

A Leaf Slipped from a Hand

~An Awakening into Stillness

by Gary Weber

The first major awakening experience was a complete surprise with no preparation or background. Serious spiritual exploration had begun after nearly dying in a submarine wreck in my mid-twenties, which jolted me out of my alcohol-fueled notorious partying. Although childhood was spent as a traditional fundamental Christian, interest had vanished in my teens.

There was also a remembrance that the faint "knowing" that had existed even as a little kid that "enlightenment" was the goal of this life, although there was not the slightest idea what that was, as it was basically heretical in Christianity. It was clear that my suffering was caused by the endless, meaningless narrative running in consciousness. For whatever unknown "reason," the decision manifested to try to stop it, although there was no reason to believe that such a thing was even possible.

Being in grad school, there was much available on the subject in the university library. One day, eating lunch on the lawn near the main admin building, I opened a book and read the first line of a poem... "All beings are from the very beginning Buddhas."

Although it wasn't clear exactly what that fully meant, the world blew open into a weird, wonderful space never seen before, completely without thought, suffering, desire or fear with everything somehow in a different dimension with vibrant energy. This lasted for about 45 minutes or so and then was closed down by all of the earlier conditioning and complete lack of preparation or understanding.

The critical result, however, was that now it was clear that there was a possibility of the brain, all by itself, manifesting such a transcendent space. As the cover of the book said "Zen Poems" or something like that, a "Zen" path was energetically embarked upon, as somehow "they" clearly knew how to produce this thing, whatever it was, or however it was done.

This was followed by decades of Zen meditation with several teachers, and with a parallel intense study of yoga in many different schools, lineages and teachers. In yoga, a route was found for sitting longer and more comfortably in meditation, and also something that worked very synergistically with the Zen meditation, to integrate the results of meditation and to release problems and issues locked in the body. The "self-inquiry" type of Zen and the work of Bassui and Ramana Maharshi to focus on and deconstruct the "I," manifested and was pursued with great diligence.

This continued for 25 years of 2 hours/day early-morning practice and retreats and teachers' training programs, in both meditation and yoga, totaling about 20,000 hours. Meanwhile, there was a very active professional life in R&D and business management, in several companies and institutions with different jobs and locations and with much travel, along with a wife and two kids.

There were several openings during this period, but nothing that lasted—nothing that ended the internal narrative, or the suffering, fear or desires. All of the teachers said to pay no

attention to these experiences, as they would become a trap and attachment, and if an effort was made to reproduce them, it would be unsuccessful. Despite these cautions, there was still the attempt to reproduce the early experiences, but it led only to wasted time and energy, so the attempts stopped.

As the practice deepened, it was apparent that "attachments" were where the last vestiges of the "I" were being held. Wherever there was an attachment, it was clearly seen that there was an I/me/my at the root of it as the core around which it was structured. Each attachment also clearly had its "own" separate I/me/my. So what was then required was to go through every attachment, and surrender each one.

The work focused on Shankara's *Nirvana Shatakam*, which had manifested magically one dark, starry night half-way up Haleakala on Maui. This text is basically a list of all the classes of attachments. The approach was to focus on each attachment and its particular story, or stories, feel into it, and then let go of it. This continued until all that was left was attachment to my two daughters. That step was delayed until it was apparent that they were secure and would not suffer from whatever might happen, as there was no certainty what would occur when the final attachment was gone. There was even the fear that this body would die without thought and the "I."

However, even after this surrender, there remained a little vestige of an I/me/my which could be felt. It was not clear who/how to surrender it to "nothingness/emptiness." The solution that manifested was to have some entity come and take it away. Not surprisingly, the entity that it was surrendered to was Ramana Maharshi, whose teachings and presence had been the critical elements in the last stages of the journey.

Two or three days later, during the typical morning sequence of yoga postures focusing on the affirmation "I am not this body," going into an inverted posture that had been done thousands of times before, everything changed dramatically when coming down. There was no blinding flash of light, no chorus of angels, etc., but the "I/ego" had disappeared like a leaf had slipped from a hand, and there was just deep stillness, silence, now and presence.

There was the clear, unmistakable, direct perception that this was "It." It had been expected that the internal narrative thoughts would diminish considerably, as that was the goal after all, but it was a jolt when they just STOPPED, along with all self-referential fears, desires and suffering.

There had been earlier experiences which had been examined, and rejected, by roshis/teachers in a classical 1/1 Zen interview called "dokusan," but there was always the knowing that the goal hadn't really been reached as the internal narrative, suffering, fears and desires had continued. This time it had. Subsequent interviews with my two principal, very different, Rinzai Zen masters confirmed the realization.

When this shift occurred, there were about 1,000 folk, four research laboratories and a budget of about \$250 million for which "I" was responsible, and work had to take place that day without an "I." At work, to great surprise, no one even noticed. There was no halo, no throwing stones, no one bowing down, no meeting with the VP of Human Resources or the CEO...just another day at the office except there was no one there "doing" it.

Another great surprise: as the days went on, work and "my life" were actually going on without "me." The work was much more creative, useful and insightful, as there was full and complete awareness in every meeting, whether it was with the CEO, peers, researchers,

customers, analysts, etc. No one else was actually there for the whole meeting, fully present in every moment to body language, voice inflection, and presentation details. They were somewhere else in their minds for most of the meetings.

Solutions that just manifested were amazingly synchronistic and creative for a host of different problems. There was preparation for complex meetings, but when they occurred, the solutions just arose, out of "no place." The "I" that was no longer there was now regarded as "the smartest person in the room."

This was really unexpected as there had been the possibility that after the "I" fell away, that there might be marginal-functionality or no functionality at all. There was never even the concept that performance in high-stress, complex, management roles with much responsibility and countless daily interactions, presentations and communications would actually increase.

It was also fascinating that as "my life" was functioning perfectly without "me," that something, whatever one wants to call it, was somehow "doing" my life and arranging all sorts of amazingly serendipitous and fortunate meetings, events, activities, etc. and always had been. "Free will," control, choices and "doing" were something that "I" was totally certain that "I" had and did...however, it was clear that this was a complete and total illusion, and always had been.

Far from being terrifying and causing mind-numbing anxiety, the recognition that there was no "free will," "control" or "choice" was one of the most amazing, freeing and enabling understandings that could be imagined. All of the guilt, and pride, which had been so skillfully installed by religion, culture, institutions, teachers, etc., just fell away.

This truly was "freedom" beyond anything that could have been imagined. There was no sin, no karma, no good deeds and no bad deeds. Something benevolent and loving was guiding and holding "me" and had been doing so all along. When there was a little surrender, there was a feeling of being held a little. When there was more surrender, there was a feeling of more care and support. Now, with no "I" to hold on to anything, and with no alternative but total surrender, there was complete love, support and compassion.

"My life" has continued like that for the intervening 17 years with management positions in organizations in academics, health care, food ingredients, economic development, etc., all documented @ www.happiness-beyond-thought.com under "About." As is the case with the "spirituality" books, interviews, blogposts, articles, YouTube videos, presentations, etc., all of this happens "all by itself." It all just arises "magically" out of the Stillness.

There is rarely self-referential internal narrative unless blood sugar/energy gets very low. There can be internal narrative directed towards problem-solving, planning, etc., as required, but it rarely results in the problematic, emotionally-charged, self-referential narrative that was previously the big problem. The cognitive neuroscience is clear on the distinction between these two types of narrative, and the two discrete, separate and typically competing neural circuits from which they arise. There are many videos, blogposts, and interviews on the difference between these two and the cognitive neuroscience explaining them.

The other big surprise is that the page turning discussed above has not been the "end" of awakening experiences, even though it was the original goal. Given that we have something like 50 trillion synaptic interconnections, if only 2% of them have anything to do

with any aspect of awakening, there are still 1,000,000,000,000 synaptic interconnections to be re-arranged. It would be cataclysmic for them all to be rearranged at once.

There is, therefore, no end to the deepening, although there is no one "doing it"—the brain, in its continual drive for efficiency, neural real estate optimization and minimal energy consumption—does it "all by itself" as it strongly prefers stillness and order to suffering, "blah, blah," anxiety, fears, etc. As Harada Roshi, a famous 19th/20th century Japanese Zen master said, "Enlightenment is capable of endless enlargement."

Early every morning, what would look to others like a practice, still emerges, in a spontaneous combination of yoga asanas, breathing practices/pranayama, sitting meditation, walking meditation, chanting, self-inquiry, affirmations, negations, bhakti, spontaneous posture flows, etc. Even more surprisingly, every morning something new is disclosed...a key is turned in a lock in a door that wasn't even known to be there. Just when it seemed as if nothing could be sweeter, more still, more complete, more present...it deepens.