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Self-celebrating: The Art of the Cosmic Chuckle



SOME COMMENTS ON NIRVANA

I stand once more beneath the sun, as I once stood as a small child. Nothing is mine. I know nothing, I possess nothing. I have learned nothing. . . .” Now Siddhartha stood empty and naked. . . he felt a great desire to laugh.¹

Nirvana, which may be seen as the Eastern analogue of our “heaven,” literally means “blow-up,” or “extinction.” In terms of our meditation model, this extinction refers to an absence of thoughts and images. When we have no thoughts, we also have no concepts such as “I” or “self.” We are like a mirror, empty. This emptiness allows us to more freely see and participate in our everyday life. Since in Zen belief the only “heaven” that exists occurs in this everyday life, the emptiness of nirvana allows the enlightened person to see the fullness of everyday life (*samsara*). As a Zen Master noted: to find the infinite, search the finite in all directions.

This relationship between enlightenment and ordinary activities is illustrated in the following poem, the first two stanzas of which were presented at the start of Chapter 4. The poem consists of *three* stanzas.

When one is unenlightened, the snows of Mt. Fuji are the snows of Mt. Fuji and the water of Tassajara is the water of Tassajara

When one seeks enlightenment, the snows of Mt. Fuji are not the snows of Mt. Fuji, and the water of Tassajara is not the water of Tassajara

When one has attained enlightenment, the snows of Mt. Fuji are the snows of Mt. Fuji, and the water of Tassajara is the water of Tassajara.

This poem is full of hope; it is an affirmation. When we seek enlightenment, when we suffer a crisis or jolt, all seems confused. Our traditional "ground of being," our normal support systems no longer suffice. However, the poem suggests that there is another side to the confusion and existential abyss. The search is worth it. We may appear the same, but things have changed:

*When the ordinary man attains
Knowledge he's a sage,
When the sage attains
understanding he's
an ordinary man.*

This belief does not mean that one is hiding from existential questions. Rather, it represents what Kierkegaard called the "double movement," what Sartre referred to as being on the other side of nothingness.

On the one side, a jolt is a crisis. On the other side, it is part of what might be called the *cosmic chuckle* — the ability to stand back and observe the events of one's life with humor: both the wry humor which acknowledges the absurdity of life and the joyous, happy humor which recognizes its grandeur and beauty. On the one side, the self is nothing, empty, confused; on the other side, the self is egoless, empty, joyful. Mind full; mind empty; mindful. On the one side, naturalness is reflex conditioned habit patterns; on the other side, our self-chosen habits are "paths of heart." We have learned new "mental" ways of acting, new ways of labeling and attributing causality. We work to develop control of our own lives, yet we will eventually die. We are helpless in the long-term sense to really be effective. Nature and the natural order of things win. If we see ourselves pitted against this order we will quit because in the present there is little we can do that will change the course of the future. However, if our goal is to achieve

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fullness of life within the present, then we have the opportunity to make constructive changes. This is a very important distinction. It is not an avoidance of the future. Rather, it is a confrontation of that future, realizing and accepting our limitations, then coming back to the present to bring as much fullness of life as we can to ourselves and to others.

SOME COMMENTS ON PRECISION NIRVANA

Unless we decide to retreat to a cave in the Himalayas, we live in the ways of the world. To survive, we need certain skills. We must learn skills that enable us to earn a living; we need to learn the mores and customs of the society so that we can interact with our fellow human beings. We need to see clearly how our behavior is affected by other people, as well as how we affect others. We need to learn to set goals for ourselves, to meet deadlines, to receive feedback about our performance, and to make improvements based on that feedback. We need to teach our children these skills; to reinforce them systematically for specific skills they have learned; to socialize them to the importance of accommodating and compromising so that their freedom doesn't overly impinge on that of others. Similarly, we need to learn which foods are healthy for us to eat, and which not; which people are healthy for us to be with, and which not. All these skills are examples of the *precise* awareness involved in behavioral self-management strategies.

However, we also need to learn more. We need to learn how to avoid becoming trapped by the goals we set for ourselves, or by the goals that society sets for us. Although future planning may be important and functional, it is also important not to live only in the future. If we live only in the future, we sacrifice the spontaneity and joyfulness of the present moment—the smile of our child; an ant crawling; the wind blowing a leaf to the ground; morning dew.

Further, we need to learn to let go of our self-evaluations; to get off our own backs. Feedback is important for learning, but analyzing and evaluating, categorizing and labeling inhibit experi-

encing. We need to learn to let go of the security of our labels, the security of our ordinary ways of perceiving reality, and just experience. Sometimes we need to trust our learning, let go, and float on the river, even though we aren't sure where it leads. In addition, we need to reinforce our children and ourselves in a total holistic way, for no reason — for no accomplishment — except that they are, that we are: the big cuddle, a warm bear hug of closeness. All these skills are examples of the global, nonprecise *nirvana*-type awareness that may be achieved with meditation.

What I am suggesting is that neither of the above modes of awareness *is* reality, neither mode is higher or better. Neither meditation nor behavioral self-management skills provides a final answer. Rather, both are necessary. Therefore, we need to learn a *precision nirvana*. By this I mean three things: we need (1) the skills of applying ordinary awareness and self-management strategies,* (2) the skills of applying altered states and meditative strategies, and (3) the ability to know, intuitively and accurately, when which modes of awareness are called for.

By being able to use both modes, we learn to be master of both. We learn that reality is a fiction created by our mode of perceiving. As Chuang-tzu noted:

One night I dreamed I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, content with my lot. Suddenly I awoke and I was Chuang-tzu again. Who am I in reality? A butterfly dreaming that I am Chuang-tzu or Chuang-tzu imagining he was a butterfly?²

Through both Eastern and Western modes, we learn to maintain a perspective on ourselves when we act in the ways of the world: we set goals, but do not feel enslaved to them; we use feedback and evaluation as a means of learning, but do not forget to experience; we give precise reinforcement to optimize performance and skill learning, yet we also give the big, noncontingent cuddle. We learn

*Notice that philosophically we are still talking about a world of cues and consequences, cause and effect. However, we are saying that certain states of consciousness—i.e., those which don't involve evaluations and a search for causality—may have positive consequences. Therefore, we need to teach (condition) ourselves to use both states of awareness. This does not imply that we live in a world in which causes can't be determined. Rather, it suggests the importance of acting, at certain times, "as if" we believed in such a world.

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to notice which situations cause us the stumbling self-consciousness, which situations make us tense; and, at the same time, as in meditation, we learn to let go, relax, and move beyond the early steps of self-consciousness and tension. We strive for the goal of excellence, yet we see perfection as a playful game of becoming. Free, yet specific; within the world, of the world, and enjoying the world, we have learned the skills for obtaining *precision* and the skills for attaining *nirvana*.

SOME COMMENTS ON CARE AND MAINTENANCE OF THE MIND

This book has been concerned with what goes on inside our "mind."* We have seen that according to Eastern belief we should decrease the images and thoughts that we have in our mind. Therefore, we can use Zen techniques, such as breath meditation, in which we try to remove all thoughts; and techniques, such as the *koan* and *mondo*, which use words to show the limits of words.

According to Western belief we should decrease the negative, unproductive types of thoughts, and increase positive, reinforcing thoughts. In the West we are told that through self-observation we can learn to use words to best advantage, to find causes for events, to analyze and better define and understand reality.

We have mentioned the research that suggests that each of our two brain hemispheres may have "its own private sensations, perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and memories." Most of our language function is considered to be "in" the left brain hemisphere, which is apparently better able to deal with verbal, sequential analytic thinking.³ This mode of awareness is that which is involved in behavioral self-observation and self-management skills.

The right brain hemisphere, on the other hand, seems specialized to deal with spatial relationships: relating parts to wholes; nonverbal, holistic thinking, based on direct, perceptual, intuitive experience.⁴ It may be that meditation is a mode that is primarily governed by the right hemisphere.⁵

*I am using the word "mind" here as a descriptive phrase.

If this relationship is borne out by further research (and I must acknowledge the speculative nature of what I am now going to say), then the Zen Master and the Grand Conditioner may be nothing more than cultural representations of our two brain hemispheres. The East emphasizes the holistic right brain perception; the West, the logical, analytical, left brain perception. When these two figures—the Zen Master and the Grand Conditioner—bow to each other and shake hands, we have poetry. For, as we noted when discussing haiku poetry, there is an intimate connection between an intuitive, holistic experience (right brain—Zen Master) and a logical, intentional description of that experience in words (left brain—Grand Conditioner).

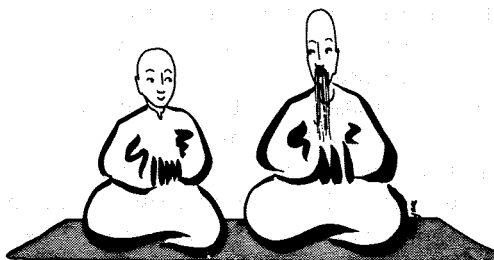
Through a combination of the Eastern and Western techniques, we may learn to control our mind—to analyze, think, and set goals when it is necessary; and to stop thoughts and stop analysis when that is useful. We learn to work our mind hard for progress and productivity, to play and have fun with it through fantasy and images, and to integrate its two sides for creative synthesis. In so doing, we truly learn the “care and maintenance of the mind.”

AND NOW IT'S YOUR RESPONSIBILITY: AN OWNER'S MANUAL

In our left hand, we carry nothing; in our right hand we carry a self-observation data chart. And this is as far as this book can take you. The rest is up to you. Only you know what vision is of most interest to you. Go through the areas of the vision and see which seem most relevant. Practice the various techniques we have described that relate to your vision.

The techniques presented are like a delicious smorgasbord: meditation, guided fantasy, role-playing, different sensory awareness exercises, relaxation and self-control strategies, communication skills, poetry writing. You have to decide which techniques work best for you; which ones feel comfortable for you; which techniques seem relevant in reaching your own self-chosen vision.

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Begin your own journey, your own search*; experiment with different combinations of visions: being both a spontaneous, joyous child *and* a disciplined, creative, empirical scientist. Follow your journey, structured and free, poetic and ordered, as an unfolding within and without. You are choosing to play your own game, your own dance with life. Listen, and enjoy the melody.

Zen Laughing Meditation

I would now like to conclude with a brief meditation—a Zen laughing meditation, which I made up while giving a talk on the question of “Is there humor in Zen?” I suggested that there were three answers to the question; and that these three answers corresponded to different steps of meditation.

*As we have noted previously, if you find yourself dealing with an issue or area that seems too difficult or overwhelming, it may be useful to seek professional psychological support and assistance.

Humor

answer one: no

answer two: yes—quiet joy

answer three: _____

Meditation

step one: stumbling self-consciousness

step three: effortless breathing

step five: mind as mirror

As can be seen from this, the first answer to our question is “no”; the second answer is “yes”; and the third answer is—well, we’ll get to that.

Answer One: No. When we are at a stage of little consciousness of ourselves, there is little humor. For example, let’s try an experiment. For the next ten seconds, I’d like you to be humorous.

Pause and be humorous.

Well? Probably you noticed that the old reactive self-consciousness effect took over, similar to step one of meditation. Thus, the first answer is “no,” there is not humor in Zen, since there is little humor when there is self-consciousness.

Answer Two: Yes. The second answer is “yes.” As we move toward a new awareness, a greater consciousness of ourselves and the world around us occurs. We come to realize the limited nature of the reality in which we have previously believed; our constructs begin to topple. For example, when asked by the monk, “How do you see so clearly?” the Master replied, “I close my eyes.”

Ordinary reality is a construct formed by our perceptions. When we realize that we can create a meaningless reality, and then believe in it, that’s funny. For example, when the monk asked the Master to play a tune on the stringless harp, the Master agreed. After a few moments, the Master said, “Do you hear it?” “No” the monk replied. “Why then, didn’t you ask me to play louder?”

This “humor” of Zen needs to be seen in the broadest sense of the word—as a kind of joy, a celebration of the moment. This is illustrated in the following poem by Pao-tzu:

Eating rice

Drinking tea

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*Passing time as it comes
Looking down at the stream
Looking up at the mountain.*⁶

This humor is similar to step three in meditation, the effortless breathing, the calm joy of just being.

In this regard let me ask you to do a short meditation, called a Zen laughing meditation. This meditation was passed on to me by a friend, and I share it with you.

Get comfortable. Close your eyes. Take a minute to notice your breathing—feel your breath come through your nose—let it go out. Just let go—let the chair or the floor hold you up—there's nothing to be concerned about now—just relax—Now imagine you're in a spot that's a favorite spot for you. Make it somewhere outdoors, in nature—notice where you are, what's around you; make this a peaceful spot for you. Imagine that it's just before sunrise so that it's dark, but almost not dark. Watch the dark before the sunrise, and imagine, rather than the sun coming up, that you and the earth are rotating down. You are turning upside down and looking at the after glow of an imaginary candlelit dinner and watching as the candle-tip flames of the stars are snuffed. Imagine yourself in this pleasant spot of yours, and, as it begins to get light, do the following laughing meditation: Begin to smile, and notice the peaceful feeling within you. No loud laugh, but just a quiet joy as you see the light begin to flicker through whatever is around you—the beginnings of the morning. You're feeling very quiet and very nice. Take a few seconds as it begins to get a little more light, and enjoy the smile, as you appreciate that light. Feel a twinkle in your eyes. Now, let yourself go for a moment or two, and just enjoy. Later, as you feel comfortable, stir a little bit, open your eyes, come on back.

We realize that the second answer to our question of whether or not there is humor in Zen is "yes." As humor increases, so does our awareness, and our health.

Finally, we get to the third answer. This answer is represented by the fifth step of meditation—the step that goes beyond duality, beyond constructs. In the fifth step of meditation, we learn to go beyond the duality of yes and no. In the fifth step we go beyond distinctions of humor and not humor.

Self-celebrating: The Art of the Cosmic Chuckle

A DANCE
TO
SUMMER.



IN THIS
DANCE
I ASK
THE
QUESTION:

IS LIFE WORTH DANCING?



AND I COME UP WITH
TWO ANSWERS.



AND

NO.



I AM THUS
INSPIRED
TO KEEP
ON
DANCING -



TO PERFECT
BOTH
ANSWERS.



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SUMMARY

We have learned to watch, *and* we have learned to participate, to be centered *and* productive, self-controlled *and* yielding. With practice, we shall learn to play our new game, and new role — the master game, the only dance there is. We have learned to let everything reinforce us. Therefore, may you work hard, may you enjoy the cosmic chuckle, and may you not know the difference.

Now we have finished. Everyone stand and we will bow to the Buddha three times to thank him. We thank him, because even if we did not have a great enlightenment, we had a small enlightenment. If we did not have a small enlightenment, at least we didn't get sick. If we got sick, at least we didn't die. So let's thank the Buddha.⁷