

Way-Seeking Mind Talk-Tabrez

December 2, 2012

When Peg first said she was starting a series of way seeking mind talks I was ecstatic. One of the first things I ask people I meet here is how they got here. I thought it would be great to hear in depth about the life events that brought all of you here. Then she asked me to give a way seeking mind talk. I was less ecstatic. I know I'm not comfortable talking about my life so I decided to write down my thoughts and just try to read it out. My first attempt at writing this talk yielded about 8 minutes of material. So I went back and listened to talks others have given for inspiration. Let's see how long this one goes!

If you had asked me 10 years ago if I would get up before 7am and drive somewhere to stare at a wall for an hour I would have said you're crazy. If you told me that I would espouse a view that slowing down and doing one thing at a time is a good thing I'd think we weren't well acquainted. But I'm here. An outcome that boggles my mind. I think of the times I saw the path leading down this way and kept moving in the opposite direction. So what brought me here? This is my story.

Stories have to start somewhere. So let's start this one 35 years ago in South India. I realize I can't talk about my life without talking about India. So let's spend a few minutes talking about the India I knew growing up. They say India is the world's most religious country. My experience definitely confirms this statement. Indians are about 80% Hindu, 13% Muslim, and 2% Christian. What percentage are buddhist? 0.8% People often ask me if my interest in Buddhism is because of my Indian background and that's certainly not true. I never knew a single Buddhist in India. I learned about Buddhism in school but to my knowledge it was a religion where people worshipped a guy name buddha and seemed to believe in non-violence. It cracks me up to this day that I had to come to Texas to learn about Buddhism and Yoga.

Atheists? It was inconceivable that anyone could not believe in God. I'm sure there were atheists around but we just assumed they were not as religious as the rest of us.

India is a land of coexisting contradictions. Especially when it comes to religion. Hinduism is the ultimate big-tent religion. A hindu can be a atheist, monotheist, henotheist, whatever. It's this adaptability that let's Hinduism absorb external influences so easily. After the Buddha, Hindus started to accept him as an avatar of Vishnu absorbing Buddhism into the religion. Advaita (or non-dualism) became a philosophical concept within Hinduism itself about a 1000 years after the Buddha's time. Some forms of Hinduism believe that all religions lead to the same God and yet the contemporary popular movements today are virulently communal and opposed to other religions. What this means in practical terms is that people you know never try to convert you to their religion. Sure they might be convinced you're going to hell but fixing your life for you is not their concern.

I was born in a Muslim family. My parents liked to think of themselves as moderately religious. My Dad was a big fan of Rumi and Kahlil Gibran. I was named Tabrez because Rumi's teacher was a guy named Shams Tabrez. Islam in India was heavily influenced by the sufis and was generally a more chilled out version. This too is changing now because of the influence of wahabi influence. Growing up Muslim in India means you're a minority. In my class at school I was the only Muslim. My best friends were hindus and christians but there were cultural differences between our home lives. When I was about 14 India went through the most violent period of communal tension since Independence. There was a dispute

about a mosque which was supposedly built over an old temple - 500 years ago. The politicians made it a political football and it ended up getting destroyed which triggered riots and spasms of blood-letting across the country. My community was unaffected but it was a deeply unnerving experience for me. It created this strong sense that I didn't belong. All these years later that feeling seems to still be here. Hearing stories of neighbors setting fires to or killing neighbors because of their religion was traumatizing. I have a conflicted view of India but that is a whole talk in itself! People visiting the country are unaffected by these things. It's an inside game.

Anyways back to my religious life. I certainly believed in God. But there was a pattern of a self-serving interest in my belief. My religiosity would reach a fever pitch right before finals. It waned when life was generally ok. I suppose God was like a backup plan when things didn't go my way. I started to pick and choose the pieces of islam that fit my worldview creating a Tabrez version of the religion. We do what we can to get by. I suppose a lot of people do the same.

I came to the University of Texas at Austin to study computer science when I was 17. In college I met Susan. A born-again baptist whose fervor for Jesus was only matched by her loud laughter that reverberated the hallways while we studied together. As our late night study sessions meandered from computers to the meaning of life she asked me about my religion. With very little subtlety she asked me about accepting Jesus. I wondered aloud: "What if God were like a grocer who has the freshest produce. One chef whips up the best italian cuisine from the same ingredients that makes its way into delicious Spanish tapas at the hands of another chef. Perhaps we have all the same message just dressed up in costumes"

Susan looked straight at me as she said that there was no hope without accepting Jesus. Everybody else just had it wrong. I realized then that the role religion played in American society was quite different.

I graduated and started working for a tech company in Austin. Without the pressure of learning for grades my natural desire for educating myself took me to bookstores. Shelves at home began to fill with books. New shelves joined the old ones. I wish I could say I read them all. The truth is my bookshelves are more indicative of my ambition than my wisdom. I worked my way through as much philosophy as would stick in my mind. As my frustration with philosophy peaked I read Daniel Dennett. His message that "Philosophy without biology was useless" was like a clarion call in the fog. I switched to reading about the biology of the brain and evolution. Along the way, I started learning about the religions of the world. I read about Buddhism. Reincarnation? Suffering is universal? Whatever! This clearly wasn't for me. I pegged Buddhism on one end of the spectrum and Rastafarianism on the other. One end seemed to be ascetic. The other hedonistic. Little did I know!

I was very ambitious about my career. I poured my heart and soul into work. I believed that I would lie on my death-bed ruing the fact that I hadn't worked another day.. It was the dot-com boom and I worked for a start-up here in Austin. I had talked my boss into giving me a chance to lead a project. This was going to be my ticket. I was going to prove my worth and rise to the top. I remember working all weekend to get a project going. On Monday the CEO announced that the company was shutting down and we were all being laid off. The ground crumbled. I realized that the ground on which the towers of my dreams were constructed was not as solid as I had assumed. I realized I could work as hard as I wanted but my life wasn't completely under my control. At about the same time I ended a complicated relationship. So

there I was like a country song: unemployed, with a broken heart, and my newly wrecked car in a body shop (I'm not kidding).

Time passed slowly and my mind seemed obsessed to replay scenes that reinforced my title as the king of losers. Intellectually my life was fine. I knew I would find another job and ending the relationship was the right thing to do. But then why did I feel like crap? This was the first pivotal point that started the inquiry. "Why does this bother me?" is the question that has kept bringing me back.

As I ran my fingers across the spines of the books on my shelf, I ran across a quixotic title: "The Tao of Pooh" One morning I leafed through the book and was struck by the message. What if we could live our lives not buffeted by every passing event? What if we were not Eeyore lamenting every problem. What if we were unlike Piglet constantly living in fear. What if we were Pooh calm, equanimous, and gentle. The message pulled me online as I researched Taoism to hear about this thing called Zen and this strange practice called meditation. I decided to give it a go. "Find a quiet place," the instruction said. Hmm. I played the radio station. I sat down on a pillow cross legged and my fingers outstretched in a pose that my imagination said was right. That was my first time meditating. Ok. What happens now? I sat. A few seconds in, my mind took over as it replayed every depressing thought. There was me unemployed and hopeless. There was my ex having a great time.

All of a sudden the scene flipped. The stories were no longer happening to me. They were just stories being played out on a movie screen. Just opinions. Just possibilities. Not necessarily true. Aha! So that's what this Zen thing is? That's pretty cool. But do I really have to sit and meditate for this? Nah! I'm sure that's just for the less advanced folks. As an Indian I'm sure it comes easy to me. It's in the water over there. I'm sure I had it. Oh how little did I know. That little insight became quickly intellectualized. I thought I knew what zen was all about.

The next 6 years I sat when I felt like it. 10 minutes after a rough plane trip. 5 minutes before a big presentation. I'd stop by Austin Zen Center every now and then. Zen seemed cool. I thought Zen was 'cool' - the hairstyle worked for me and black suited me. I even attended a few Sunday morning with Ordinary Mind Zen when you met at AZC. I just couldn't imagine a world in which I'd spend time sitting. I clearly had better things to do. By accident I ended up at a 1-day retreat at AZC. My mind ate me alive. I had never seen boredom up close and personal like that day. I couldn't imagine doing that again. I figured different people needed different paths to realize the same thing. It just so happened that I needed a lot less sitting. Lucky me!

In 2004 I chanced upon a fire-hazard that doubled as a used-book store in Milwaukee. Sandwiched between the agricultural reports from some African country I found a barely used copy of Joko Beck's book: Everyday Zen. It quickly became a permanent fixture on my night stand. I read and re-read chapters completely unsure of what they meant. Kafka once said: "A good book can serve as an axe for the frozen sea inside us". Joko's words seemed to resonate deep inside me in ways that made no sense to me. It would take a lot of sitting first.

Then in 2006 I once again found myself sitting at the feet of the greatest Bodhisattva: the heartbreak left behind in the wake of a dying relationship. Once again what seemed the right thing to do was sure as hell not feeling like the right thing to do. Once again I wondered why the circumstance of my life bothered me. I remembered my past insight and decided to regain that perspective. Maybe I thought I did need to meditate a little bit more?

I found Ordinary Mind Zen Austin and Peg's Thursday evening program. I wrote her an email asking if I could come by. On a rainy December evening I walked up the steps into her kitchen (This was before the beautiful deck was built). She rang the bells as I sat and zoned out in the zendo. Afterwards I joined her and Ben in the study for tea and cookies. I kept returning every Thursday evening. In Feb she announced that she'd start a morning program. My mind laughed heartily at the idea that I could wake up before 7am. I am a late night person and loved my evening hours. I couldn't see giving those up so I could get up earlier in the morning.

When faced with trying on habits that seem unpleasant I use a trick. I tell myself I will try it for 3 weeks. In those 3 weeks I won't assess the efficacy of the habit. However at the end of 3 weeks I can make a decision to stop. Those 3 weeks were MISERABLE. I found myself sleeping on the cushion. Sleeping in the office. A thick fog surrounded my head everywhere I went. However I stuck with it. By the end of the 3 weeks I wasn't as sleepy. I'm not quite sure what I was getting out of it. However I found that the hour on the cushion seemed like a good place to organize my day or think about whatever else I wanted to think about. I still had a lot of resistance to the forms and chanting. I had even greater resistance to meeting with the teacher.

Later that year I got back together with the girl I had been seeing. I continued to sit. Slipping out of my house at 6 every morning to make the trek down South. During the summer problems in the relationship returned. These problems were harder than anything I'd ever seen. I was at a complete loss on how to work with my life. My little world view was crumbling and under assault from all directions.

I believed that I was not an angry person. Others had told me as much. Oh yeah? So who was this guy who was yelling and screaming?

I believed I was good at letting things go. but wait. Does letting go mean stewing about it and being a pain in the ass? Or was that called being passive-aggressive.

I returned to a Thursday evening beginner program in May of 2007. Once again it was just Peg and I sitting in the Zendo. As the light faded from the setting Sun I heard Peg instruct: "Watch your breath. When you find that your mind has drifted simply come back to the breath". Hmm. Maybe I'll give this a go instead of plotting revenge and vacations. I once again gave myself 3 weeks. I said I wouldn't zone out. I would watch my breath every single waking second. With that pledge I strained and pulled. Chastising myself for every thought that snuck in. Somehow I managed to quiet my mind for a day. The second day things unravelled. but I kept going. That first week I was in the middle of another argument. But somewhere in midst of the anger and the frustration there was space. I couldn't explain it or even understand it. I just knew that in that space was hope. Maybe this not thinking thing was working? Week 2 was harder and by week 3 I realized that when I did manage to quiet the mind there was hope. I finally learned the hardest lesson - I learnt that I had something to learn. I met with Peg that week for my first practice interview and told her that I was now teachable.

I started sitting regularly and made what I considered as progress. I brought my ambition from work to my practice. Nirvana just ahead said the sign in my mind. I was on my way baby. I signed up for every retreat convinced that this time I'd get it. Dec 2008 I signed up for a 10-day vipassana retreat. I'm not sure how I made it through those 10 days. On the last day as I discussed with the others at the retreat I

heard stories of 'experiences'. Everyone was on a timeline. One person asked me : "Can I get enlightened faster with Zen?" I returned to Austin convinced that the chase was taking me further away from whatever it was. I started to sit just to sit. Some mornings were peaceful others were terrible. All the while my life settled down. Work got easier. I no longer worried about being good at what I was doing. Turns out giving up the worrying made me better at what I did. I stopped seeking recognition and I was being recognized and promoted. One thing I struggled with in the beginning was reconciling my ambition with Zen. At the surface it seemed like Zen was passive. Accept. Grin and bear it. It seemed to say. Not something that resonated with someone who loves to work at tech startups. I've come to realize that the subtlety in the teaching is about when to accept things. We accept things as they are. Then from that acceptance comes the opportunity to change them. I think of it like letting go an arrow from a bow. We should absolutely pour our heart and soul into aiming the arrow and pulling the string. But too often I was straining my neck and exerting myself after the arrow had left the bow. I believed that my exertions after the fact will change the arrow's path. Zen has taught me to calmly pick up the next arrow and start aiming. Has anything fundamentally changed in my talent? Of course not! I get the same percentage of hits. I just take a lot more shots and win more as a result. Not bringing the results of the last go into the current one helps make the current attempt go better.

My personal life seemed to be going as well I could have imagined. I looked forward to marriage.

Then she left.

The funny thing is I knew before I knew. One weekend as I sat cross-legged on my zafu I noticed that the deep unremitting sorrow kept bubbling up. We had been having arguments but the emotions seemed to say this time things were different. Suddenly the words rushed out of my mouth: "I'm losing her". Later that week, after dinner of asian takeout, she sat me down and told me we were done. In the midst of all the heart-break I was able to meet her with compassion. Yes, it felt like she had hit me across the face with a 2x4 but I could see she was hurting as well. There was intense sadness but there was peace. My best friend calls it "Happy Sadness". I had read that Zen helps you meet your life with dignity. Now I saw what that was like. The vicissitudes of life beset me at every turn but meeting them with dignity and honor was unprecedented. I don't know what enlightenment is but in that moment I knew if I could meet my life like this then this practice is for me. Peg often says "the fruits of practice just fall in our laps". Well in this moment the fruits were worth every second I had battled sleep, impatience, and pain on the zafu. Zen isn't an escape from our lives. It's a way to be fully present in our lives. I could now be fully present in my sadness.

This would be a great moment to end the story. The credits roll and the protagonist walks into the sunset to live the new life. Alas. The path is rarely a straight line. The best analogy I've heard is that you're going down in an elevator stopping at each floor. Some floors are clear and simple and you learn simple but profound messages. Then you reach floors that are barricaded and you spend eternity chipping away against your resistance to look at your life. Yes that's a good way to describe it: resistance to look at my life. Habits acquired over a lifetime can only be unwound slowly. Life has a funny way of bringing up the things you refuse to learn. The years since then have seen equal parts joy and pain. I wish I could say I've never been angry. Or passive-aggressive. The truth is I've been angry. I've been upset. I've been sad-sad more than happy-sad. I show up some mornings and when Peg asks me "how are you?" I say "Can we talk?" In practice interview I bring out the broken pieces of my courage and together we piece it back together.

Thank you all for being here. In incalculable ways you've helped me on this path. A smile or a nod as we shuffle in wordlessly on a cold winter morning has meant a lot. Hearing a sigh or a breath from cushion next to mine redoubles my resolve to continue this practice. The intention with which you hold the forms creates the space that makes this possible. Most importantly I have unbelievable, profound gratitude for Peg. For those mornings in 2007 where I'm sure she clacked, bowed, offered incense, and rang the bells all by her self. Because of those mornings there were mornings when I was there. And now there are mornings where I smile as I walk up the path to see shoes spilling out of the rack.