

CHAPTER THREE

THE MONK AND THE PSYCHOLOGIST

Theravada Buddhism elegantly lays out the progressive stages of Insight that each meditator will experience on her journey from the unreal to the Real. It is a fascinating blueprint of mental development, from the first insight knowledge into nama rupa (mind and body) to the final attainment of fruition. With the attainment of fruition, the clouds of delusion are dispersed and the soul is released from the ancient wheel of samsara.

No wonder few humans reach this stage of mental development. From the perspective of our little ego, which does its best to keep itself (me) safe, who wants to experience emptiness, *sunyata*? Reality sounds like nothing but bad news. But for those who do reach this level, something extraordinary occurs. The mind sees that the endless round of pleasure-seeking and pain avoiding never ends; it is a game that cannot be won, a “cosmic joke,” according to Chogyam Trungpa.

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 iPad - can do one thing vastly better than any human. A computer can enlist 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 a meeting with the boss at work in the morning. Joshua simply applied the totality of its megabytes to the job at hand, going through all the possible moves that are involved in winning a game of tic-tac-toe. As a result, it came to the only conclusion possible: The best you can do in this game is come to a draw.

Unfortunately, we humans don't have enough time in the span of one lifetime to do what Joshua did in a few minutes, process and eliminate the millions of "winning" possibilities in the game we call life. Indeed, what better argument for reincarnation exists? In one lifetime, at least for most of us, 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; it is called *bhavana* in Pali, and it means "mental development or mind training." Think about it; we will train anything but ourselves. In China, the Three Gorges Dam will stretch one mile across and rise to a height of 575 feet above the Yangtze River. The Buri Khalifa in Dubai pierces the sky at 2, 717 feet and 162 floors. We train our bodies with a similar relentlessness: basketball players leap through the air with the same grace as ballet stars;

pianists and singers stir our hearts with their extraordinary skill; and yoga practitioners twist into amazing postures. But how many of us can simply bring the monkey mind to rest for even a moment?

Through meditation (bhavana), we train the mind to cut through the distractions of thinking, feeling, doubting, dreaming, planning, hoping and worrying. Through meditation, we begin to 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. When we are able to harness the mind, allowing it to rest naturally, it 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.

Paradoxically, the scriptures point to a state of desirelessness as the goal, even as they mention the desire for liberation. From our Western perspective, who can imagine life without desire? According to our psychologists, if a person has no desire, he is in a state of anhedonia. He is experiencing a classic symptom of Major 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. Perhaps insights such as Bion’s are a foreshadowing of a gradual psychological maturation in our Western consciousness.

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. 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.

With this question of desire in mind, let us ponder a most remarkable encounter between a monk and a psychologist that occurred many decades ago. 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 this metaphor because it evokes, at least potentially, a measure of humility. He believed that Self (the psyche) exists beyond the boundaries of the conscious ego, existing in the vastness of the infinite sea of the unconscious. Jung’s dichotomy of consciousness and unconsciousness is unquestionably Western, and is the logical consequence of

processing reality through the lens of duality.

Far from agreeing with Jung's analogy of consciousness as a little island surrounded by the vast sea of unconsciousness, the monk referred 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. The monk saw consciousness and desire as "not two."

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. We regard it with suspicion, if not outright fear. The unconscious is the land of Id, a veritable cauldron of desire. This is precisely what is meant by seeing through the lens of duality, or as the Chinese master Ta Hui says, "dividing emptiness into two."

The monk, on the other hand, saw from an Eastern non dual perspective. He described consciousness not as a benign state (a little island) existing *above* the unconscious but as an inextricable part of the ocean. Not surprisingly, both Jung and Periera spoke in metaphor, but, sadly, there was more than a hint of condescension, if not on both sides, certainly in the monk's delayed, written response to his encounter with the "eminent psychologist."

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. Zen teaches that a truth put into words

becomes a falsehood. 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." 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 proclaimed it to the world: You gotta beat the bitch! As stated earlier, we humans regard this earth - and our bodies - as something to control and manipulate. So Mae West uttered an attitude that is universal: *The only way to beat nature is to show the bitch who's boss!*

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 reaches the very gates of nirvana, but still, when the ascetic Gautama came

out of 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 processes. 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, there was still a faint attachment to a sense of self. Gautama 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 his body.

After six years of every ascetic practice imaginable, he literally had conquered reacting to hunger itself. We are told that eventually, he ate 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 from the front of 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 rough 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. Perhaps this is an insight that Jung understood far more deeply than the monk from Ceylon 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 into 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 with the Vipassana Insights, and for teachers who run students through a Vipassana "playbook" with the goal of "winning" liberation. It is perhaps the shadow side of Vipassana meditation. No matter how "spiritual" our desire becomes, the desire for liberation is a fox in the henhouse.

In that darkest moment, as Prince Siddhartha lay near death, he realized that there is no way to kill desire without killing your own body. 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 the truth that no true path can exist in the absence of love.

The Buddha had a second insight – one that was already wired deeply into his Indian psyche through previous 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 always to remain its wise master.

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 out 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 wonderful 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.