

## **The Realization of Paul Rezendes** ~ An excerpt from the book *The Wild Within*

That's what I thought I was doing: constantly trying to watch myself, whether I was teaching Hatha Yoga, meditating, talking to someone, hoeing the garden, tending my beehives, walking in the forest. But this was not observation from the perspective of wildness. It was self observing self, thought observing thought. I was practicing my idea of awareness. The awareness I practiced was not the awareness that is wildness. It was cultivated, just another neat little row in the garden of self. The door was not yet open, wildness was still not real. The only thing happening was that thought was doing its best to mimic wildness.



It was in this period, during a walk in the forest, that I discovered who was tracking self and much, much more. One day, when I needed some time alone, I walked behind the ashram's large organic garden and beehives into a swamp of small shrubs and red maples. This swamp backed up to a hillside of tall white pines. The pine forest had a luxurious carpet of needles, marvelous stuff to walk on. The warm weather had just arrived, and the sky was a magical blue.

While walking I watched the movement of thought, conscious of every step and aware of the light, airy feeling of my body from yoga practice, meditation, and the raw-food diet. The air was thick with early summer smells and white pine pollen, which was so copious that it painted the forest floor a subtle yellow-green. My footfalls sent delicate pollen wisps swirling around my feet, turning my white sneakers a psychedelic chartreuse.

There was no hurry. I was just sitting there, being me, having spent about six years of intense inquiry into truth that began when I saw the young Mama being abused. I started questioning who I was and whether my life had meaning. This self-inquiry deepened and took on a new urgency when I came close to being gunned down by the police and narrowly escaped prison. These events forced me to examine my life, which had to be more than just the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. I had had my fill of pleasure. I had wallowed in sex and drugs and personal power. Yet somehow I could never fill the cup of desire. It was always half empty.

After my bust, I decided that the answer to the questions that I was asking about the nature of self and the meaning of life must lie with God. I naturally turned to my roots in Catholicism, the faith of my parents. If I became a good Catholic and went to church, took the sacraments, and led a pure Christian life, I thought I would come to know who I was and life would have meaning. But there was a big problem.

I could not become a full, practicing Catholic because I was married to a woman who was still married to her first husband in the eyes of the Church, which didn't recognize her divorce. I was living in sin. In order for me to be fully accepted into the Church and to be

able to take the sacraments, my wife needed to get an annulment of her first marriage. The only other option, if I wanted to pursue Catholicism, was to leave my wife. I opted for an annulment.

My wife and I wrote to the pope, asking for the annulment. I took a vow of celibacy and prayed and prayed, crawling on my knees through the stations of the cross at La Salette Shrine and Seminary in Attleboro, Massachusetts. I talked to Christian monks and studied St. John of the Cross. I did this with total abandon, believing I was asking for the right thing. After all, I reasoned, it wouldn't be right for me to forsake my wife and children. All I wanted to be was a good Catholic.

I did this for a whole year. The celibacy part was one of the hardest things I have ever done. When the Pope's answer came, it was an unequivocal *no*, which shook me to my core. I really believed that God would answer my prayers, because I sincerely believed that I was asking only for what was right. It seemed to me that my prayers not only went unanswered, but that no one was listening. I had to admit that I didn't know if there really was a God. For once in my life I didn't care about pain or pleasure, my image of myself, or my need to belong. I just wanted to know the truth. What was life about? Was there a God? Who was I? Was life just about the pursuit of pleasure and pain, or was there some greater meaning? I began to realize with an undeniable clarity that my pursuit of God and spirituality was no different than my pursuit of pleasure. It was all in the name of self-gratification.

I didn't realize it at the time, but a new energy had entered my life. It was the awareness that is wildness, and it wouldn't accept anything but the truth. And it was this quest for truth that led me into this beautiful forest of white pine, walking along on a warm day in early spring, admiring my psychedelic sneakers, and doing a good job, I thought, of observing myself and paying attention as Krishnamurti had exhorted all of us to do.

Then the extraordinary happened. Suddenly there was a "seeing," and awareness that the awareness I had been practicing was blind. Self was watching self, thought was watching thought. Self could not see its whole movement, but, at the same time, there was a "seeing" of the whole movement of self. This "seeing," though, did not come from self. Thought didn't make this one up. It was like coming upon a bear in the forest. There was no denying it. Something was showing me that I didn't see. My blindness was revealed to me despite myself. Wildness was revealed.

In that moment I saw that wildness was the whole universe. All things were manifesting in it. Wildness was the bear in the Adirondacks, the coyote and the doe in their dance of life and death. It was as if I had been asleep all my life and had been dreaming about being a gang leader and a yoga teacher in an ashram. I had woken up and realized that I was not just the gang leader, yoga teacher, thinker of the thought—I was the universe, every rock, tree, cloud, animal, and person on the planet. I was the moon and stars, intelligence, awareness, compassion, love, direct communication, the dance life and death, and the web of life. A door had opened, and the wild blew in.

I was floored. The thinker of the thought was totally inept. This is what I, the self as the thinker of thought, had been avoiding. I had avoided seeing my limitations. The self that thought had created was incapable of awareness. But by practicing phony awareness, I had been able to maintain the illusion of achieving awareness. I thought that, ironically, my

practice had helped bolt shut the door to wildness, to awareness, to the master tracker, which is what all of us are in this conscious state.

As I walked back to the ashram I thought about what a paradox my enlightening experience was. My true nature was wildness, but I was still Paul Rezendes. My practice was the closed door to wildness, but how could I have seen the folly of my practice if I wasn't doing it? I realized that, although in one sense the earth had moved for me and the most significant event of my life had occurred, nothing had happened. Everything had changed, yet nothing had changed. Zen Buddhists have a saying that expresses this paradox of enlightenment:

Before enlightenment, the valleys were valleys and the mountains were mountains. After enlightenment, the valleys are valleys and the mountains are mountains.

This saying expresses the awareness carried out of the woods with me that day. Over the years, I used the following interpretation, called the Mountain and the Valley, which I gave to my meditation students and now give to my tracking students, to explain the paradox of existing as the whole universe and yet remaining as an individual.

Before enlightenment, the mountain and the valley were always in conflict, always afraid of each other. The mountain felt the valley was encroaching on it, taking over its territory. And the valley felt the same way. The mountain was encroaching on it, threatening its very existence. The mountain and the valley were always at war. Until they realized, Hey! Wait a minute! There is no mountain without a valley nor valley without a mountain. There can be no back without a front or front without a back. Each supports the other. The essence of each is intrinsic in the other. They realized that their true nature was not separate, and they were dependent on each other. At the same time they both realized, AHH, yes! I must be fully the mountain, different from the valley. And, yes! I must be a valley as best as I can be a valley. In being a valley, I support the mountain. And in being a mountain, I support the valley. But even with this sense of their individual identity they realized that their true nature was one. They kept their identities, but their identities did not rule them or fragment them. Instead, their identities took their proper places, and a small portion of who they are, a smidgen of their larger wholeness.

The Mountain and the Valley is instructive because it illuminates the fundamental nature of reality. Although the mountain and the valley appear separate, they're inseparable. They are one. Zen Buddhists have a gesture called *Gasho*, putting their two hands together, palm to palm, and bowing. The two hands represent the mountain and the valley, their separateness, the left and right, good and evil, the pirate and the girl, day and night, the doe and the coyote, life and death. Bringing hands together symbolizes the fact that all seeming dichotomies and dualities are one. Bowing recognizes and expresses gratitude to that fundamental nature of oneness. To me, that oneness is the wild within, although in reality, it's as much out there in the universe as it is within us.