

Earlier, I quoted part of Galway Kinnell's poem *The Still Time* because it captures, for me, the essence of tanha: "that total craving that hollows the heart our irreversibly." Poems are like this. They touch the non dual, they express in words that which is beyond words. Let me close this discussion with the concluding stanzas from Kinnell's poem.

So it surprises me now to hear  
the steps of my life following me –  
so much of it gone  
it returns, everything that drove me crazy  
comes back, blessing the misery  
of each step it took me into the world;  
as though a prayer had ended  
and the bit of changed air  
between the palms goes free  
to become the glitter  
on some common thing that inexplicably shines.

Surely this is what the Buddha experienced as he heard the steps of his life returning, blessing the suffering that had taken him from despair to the brink of enlightenment.

And the old voice,  
which once made its broken-off, choked, parrot -incoherences,  
speaks again,  
this time on the palatum cordis,  
this time saying there is time, still time,  
for one who can groan  
to sing,  
for one who can sing to be healed.