

NOT FOUND, NOT LOST

Extracted from an article by Joel Agee in *Tricycle* (Winter 2008)

SEVEN YEARS AGO I stumbled upon the website of an Australian university professor who offered telephone counseling informed by “Eastern Wisdom.” That offer held little appeal, but the professor’s name, Peter Fenner, sounded familiar. Then I remembered: He was the author of an astonishing essay I had read two years earlier with the odd sense, as I reached its conclusion, that the top of my head had been taken off like a lid. Excited though I was at the time, I had put the article on a shelf in the hallway, visible on top of various stray papers, where I suppose it addressed me subliminally, reminding me of its theme every time I glimpsed the cover of the magazine it was in. Now I read it again.

The practice in question was one of simply observing, steadily and without interference, the perpetual mobile of attraction and aversion that prompts most of our actions and supplies the fuel of practice itself. Exposed to the lucidity of simple awareness, practice dissolves into a practice of no practice (which is not the same thing as abandoning practice) where no one is doing or not doing anything, and natural freedom, no longer yearned for, naturally prevails. Something about this made me intensely curious.

I wrote Peter Fenner an email. I asked him if his impossible practice wasn’t essentially what the Dzogchen texts call “non-meditation.” Was he by any chance able to help me to experience rigpa, the nondual nature of mind? Vaguely, as I composed my message, I was asking myself: Would I fly to Melbourne for this? Should I risk a few thousand dollars for the unlikely chance of finding the jewel without price on the strength of this stranger’s assurances, if he gave them? The answer was yes.

I no longer have the response he sent me, but I remember one sentence: “I can show you this over the phone.” I was both skeptical and intrigued, attracted and averse. But the fee he proposed for an hour-long session was modest, and he would pay for the cost of the call. Why not? Maybe I would learn something. Our conversation began with hello and how are you, do you hear me all right, followed by a brief exchange about the nature of my interest. I told him that I had been attracted to Buddhism for many years, that I believed I had experienced something like kensho a number of times, but found myself still searching, still convinced that something essential was eluding me.

“And what is that?” he asked. A brief search for an answer:

“I don’t know.”

“If you don’t know what it is, how do you know it’s eluding you?”

“I don’t know. All I know is that most of the time I’m living at less than my full capacity.”

“And now?”

“You mean right now?”

“Yes.”

I didn’t know what to say about that.

“Take your time,” Peter said.

Take my time with what? I wondered. But I took my time. We were silent for a while. What was his question? I no longer knew. What was going on? Were we meditating? Was this a test? Was there some insight I was supposed to have? A flash of suspicion, hilarious on second thought: that I'd hooked myself up with a Buddhist con man. He's selling emptiness. But that's what I want, isn't it?

Finally I spoke: "This is strange, being silent with someone on the phone. Especially someone I don't know. I feel I should be telling you something."

"I know what you mean. Maybe it helps if I tell you that I have no preference for speech over silence. I feel connected to you either way. We're sharing the silence, after all."

What a concept—sharing silence on the phone! I could do that. I listened. Then thoughts came, and I listened to those: If he has no preference for speech over silence, does the opposite hold true as well? Maybe I should talk. But why? I have only one question, and he knows what it is. And so forth. This mental gnawing and questing had been going on for so long that it had become automatic, like a tic or a compulsive worry. Now, in the stillness, I saw that, and felt myself drop into a deeper, steadier attention.

"How are you doing?" he asked.

"Okay. But I don't understand what we're doing."

"We're not doing anything. At least I'm not. Are you doing something?"

"Yes. I'm trying to understand."

"Oh. There's nothing to understand."

Silence.

"There's nothing to work out either."

Silence.

I'm noticing now that this bare transcription (I took it down from memory shortly after the call) does not communicate the extraordinary delicacy of the exchange, or its radical difference from any conversation I had ever engaged in. That difference was partly due to its purpose—an inquiry into something that was by its nature not communicable through words. I knew that, and yet here we were on the phone, and he was letting me know at each moment—with and without words—that what I was listening for would not—because it could not—come to me by way of conceptual clarification. My listening was, consequently, extremely alert—like the alertness one feels when the lights go out at night in an unfamiliar house. You don't know where the next step will take you. There is no memory, or very little of it, to guide you, so the other senses, which were half asleep while the dominant sense of sight was in control, take over the unfamiliar task of navigation. But I was restricted to the single channel of hearing. The other senses were of little avail. And there was this pleasant voice advising me, in a tone of gentle precision and with an Australian accent, that my expectations were leading me astray.....

Silence.

The body was comfortably settled and stable, content. I could sit here forever, I thought. And then: It could be that I'll never get this. And then, happily: It doesn't matter. Maybe that was the turning point. The seeker came to rest, but without resignation.

What happened then . . . but when I say “happened,” it suggests an event, and there was no event.

In a way, nothing happened. But this nothing that happened was a revelation. Unconditioned awareness, no longer sought as an object, shone in its own light, a luminous clarity without limit. I was looking out of my window. Trees, a wall, the sound of chimes stirred by a breeze, the humming stillness in the receiver, the man in Australia who had guided me into this miracle—everything was made of the same subtle substance.

What was it? Just this—silent, self-knowing awareness. The walls in my room stood as solid as ever but seemed immaterial, as if painted on air. Thoughts came and went. They too were made of awareness. So was the sound of an airplane as it etched a long curve into the stillness and vanished. And where was I in this? Where indeed!

Everything that I normally associated with the sense of “me”—sensations, thoughts, feelings, the body as a whole—was emptied of “me”-ness. The sense of self, still palpably present, was indistinguishable, as was everything else, from this vast, clear, open space. Like fairy tales, they suggest the possibility of an “ever after.” The day after that call, I looked around for at least a residue of the bliss I had experienced. It was gone. It seemed I was again at the beck and call of the dualistic mind, believing its judgments, controlled by its fears. But in the course of several more telephone sessions with Peter I realized that something irreversible had occurred. The seeker had disappeared. He had never existed in the first place, but now it was obvious. For forty years I had been searching, never realizing that what I was looking for was this which was looking, and that this which was looking could neither be lost nor found. ▼