


Epilogue:

A Personal Essay

 I END THIS BOOK with feelings of respect, humility, and acceptance. I have a great and renewed respect for our scientific tradition, and for those researchers who are pushing the frontier of our knowledge by investigating meditation practices. I have a similar respect for those involved in the personal quest on the meditation path. My humility is rooted in the goals I set at the start of the book, a mission of trying to bring these two traditions together. While writing I heard voices criticizing me. The “Western” voices said, “Shapiro is getting soft and anti-scientific; we always knew he was a bit of a flake anyway.” The “Eastern” voices said: “Shapiro is corrupting our tradition; he’s become too scientific, rigid and analytical; and does not know what he is talking about.” I imagine both voices have a certain truth in them. I am not sure I can clearly bridge these two traditions. I feel somewhat humbled at the very idea of it, and, in retrospect, somewhat surprised at the “hubris” that allowed me to try to undertake it.

Interesting the two critical voices shared here: one is the “not intellectual enough, too soft, weird, flaky.” The other ther was too rigid, analytical. This is the get in touch with emotions, feelings, being. I feel at this stage I really have a nice balance of both intellect and heart, and the meditative “calmness” to explore both for the best wisdom they can give me. The “voices” have quieted and are more part of the “symphony.” I can also look at them with more “curiosity” and “amusement”—and even be the “Laguna eccentric with joy and playfulness. If I had advice now (69) for my younger self (32) it would be you’re doing just fine; trust yourself; those are the natural developmental struggles of that phase as you find your way in society (and yourself), your voice. All will be well☺. And it was....

Talking about the two “sides of my mind” analysis, and “letting go”: And a lovely meditative experience:

Whether by nature or training, I am a curious, inquiring person. Until ten years ago, my main response to a new situation was, in general, to cope by intellectual means. More often than not that is still the case. Over the past ten years, through flute playing, meditation, poetry writing, and Sumi-e (brush stroke painting), I have worked on cultivating a style different from my rational, intellectual one: a more yielding, non-analytical, delicate mode. However, writing this book in general and the content analysis article in particular (Chapter Three) have made me confront some strong barriers I have to writing about my own meditation experiences. I feared that analyzing that new mode in the service of professional career could destroy the very thing I was trying to create.

Let me give an example. One morning while meditating on the beach at Laguna, I had a glowing, warm feeling which was, in many ways, overpowering. Images of friends, colleagues, loved ones and enemies came pouring forth. Each person's face had a vivid detail to it. Further, each person's face had a certain pose of delicacy and graciousness. Even when the face of a person whom I did not like appeared, it was in a friendly, kind posture, showing them in their best light. This posture was one which I had in fact seen them in at some point in our relationship. I saw and I experienced an essence of tenderness and gentleness in each person. I could feel and think no evil thoughts; they were transformed into a positive glow.

This is lovely experience. I hadn't remember it. It's morning thankfulness prayer now (plus forgiveness evening prayer, all in one! Grace. (Thank you!))

An example when I “let go of thoughts” with a Haiku:!

This duality is one I wrestle with frequently. The East says do not research meditation, and do not analyze it. The West says, it is not real unless you can come up with some kind of concrete, valid, replicable study.

That contradiction became particularly acute when, during the September 1977 content-analysis research project, I went to Tassajara, a Zen retreat in Carmel Valley, for a few days. Not only was the above an unresolved issue for me, but there were strong anti-scientific demand characteristics at the monastery. For example, I asked if, when no one else was in the meditation room, I could meditate and conduct my experiment, which involved the use of a tape recorder. I was told absolutely not. Electricity was not allowed in the meditation room—even vacuum cleaners were anathema, they cleaned the room by whisk brooms. I felt very scientific, precise, and awkward to be recording and writing down thoughts of meditation. While at Tassajara I gave up my attempt to analyze meditation.

Creative words

flow down stream
with the current.

Some wrestlings with ego!:)

Another issue for me relates to my own ego. Meditation traditions are quite clear about the importance of humbleness, honesty, purity and integrity, as important preparatory virtues for facilitating meditation practice. I strongly believe in these virtues and work toward attaining them. Several times during my meditation experiences, I have felt that "inner peace," and, as Mickey Stunkard once jested about his own experience, I too felt, if they gave certificates for enlightenment, I was ready. But my daily existence is filled with ego-oriented events: first and second authorship: annoyance at seeing "my" meditation tape passed over for another's, etc. During my "content-analysis" experiment, I was surprised and not a little disturbed at the number of ego-related competitive thoughts I had. So the vision remains tantalizing; sometimes reached and experienced but lost again; sometimes a self-acceptance, even with the imperfections of the struggle; often not. Again, the goal seems clear; the path difficult.

Breath soaring
a seagull's meditation
yielding to the wind.

Wrestling with goal orientation and “shoulds”:

Another issue for me, and others with similar “goal-orientation,” is the problem of approaching meditation in a “Western way”—looking for the end product, rather than at the process. This has two ramifications. First, there are a lot of “shoulds” associated with reaching the goal, and doing so “perfectly.” For example, during the initial years of practice, I felt I “should” practice a certain length of time. If I did not, I felt I was failing not only myself but also “The Great Meditation Teacher in the Sky.” There is a discipline involved in learning to still one’s mind and body; however doing it with a compulsive “I had better succeed” attitude, and trying to compete, if only with myself for “longer times” was not helpful. Rather, as in the case study in Chapter Two, it was just another opportunity for me to be critical about myself. What do I do, for example, when I am trying to meditate for a half hour, and my two and four-year old children come home, rush in, and say “Hi, Daddy.” Of course the true Zen master makes them part of his meditation. Sometimes I could, but for me, formal meditation is an important time to clean out, to reduce inputs, and get away from stimulations. I wanted to “finish” and so I would brace as I heard them, try to breathe, hug them, and ask them to give me a few more minutes alone. Then I would continue with meditation, and try to learn to accept “guilty feelings.” How discrepant were my visions of whom I wanted to be with how I live each moment, leaving me to wonder if that gap would ever be closed.

Also, once having felt peak experiences, in which I was suffused with a lovely inner peace, I wanted them every time I meditated. Sometimes it would occur so easily. Other times I could try hard, I could try not trying, I could not try, but could not find the “entrance” into that special place. This still remains a frustration to me.

Sweet ending: positive assertive, positive yielding and xujing dongjing (in 2015 terms): peace indeed.....)

So, the book ends, with respect for two traditions, humility at the size of the task and a recognition of the limitations of our humanness. The challenge remains: to struggle to push the limits of the self, personally, professionally, while remembering to temper the struggle with acceptance.

In peace.
DHS
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