

JOURNEYS, PLANS, MEMORIES

SMALL STEPS TOWARDS GREATER CONNECTIONS

Norman Blair

There are many events in this life of mine – like my dad dying, like my mum dying, like relationships starting and ending, like the great good fortune in getting so far so good. One flash is that night of terror in the Italian judiciary system, a brief disappearance leaving behind puddles of blood. Another flash is a long-term relationship crumbling to dust, leaving me sighing in the shadows.

This *Journeys, Plans, Memories* reflects on a few of these experiences as a way of learning and hopefully helping, a transmission of stories from warm hand to warm hand. I know that mindfulness and yoga are fascinating and deeply engaging for the practitioner – but as spectator sports they are amongst the most boring ever invented. This is also true for the narrating of mindfulness and yoga. I do not want this to be the “how I found Jesus/Dharma/Yoga and then all were saved” story. I want this to be as real as can be dared. I want to avoid denying the varied parts of my personality.

This is me. Here I am. Feet are on the floor. Wondering about what words to write and how to shape this structure for ‘my practice story’. How about a recent event. I was struggling with computer issues. I was feeling foolishness and frustration, becoming irritated and angry. But not too much as I am aware of extenuating circumstances and I can cut myself some slack. I certainly know that I am neither particularly computer literate nor enlightened – and perhaps there is a little bit more lightness and a greater ability to ask for help than before.

VIEWS, DESTINATIONS, BLINKERS

This life is a journey – all of us are going from A to B, from birth to death. The difficulty is that often we are missing the marvelous views, fixated on destinations and restricted in vision because of familiar ways of being. We are wearing blinkers of habit. The mythologist Joseph Campbell challenged us to “actually feel the rapture of being alive”. Now that is a powerful intention that could cut through some of the stories. That is both risky and scary.

My past – like everyone else – has had its moments. Like behaving in ways frantic to get attention – without properly realizing the engine behind my actions. Motivated to be a martyr so that I might be liked. Or occasions of damaging and destructive behaviour – please note the plural! Trying to heighten perception of reality but actually just trying to escape from the real because it wasn’t good enough. Having said that, there were definitely times of immense jubilation and intense joy: of dancing for hours in a field with my arms above my head; of having boundaries dissolved and feeling profound connection with others; of laughing and playing without the demons of self-consciousness judging every action; of taking action over what I perceived to be unjust and unfair; of the fading of awkwardness and alienation.

There was both entertainment and engagement in these events. But it wasn’t fulfilling the hungry ghost. I know that apparently contradictory elements

can exist together. Whether it's that ghost or incredible moments of intimacy, whether it's oblivion on my own or ecstasy of sharing surrounded by wonderful friends. As I get older, the questions become more about sustainability. There are consequences (my dentist is shocked at the state of my teeth; my memory isn't as coherent as it used to be – nowadays I regularly take Ginkgo Biloba or at least when I remember to). It's like how I stopped coming up from the ashtanga drop backs: my body couldn't take it any more.

During the 1980s and the 1990s, this little boy who wanted to be liked and to be loved was growing up. I was becoming a man with that little boy still very much inside me. I began practicing yoga in the early 1990s and I was still angry, still doing lots of drugs, still running and hiding and looking. Three years before the classes of stretch and relax, twenty-seven years to the day after my birth in this world, I was at the Poll Tax riot in Trafalgar Square. I was in wonder at all that was happening while also worried about the possibilities of being arrested on my birthday.

SLOW SHIFTS

At this time – after I had begun yoga – I fell in love. She did her best to soothe the hungry ghost but really the only person that can properly feed this aching belly is myself. Together we went to the Buddhafield Festival (hippy Buddhists camped out in a field with policies like no drink, no dogs, no drugs): this was the late 1990s. Slow shifts were taking place. I have had times of feeling flat, of being disconnected when the sky is deeply grey. Someone described such sensations as “a cold, concrete room with fluorescent lighting which makes everything look bad”. This was becoming less and I was more appreciative of the brightness that is around.

We went to India for two months as the century turned – that was a beautiful opening of eyes. A very brief handshake with the Dalai Lama! Old skins were being sloughed off; perhaps I could be sensitive and soft, perhaps there could be a lessening of the aggression roar. Then the first retreat: Vipassana in the style of SN Goenka in December 2000. I remember on the way home calling my partner from Newport train station and crying down the phone: “it was one of the hardest things I have ever done”. I was less defended and more open, vulnerable to the blossoms and blows of this life. First thing I did when I got home was eat chocolate and smoke dope.

That relationship ended in autumn 2001: I was bereft, heartbroken and traumatized – why had this happened? Maybe it was a sign that I needed to wake up a bit more, be more conscious of how my thoughts and my behaviours impact upon the well-being of those around me and myself.

RETREATS, WORKSHOPS, REDWOODS

I started teaching yoga, going on workshops and retreats. I began a daily practice of meditation (for the first few years, 15 minutes a day – of course there are days missed: I am human). Since then I have been on two retreats a year. In 2008 I discovered Gaia House (which has kind of become my spiritual home) and also that year I did a psycho-spiritual inquiry retreat with Jennifer Welwood

amongst the Californian redwoods. There was a great breakthrough – a breaking down as the power of these emotions (loss, longing, loneliness, love) literally ripped through my body.

Jennifer guided me deeper and deeper into feelings of aloneness and fears of being lonely. These emotions physically shook through my body. I could feel fingers tingling, arms trembling, then a torrent of tears, weeping in front of people I barely knew – yet I did know that they were there for similar reasons. These journeys of self-discovery, that wondering of why. At the end of that particular emotional event, there were the men – holding me, hugging me. The walk afterwards through those great trees: I was much lighter and brighter – weights off my shoulders – that was good. But it was hard work to get there and I had taken risks in exposing my wounded self in front of others – and the lesson from that was that it was fine. I was ok. Opening myself to the other and revealing sore wounds could encourage connection. Sharing vulnerabilities can be a means of bonding rather than disconnection.

This was the year my mum died. She died in March 2008, so understandably some of that shaking amongst those redwood trees was the grief of losing her (even though she was ready to die and I was ready for her to die). It was a year of significant changes. Moving home. Entering my seventh year of teaching yoga. Emptying out my mum's house – so much stuff, box after box after box. The financial meltdown and the collapse of Lehman Brothers. A cat dying that I much loved. Beginning regular attendance at an Iyengar class (and I am still a consistent participant in that Archway living room).

On this journey, I am learning the importance of relationships and how we relate to others – didn't the Buddha say to Ananda that the most important part of the path is friendship? Sangha is community – it is connection and realizing that we human beings are deeply sociable. We are biological creatures with warm bellies and busy brains. We are intensely tribal animals. Some people have had a great influence on my life and for that I am deeply appreciative.

THE CATS ARE ALRIGHT...

Practice has enabled me to be calmer and has given me stronger skills to deal with the unexpected. Like when in 2006 I turned the corner and saw fire engines in the road where I lived. Walking down that road, I began to realize that actually they were outside my home: that they were inside my home. I think that the first thing that I said to the firemen was "are the cats alright?" Fortunately the cats were fine – the house wasn't – nor were a couple of friends of mine (one burnt and the other losing nearly everything he owned in this world). The response was predominantly about accepting what had happened and working out strategies on how to deal with the situation – not too many dramas and hands thrown up in horror.

Yet at the same time, I can still lose it – like Sunday a few weeks ago: the snapping of "I do prioritise..." Snarling words, tightened jaw, tension around throat, a gripped and closing heart. The physical sensations of emotional discomfort. Yet also quickly seen, resolved, discussed, held. I want to write that these are the fruits of practice – inevitably there are slips and we fall. It is

remarkably easy to slip in this life – the question is how well do we handle these events, how well can we stand up after falling over. It can take time to learn the skill of standing up after a fall, to let go of the hot coals of anger, the identity of particular statements.

I have been working on this mind for more than a decade – struggling to get towards that more peaceful place: a place of less restricted views, not so dominated by preferences, a reducing of comparisons and jealousies. As well as the retreats and the daily practice, there have been nine years of psychotherapy and from 2012 I have been involved with ManKind Project.[®] This has been another mirror for reflection. I have learnt from this particular container about speaking from the heart, about avoidance of ‘shoulds’, about using I-statements, about taking responsibility: stepping up.

BRISK WORDS

I can remember the brisk words of Christina Feldman at that first Gaia House retreat when I went for a private interview in turmoil because of my mum’s death. At the time I was somewhat taken back by what she said. In retrospect I now see the truth of her words (to be grateful that the relationship with my mum was resolved).

There was that Swedish monk Natthiko three years later at Gaia House. I felt frustration with how he was teaching (he talked us through the meditation sessions). At the same time, I had a deep experience. There were times of great calmness and a real dropping of the nervous tension that is a familiar friend. On that retreat, I chose to do outside gardening as the work period. I spent several days shoveling compost during which I composed this poem:

There I sift

Compost and me

In the soil of tranquility

I know it’s not exactly William Blake – at the time it provided a rhyme for settling my mind. Normally at Gaia House, I chose dishwashing. Part of practice is that over time I have tried to lessen my drive for efficiency in doing this task as fast as possible. When I was with Martin Aylward this year, another ‘breakthrough’: the whole retreat with neither reading nor writing words. That reminds me of Sarah Power’s retreat in 2004. She proposed that we drop our books and our journals and my recollection is that I felt resistance to the idea. It has taken me ten years to become more comfortable on retreat being without books and journals.

BUSY BRAINS

I do not perceive myself as a ‘good’ meditator as I feel that my busy brain is not naturally quiet. I try my best and I am sure that I can do more – and also I need to be gentle and nurturing to myself because I tend towards harshness and active inner criticism. I remember when I was initially teaching yoga and we would do a short sit at the end. I would say, “the mind may get distracted”. Now I understand better: the mind will certainly get distracted and very probably pretty quickly.

In the last three years, there has been a new turn with my meditation practice: doing insight dialogue with Gregory Kramer and the Satori process with Clare Soloway. The Satori has been an intense and challenging experience. There is a lot of time staring into the other's eyes with questions of "who I am", "what is life", "who is another". After many intimate hours of closely connecting and continually asking questions such as "tell me, who are you?" – stuff does soften. Again a breakthrough – realising that I am good enough which is a powerful insight. When brushing teeth each morning, there is an intention to say that to myself: I am good enough – that is absolutely fine, just like that.

At that retreat with Martin, one seemingly trivial intention was set – that I could say "please" more and swear less. I made this into a humorous aside but actually there is deep meaning. This is a conscious easing of edges in how I connect. Another arising on that retreat was late one night – a voice that felt as though it was coming from the deep primitive past. Yes I can blame my brother, yes I can blame my parents, and yes I can blame society. But this is my life and I need to take responsibility and sort out this stuff: because ultimately however much help I might have from teachers, friends, lovers – I have to do it myself. Such as at Moulin in September 2012 when I was having panic attacks: in the imposed silence, with a roommate who snored, caught in fears of what was happening in my life and what might occur (aren't anxieties always future-orientated?). Just writing a note to the teacher eased the pressure – it was I that took that step to write the note, to call for help.

RADIO STATIONS

In the shower, recently I remembered one Gaia House retreat. I was sitting in this beautiful quiet place while in my head it sounded as though there were 30 radio stations all on simultaneously. How intensely irritating when I was in this wonderful stillness. There was then a call from deep inside: "for God's sake, just shut up". For some blissful seconds there was this silence; it was amazing.

Next day at the same place for sitting and with similar sounds in my head. I tried that strategy: the call from inside but without success because it was coming from a rationalizing and a planning, rather than that deeper down experience. I have many inner conversations and much chatter of mind. Hopefully I can relax more into the sounds of these various voices. Maybe there might be a slight diminishing of the din if only because there is a less resistance and more acceptance.

Two years seem to have arisen purely by chance in these strands of time passing. There is 1993 (beginning of regular yoga practice, falling in love) and there is 2008 (that year of significant change): fifteen years separating these two dates. To go backwards by another fifteen years: that was 1978. I was a fifteen year caught in that common adolescent cry "I want to be the same as everyone else, but I want to stand out and be different from them too". I wanted to belong at the same time as wanting to be special. There was post-puberty alertness to sex and confusion around sexuality plus very probably pimples and unease in this skin.

Back another fifteen years and I was being bought out into this world. After my mum died, I found these photographs of me as a baby that I love looking at. I feel this fondness for that little being that I was, there is a real softening of heart.

How about going forwards fifteen years from 2008: into 2023 and what might be happening then? Telepathy? Teleporting in transporters? Boiling hot summers and higher seas? Paramilitary policing and chips in our brains? Or peace, love and happiness? Billions regularly meditating, mysticism being much more important than the fundamentalists, cultures based on caring and sharing, emotional openness being common currency? Most likely all of the above plus a lot more.

I still get grumpy and irritable – I want to say that I am my father's son. There are still frustrations and longings. But nowadays even in those winds, I can keep connecting to the celebration of life. Not always of course: there are times when it feels that circumstances turn against me. It requires effort to put my shoulder against the wheel. Then I am able to realize how incredibly fortunate I am to be in this body – just as it is. There is a flow of appreciation and a cultivating of great gratitude for just being me. And in being me, there is more room for playfulness and for enjoying life. The honesty and integrity that has stood by my side for a long time is eased by kindness and compassion. Yes the journey continues: this work of polishing inner jewels is a process that has no end – as long as I have the bravery to continue. It is brave to look inside, to open the dusty boxes.

BEING BALANCED

I mentioned earlier about the fruits of practice and the acknowledgement of my fallible nature. I am human, I make mistakes, and I am driven by fears of being lonely and unseen. One of my strengths is not giving up too soon, yet on occasion I think that there is too much loyalty and reliability that beats in this heart. Being loyal is important in relationships but there can be a danger of being blinded by loyalty. There is a balance here – neither hiding nor being deluded by desperations, being reliable and being boundaried.

Practice is connecting to self (without fetishisation or narcissism) and connecting to other (with clarity and kindness). It is lessening judgments and encouraging joy. A symbol and sign of deepening practice is laughing more, becoming more able to wear the being human with greater lightness. Yes, obviously, the settings from the past are still present – yet certainly there have been shifts. There is a definite brightening of inner skies. I do now know from a deep place that these settings can be shifted through presence and that has arisen through my practicing. I know that I am a good person and that my heart is generous and open, that I have sensitivity to those around me and myself.

When the meditation master Dogen came back to Japan from China in the 13th century, he was asked what he brought back. His reply was simple: “a soft and flexible mind”. That is my aspiration – for this mind to be flexible and softer.

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Please feel free to contact with comments Norman108@clara.co.uk and share as you wish.

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REFERENCES

If you want to follow some of the strands in this story, here are signposts:

For “night of terror in the Italian judiciary system”:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2001_Raid_on_Armando_Diaz

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for “a Vipassana in the style of S N Goenka”:

<http://www.dipa.dhamma.org/>

for “Gaia House (which has kind of become my spiritual home)”:

<http://gaiahouse.co.uk/>

for “the financial meltdown...”:

Paul Mason *Why it’s still kicking off everywhere*;

for ManKind Project:

<http://uk.mkp.org/>

for Clare Soloway/Satori Process:

<http://www.claresoloway.com/>

for an accessible account of Dogen’s teachings:

Brad Warner *Sit Down and Shut Up*.