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“Zen without bells and whistles.”



Deconstructing Dukkha

BY ERIC HANSEN

Dr. Edward Wortz can wiggle his ears. What's more, he can tell you exactly how and why he cultivated this skill. Sitting across from Dr. Wortz – Ed, as he's known to his wide circle of students, clients and friends – in his Santa Monica, California office, I wait a moment while he pauses, his warm eyes twinkling. Suddenly, the ears jump, noticeably moving up and down. "It took me two and a half months to find the controlling muscle in my awareness," he says. "I was interested in how we can bring processes which might seem involuntary into our conscious control. Sometimes I use little tricks like this to show my clients that, with practice, they can gain greater control of the way they 'do' suffering." For the last 30 years, as a psychotherapist and Buddhist meditation teacher, Ed has been working with clients and students at the place where science and Buddhism converge, helping them to observe and disassemble the elements out of which the experience of suffering is constructed.

In Ed, the discipline that is required to learn to wiggle your ears, or achieve great spiritual insights, is wedded to a wide-ranging and powerful intelligence. Growing up in San Antonio, Texas in the 1930s, he was pegged early on by his father as "lazy." Nevertheless, by the age of 37, in 1968, he was running the Life Sciences department for Garrett Aerospace Corporation, working on environmental control systems and simulating lunar conditions for NASA, with the first moon landing just a year off. That's when Robert Irwin, the noted California artist, and artist James Turrell were ushered into his office. Irwin was looking for a scientist to collaborate with him on his contribution to the famous "Art and Technology" exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. In those days, Ed certainly looked every bit the 1960s rocket geek; with his short-sleeved white shirt, pens jutting out of his shirt pocket, he seemed the kind of guy you'd see in the background in an early broadcast from Mission Control. In spite of their superficial differences, Ed and Irwin took an instant liking to each other and became lifelong friends. In a biography of Irwin, written by Lawrence Wechsler, the artist describes his meetings with Ed: "The thing that fascinated me about Wortz, was that he could handle more information with less difficulty and less prejudice than anyone I'd ever met. People would walk in and ask him about some very complicated mathematical formula or other problem ... he'd discuss it with them, make a decision on it, state it back to them in alarmingly simple terms, and then come right back to talking with me, without skipping a beat."

Sharing an interest in how people perceive themselves and their environment, the three men assigned areas of investigation and reported back on their findings. One area that Ed chose for himself was meditation. He had never meditated, but as a naval officer during the Korean War he had traveled extensively in Asia and continued, over the years, to read many books on Zen Buddhism. Still, he was always reluctant to meet a Zen Master in person. "I had a pretty big ideal built up in my mind of how a Zen Master should be, and I was certain I'd be disappointed." Finally, he enrolled in a meditation class taught at UCLA by a Vietnamese Zen Master, Dr. Thich Thien-An, and, Ed says with a laugh, "I was not disappointed." Thien-An was one of Vietnam's most influential Buddhist scholars, yet the thing that most impressed Ed was that, in spite of suffering a harsh two-year imprisonment and other terrible hardships in a war-torn country, Thien-An was the most compassionate and happiest person Ed had ever met.

Ed's meetings with these remarkable men suggested a different kind of life. Wanting to interact with



others in a more direct, compassionate and intimate way, he left the space program to become a psychotherapist, inevitably finding points of cross-pollination between Buddhism and science. It was at this point that he discovered the work of phenomenologist Michael Polyani, which, Ed says, "was a mindblower." Polyani's concept of "indwelling" seemed to synthesize much of what Ed was exploring. Ed illustrates this concept by handing me a pen, which is to be used as a "probe." He instructs: "Close your eyes. Feel the sensations of the pen against your fingertips. Where is your awareness?" "In my fingertips." "Now, with your eyes closed, feel around until you hit something solid with the probe. Explore it. Now, where is your awareness?" I am surprised, because my awareness seems to have moved to the end of the pen. It seems to be "indwelling" an inanimate object, tapping the surface of a desk. "Now," Ed continues, "as you're doing this, what happens to the awareness of the pen in your hand?" It's gone. The sensations in my fingertips seem to have disappeared.

Ed explains: "We construct our experience of what's at the far end of the probe by using the sensations that we have in our fingers. But, in order to experience what's out there, we need to forget the elements out of which it is constructed." Early on, Ed realized that this simple experiment might actually point to the true of nature of suffering -- what Buddhism describes as "emptiness" -- and even suggest ways that suffering might be eased.

When psychotherapy clients come to see Ed for the first time, they frequently bring a single source of discomfort, an overwhelming problem, such as the fear of losing a job or anxiety about their own or a loved one's health, which consumes them with uncontrollable thoughts. Focusing on the ostensible source of anxiety, people are only vaguely aware of the things going on inside their bodies: racing heartbeat, tightened muscles in their necks and shoulders, constricted blood vessels in their fingers and hands, and so on.

Looking at it from the perspective of Buddhist psychology, one could say that the experience of anxiety is actually "empty," because there is no inherent, unchanging self-nature which could be called anxiety. Still, for someone suffering any acute emotional discomfort, it is very hard to shift the mind away from the distressing thoughts to observe the compound nature of the experience. It's as if the mind is stuck at the far end of the probe (the cause of anxiety) while all the elements out of which anxiety is constructed (fantasies of the future, breath holding, peripheral vasoconstriction, etc.) have become invisible.

Ed describes the problem many people have in actually identifying what is going on inside of them. "We've been constructing feelings unconsciously and efficiently all of our lives, and we're really good at it. It's so automatic, it's difficult to become aware of the elements of any experience." He has developed a number of training aids, such as "body maps," to help clients gain awareness of how they, specifically, "do" the physical aspects of anxiety. Ed explains, "Every human being has a different set of experiences, a different communication system, and different ways of suffering than the last. I can't tell them how they're doing it, but I can help them if they tell me."

Once clients have sufficiently honed their awareness to identify the primary locations and qualities of their feelings, Ed challenges them with a unique therapeutic twist. He asks them to make thing worse. For example, if a client is experiencing sharp burning sensations in the chest associated with guilt, Ed will instruct him or her to increase the burning feeling by, say, five percent. He explains, "As soon as you can budge the feeling a little bit, you move to the position of having some (however



slight) control. We know from biofeedback that anything you can budge a little you can learn to budge a lot." Ed frequently coaches his clients in moving up and down the scales of discomfort, taking it up to 6, bringing it down to 2, up to 4.5, and so on -- getting their fingers on the controls, as it were. "This training procedure led to one of my favorite hypotheses," Ed leans forward to emphasize: "You can't stop doing something that you don't know how to do."

To cultivate this skill, Ed sometimes asks his clients to do what he calls "practicing suffering," which is to construct and then release uncomfortable feelings, such as guilt, over and over again. An important refinement is making the physical display without using any memories or other triggering mental imagery, which serves to weaken the automatic link between thoughts and feelings. Ed frequently gives his clients homework. In this case, the homework might be, "Every time you see a Volkswagen...get anxious," or "Ten times a day...for no reason...feel sad." If clients actually find themselves in the grips of anxiety during the day, they are told to focus on anxiety and exaggerate some element of the aggregate. "When you exaggerate some physical aspect of it, you instantly change your position with regard to the experience. You become aware that it's something you're doing, not something that's happening to you."

Many people instinctively recoil from the idea of increasing their suffering, but Ed has found this is the direction in which they must first move. There is both a physical reason, "the onset of any kind of muscle tension is rapid, while release is pretty slow," but also another, more subtle reason, grounded in Buddhist psychology. The Buddha identified aversion as one of the key catalysts of human suffering, and there is nothing we are more averse to than our own discomfort. It is very likely that a primary component of any bad feeling is our resistance to the initial feeling, to which we frequently add self-judgments about the feelings and bad feelings about the judgments. To wade into the middle of this and start resisting the resistance is not a recipe for success.

One of Ed's favorite adages is, "When you run from problems (or feelings), they chase after you; when you go towards them, they run from you." Indeed, many people find that as soon as they start to exaggerate a physical element of their emotional suffering, not only does that feeling diminish, but the whole construct begins to break up. Suffering might not disappear, but it changes, like a knot which has been loosened. Ed, in his characteristically understated way, says, "Of course, we are never in absolute control, but neither are we helpless." It's at this point that he pauses, wiggles his ears, and smiles. "These skills are doable."

Without physical reactions, thoughts register with far less conviction. From the perspective of deconstructing emotional suffering, this point cannot be overemphasized. Thoughts and fantasies come and go all the time, unaccompanied by any feelings, and their passage is hardly marked. If, for example, I picture a man with an axe standing outside my door, I will probably think "strange thought" and let the image bubble on its way. But if, while having the same thought, my heart is pounding, my knees are weak, and my mouth is dry, the nonexistent man outside my door will seem very, very real. My body's response makes the image seem credible. This applies across the infinite range of thoughts and fantasies, from "I'm stupid and I don't deserve to live," to "I'm the most enlightened being on the planet." Ed's hypothesis is that, because the physical responses are in fact real, embodied in this moment, they lend an "aura of authenticity" to the construction of an experience. Even for an experienced meditator, someone practiced in the skill of letting go of thoughts, this task becomes far more difficult when the body is engaged.



By now it should be clear that repressing feelings is the opposite of what Ed advocates. Nor does this teaching lead to a lessening or deadening of emotion, as some people might fear. What one finds instead, as insight is gained and resistance to feelings (good or bad) is lessened, is the rare opportunity to experience emotions more completely, and, in fact, to see what's really going on.

This kind of seeing also requires a perceptual shift: directly observing where the locus of responsibility for our emotions is really located. It's normal to think that feelings are caused by external events, situations, and people. The media, literature, and most of our day-to-day social interactions reinforce this view. We can imagine ourselves saying and thinking things like, "She hurt my feelings," "You kids are driving me crazy," or "If I don't get that job I'll be devastated." But, looking at it more closely -- if someone, for example, calls you a "stupid jackass" -- has any physical contact been made? Has force been applied? No. We're clenching our own jaws, speeding up our own hearts, dumping adrenalin into our own bloodstream, or however we respond. Still, the illusion persists that the person out there is making us feel bad, by their words or actions. Ed calls this the "Obsessive External Focus," and while it is relatively easy to observe in others, it is much more difficult to catch in ourselves.

"There are lots of reasons for hanging onto the obsessive external focus," Ed says, acknowledging its curious social utility. "If I make myself feel bad, and blame you for it, maybe I can get you to change your behavior. Perhaps I can get you to accept the illusion of your power. You're responsible for my feelings, right? Parents run this on their children all the time. 'Tell daddy you love him or he'll be sad.' 'If you don't eat your green beans mommy's going to be very upset.' People are constantly agreeing to this illusion, giving externals the power to determine our feelings."

The hallmark of a good meditation teacher, Ed believes, is that he or she will always turn students back to themselves for answers. Instead of proclamations, he's much more likely to couch his ideas as "hypotheses" for his students to investigate, recalling the Buddha's dying words to his followers, "Be a lamp unto yourselves." Yet, many of us hit a fundamental perceptual snag when it comes to the discomfort and emotional suffering that we create in our own bodies. Why do we imagine that the control is out there? How did we come to believe that people and situations can "make us" have feelings? The short answer -- it's one of nature's survival mechanisms gone awry -- requires that we look at the essential function that feelings serve. They are displays meant to communicate meanings to ourselves and others. This is their evolutionary purpose, not just for humans but for other creatures as well (think of a dog baring its teeth, raising its hackles, etc.). As social beings, we use our bodies moment by moment to understand, communicate and display the meanings of our lives. We rely on our physical reactions to tell us who we like and dislike, with what intensity, and even, we believe, what kind of person we are. For example, Ed sometimes inquires, if a boat goes down in the South China Sea and all five hundred souls aboard are lost, how should you feel? Bad, of course. It's one of the easiest ways to display your goodness. Good boys and girls feel bad.

This process begins no later than at the moment of birth. "As infants we're essentially helpless," Ed says. "The only way to communicate our needs is by making a display of discomfort. So, we screw up our faces and feel real bad and make a lot of noise, and mommy comes in to take care of us. Thus, displays of discomfort have survival value for infants which, of course, they don't have for us. Yet, for the rest of our lives we still assume they're tied to our survival; we've established a link between internal states and external outcomes." This last point deserves to be underlined, for it casts light on the fact that, even as adults, we still harbor an unconscious but deeply ingrained superstition



that with feelings alone we can (magically) impact the world. Worrying is a good example of this. When I worry about a loved one, I not only display meanings to myself (I care about my family; I'm a good person), but I also seem to believe that my discomfort will somehow control remote events. It's understandable, with so many important things beyond our control, that we feel the urge to do something, but, alas, many times this something just boils down to spinning fantasies as we move chemicals around in our own bodies.

Which brings us happily back to meditation, which remains, after thousands of years, the most potent technology for cutting through fantasies and disassembling conceptual thought. Ed calls it the single most "powerful agent of personal transformation" that he has observed, and, indeed, every skill and refinement of perception discussed here can be strengthened -- its development quickened -- by the practice of meditation.

Like a weight lifter who must hoist barbells thousands of times to observe incremental gains, meditators must do their own kind of "reps," catching themselves again and again when awareness has drifted off into thoughts and reverie, letting go of the distractions and returning to the focus, thus developing *joiriki*, or concentration power. Over time, this concentration power changes our relationship to our thoughts, helping us to recognize when we are caught up in suffering of our own making. There is no cure for emotional suffering that quite equals cutting the beast off at the head, letting go of all the spinning and returning to this moment, right now, where things tend to be okay.

To develop this skill Ed teaches concentration meditations, such as the "listening meditation," one of his favorites. This involves maintaining a focus on "ambient sounds," that is, attending to whatever sounds appear in one's environment at that moment, keeping the experience of listening forefront and "vivid." In a sense, this is training to be more "present," as our thoughts and fantasies always take us out of this moment while a sound can only be heard right now. Ed's students are instructed to listen without labeling, that is, without attaching a mental image or verbal label to the sounds, such as "there's a dog" or "bird singing," or even "pleasant sound" or "I don't like that one." Perceiving things in themselves, without labels, is an important step to take in dispelling confusion and judgment. A sound without a label is something fresh, whole and clear. A person without a label is someone you have a chance of really seeing.

Every meditation period begins and ends with a deep gong from Ed's warmly resonant iron bell. Sometimes, in order to illustrate some of the later stages of the listening meditation, he'll strike the bell during the period and ask his students to listen as the deep gong gradually fades. "Exactly here is this sound," he says. Then, when the sound has vanished, "Exactly here is this 'no-sound.'" Students are left with their ears tuned to the night, crickets chirping, a clock ticking, a stomach gurgling, and, exactly where the deep resonance of the bell was, an absence of a sound -- a no-sound pointing to the "ground of listening," which might also be, Ed hints, the very ground of being. "Where is the listening?" Ed asks. "Do our ears go to the sound or does the sound come to our ears?" A pause, filled by crickets, breath, a distant dog barking, then Ed's voice, posing the question, "Who hears?" Sometimes, for a moment, thoughts fall away and there's just listening. No thinking to let go of. No suffering to deconstruct. Just this moment, exactly here. How do we find ourselves at this wonderful moment? As Ed says, "you can't get there by trying, but you can't get there if you don't try." 🌸



Who Leads?

ZEN LESSONS: THE ART OF LEADERSHIP - Translated by Thomas Cleary

A BOOK REVIEW BY RITA VALENCIA

In light of the morally destitute state of leadership in this country, the title of this book arouses a cynical chuckle at first. We despair of a national leader we can trust to be better or stronger or more intelligent or more accomplished than, say, our fifth grade teacher. Wrap this book in brown paper and send it as a letter bomb to the White House. Buy a few dozen and seed them into corporate washrooms. Redraw the guy on the cover to have better pecs and sculpted abs, and mail it to Schwarzenegger.

As citizens we lead less and less: the individual's power to effect change or to influence policy is greatly diminishing. The vote and the street, those traditional avenues of social change and popular voice, have been subverted by a media juggernaut where right-leaning corporations control the message. The public education system has been eviscerated for so long that the populace is by now largely ignorant and incapable of critical thought. A consumer marketing program has sold us to a grotesque form of materialism, celebrity cultism, and manic consumption to distract us from a meaningful and activist civic dialogue.

In such a context, hunger for the genuine leader is palpable. The broken trust we have all experienced at the hands of "leaders"—whether political, economic, social or religious—has sparked a multifaceted reactivity. It manifests itself as both atheism and pantheism, new age spiritualism or traditionalism. Given the septicity of the western Zeitgeist, it is inevitable that there will be those who suspect that the western practitioner of Buddhism is engaged in a feverish and delusional attempt to manufacture the genuine out of an exotic orthodoxy whose best selling point is that it is not really a religion. Like any religion it has succeeded in drawing its share of phonies and egomaniacs. These "Zen Lessons" are a useful guide in identifying, illustrating and rebuking them.

In the eleventh century China at the time of the Song Dynasty, when the writings that comprise Zen Lessons were composed Chan (Zen) had reached a zenith of popularity and influence. Monasteries had taken on a prestigious civic aspect, and it had become the custom for a government official to make appointments of leadership in the monastic hierarchy. The system was easy to game: imposters proliferated, and their flatteries and pieties got them into plum roles in the monasteries. Thomas Cleary has this explanation for the vast expansion of Zen and its inevitable corruption: "According to Zen teaching, when people in positions of great responsibility in society trust Zen adepts, it may be...an unconscious response to the safety felt in the presence of a truly detoxified human being...the false appeared in such profusion precisely because the true was so effective."

In "**Zen Lessons: The Art of Leadership**", a range of Zen masters comment on sundry slippages from the Noble Eightfold Path. Start reading this book anywhere and you'll find a trenchant homily, relevant to contemporary practice, or an earthy, dishy slice of life. *"People nowadays are lazy about getting up, and many are deficient in manners when they congregate. Some indulge shamelessly in their appetite for food, some create disputes in their concern for getting support and honor."* Or you come across the sublime: *"An iron dyke a thousand miles long leaks through anthills. The beauty of white jade is lost in a flaw. The supremely subtle Way is beyond iron dykes and white jade, yet greed and resentment are greater than anthills and flaws."*



Through Cleary's able and accessible prose, there emerges a portrait of a Zen clergy notable for its plain and forthright speech, tough but intelligent, men who despise artifice and revere humility, learning, and wisdom. Such a book will hopefully find as wide an audience as *The Art of War*, which Cleary also translated, and insinuate its enlightened morality into the decadent fiber of post industrial capitalism. It belongs in every executive washroom, and on the night tables of all of us who practice leading, or following the breath. 🌸