

Pura Vida

by Brett Garcia Rose

A teacher walks onto a stage in an upstate New York college hall. He sits and closes his eyes, presumably to meditate. We wait. And we wait.

Fifteen minutes later he opens his eyes, adjusts the microphone to his seated position and begins speaking in a slight Californian accent. "I assume," he says, "that you're here because you were forced to be." Again, he stops for a few minutes, surveying the crowd one at a time and smiling. His gaze settles on my section of the audience and he says a simple truth that he would repeat many times over the ensuing years. A warning that, every time I thought had it understood and safely under hand, would surprise and stump me over again.

He says:

"Meditation will fuck you up." Crude, but Vajrayana was never big on protocol.

I studied hard with my teacher, and the harder I worked at my meditation and my life, the more difficult he made it out to be, saying all the time that it is not work at all, that enlightenment is power, that meditation will give you all the energy you need to break into and navigate these strange new worlds. And so it went for years, waking up at the Hour of Brahman, 3am, to meditate, then again at 6 before work, again in a city park over lunch if practical. And yet again, after a full day of work, three hours of school, another two of study, would I sit in a corner of my tiny rented room at midnight, my stark little meditation corner, listening to music and staring at a colored stone for 30 minutes and visit these places. This is the life of an American yogi, he'd say. The world is your monastery. If you can meditate on a subway you can meditate anywhere.

You don't immediately notice the benefits of meditation; it's a drug that takes months and years to work. There is a relaxation effect, and a 'more energy' effect, and a 'greater concentration'

effect, but in rare moments of candor even the teacher himself would admit to these observations being a shared placebo effect. "Enjoy it, of course," he'd say. "But this isn't it."

"Until you pass a certain stage in your meditation," he'd said in one of our private meetings, "the main effects you will experience will be those you create in yourself. When you do someday form your meditative mind, at that point you will have some understanding of what meditation is. And if you ever decide to stop the practice, well, at that moment you will discover precisely what meditation is."

That warning, again.

I followed my teacher for years, absorbing his advice, meditating, and unknowingly transforming my mind and my character. As my training advanced, and this transformation became more pronounced, he'd often ask; "Do you miss yourself?" and walk around with a chuckle. But the truth is that yes, I sometimes missed myself. I also missed the child I once was. Such is life.

We use the words meditation and yoga interchangeably. Indeed, yoga has a prettier sound to it, and is a more inclusive term, but in America it has become commercialized and a bit egocentric. People wearing \$100 pajama ensembles and staring at one another in front of floor length mirrors, really that is one small facet of yoga extracted for commercial value. Most people would not pay to sit in a quiet room and experience meditation (Libraries and parks are free), but throw in some music and mirrors, sexualize the practice and set the stage for a competitive fashion show; that's Western Yoga. But again, that, too, has its beauty. That, too, is a part of enlightenment. Beings inching towards perfection, even if accidental. Better to do misleading yoga than no yoga at all.

The mid-term goal of yoga and meditation is to stop thought, and in so doing begin to experience life, God, the universe...whatever you choose to call it, in a fundamentally different way. It doesn't matter what you're wearing or whether you are horizontal or vertical. To experience the world with something more than your eyes and ears. To become, in essence, sensitized.

And it is this, of course, that gets you. Only the insane would choose to become sensitized in a world like this. To be numb is to be happy. To become small and fractious, to buy into the busyness fetish; indeed, our very way of life depends upon the very last bit of energy being drained from us for the greater good. We go to sleep exhausted. We wake up, exhausted. This is why many Buddhist teachers encourage some form of martial arts. It takes tremendous power to move your character in an intentional direction, and to not waste that power and thus fall further back. Paradoxically, before I was permitted to take my first black-belt test, my sensei required me to have 100 hours of meditation, sort of like driving instruction before getting into a powerful car. They did not know one another, but they did know some of the same things.

The world requires us to be weak and distracted; that is how we function. Yoga makes you strong and focused. But to what end?

Practicing Buddhists have a difficult time keeping relationships with friends, even family. In core practice, meditation is a cult, a disassociation from the world. You take yourself out of the race, bow out with no excuse. No plan, even. People are drawn into meditation because they literally have no other choice. You stop taking the pill, and for a while there is a certain paranoia, enforced by those who imagine themselves to be close with you, to have known you.

Strange changes are taking place, they'd insist. This is where you begin to feel alien from your own species. It's a feeling I had already experienced as a lifelong stutterer, and a not wholly unwelcome one for me personally; I'd never had much use for people, but obviously it proved disconcerting and difficult for others in my study. They'd make solemn ceremonies burning yearbooks and photos, they'd intentionally and verbally distance themselves from family and friends, these sort of cathartic group efforts that they'd imagined would further them along. I don't know if it helped or not. If the descriptions of others matter to you, then perhaps so. And if the teacher ever noticed, he never said.

I'd just stare at my rock in my little room. I never had many friends, anyway.

He did notice one thing, though. Shortly after one of our desert retreats, where we'd hike for days into the mountains of California or Utah or wherever, winter or summer, build a fire and meditate throughout the night. We were back in upstate New York having one of our post-trip receptions, a time for the small group to reflect on our experiences. We'd all get up and speak, one by one, usually a quiet affair, happy and solemn at the same time, but at the end of my speech the teacher, sitting alone in the very back of the room, stood and clapped. Everyone turned their back on me to face him. He smiled and nodded his head slowly, almost as if he were proud, and pointed towards the front, prompting everyone to turn back around towards the little stage. Talking directly to me, he asked "Do you miss your stutter?" No one moved. The room was total silence. I was, literally, dumfounded.

There is no known cure for stuttering. Either it fades in childhood or you have it for life.

My teacher died shortly after that last trip. In me, at least, he had instilled enough tools, and helped through enough discoveries, to build upon. Rudimentary tools, to be sure, but more than sufficient, if only I'd use them.

As he'd said, though, meditation will fuck you up. And in typical Buddhist fashion, there is no good or bad. There is only karma.

In most religions, the 'subjects' are observers. They are provided with books of rules to follow in order to be in God's good grace. Serve God, ask for his help or his pity, debase yourself to a king of your own making. Buddhism, though, is a religion of participation. There is no savior. No one will help you. No one cares. You're not trying to get God's attention; you're already in the ring with him.

TM, or Transcendental Meditation, is becoming a common practice in this country. It is often described as a deep relaxation to allow a glimpse through certain doorways of the universe, or to yourself, which initially seems like the same thing. Tantric Meditation, and occult Buddhism (Vajrayana), is to rip those doors off the hinges and smash them to crumbs. We're not satisfied with a little peek into our deeper selves. We enter the Superconscious with

a sledgehammer. Everything must go. All the structures and mirrors of our created self, swing the hammer. Our fears, accomplishments, desires, doubts. Swing the hammer. Our self love, self pity, our greeds and losses, the descriptions of the world imprinted upon us from birth. Swing the hammer. Swing the hammer.

This is the essence of Tantra. It is a one way trip. Those doors....you never get them back. And to lose power partway through is to enter a very dark place.

Years went by. I would stop meditating and wallow in success. My income increased a hundred fold. I had a social life for the first time in years. I could speak. People called me, and I called back. I had girlfriends, a car, clothes, the life people want. I'd joined the world of the busy yet again. The very opposite of why I'd studied yoga in the first place. To meditate generates power, and to meditate well does so significantly, but to stop is to spin out.

I'd stopped. Life is a dangerous habit. The first, and often only, addiction we experience.

On the morning of 9/11 I was sitting in Battery Park, near my apartment, after a night of partying with my new friends. I was drunk, tired, stupid, lost. That was my life. The price I'd paid for my success. I'll never know why I ran towards the site, heroic suicide, maybe, or just as likely that I didn't care about myself too much at that point. But in I ran. I've never written of it or even spoken of it much, but what you know is true and worse. The jumpers. The smell. The chaos. The utter hopelessness of it all. A blow to our deeper hearts that we hadn't even known existed.

But there is something far worse, and especially confusing to a deep meditator or, for that matter, to any truly religious person. It is the rare humanity that comes forth, unusherred and unannounced. The strangers who hug you every time you stop. People who previously and would subsequently live small lives of selfishness and meanness, those people shone for a time. Every store was free, every person filled with tears of hope and despair. Everyone a friend, everyone family. From those very first moments came forth the true essence of humanity; the very real desire to immediately build a

newer, better world. To start with yourself, with your neighbors, with strangers. To enter a state researchers would later coin 'False Utopia.' But there is nothing false about kindness. About generosity and sacrifice. There is nothing false about love, and it applies to strangers every bit as much as it applies to 'soulmates.'

One morning I was returning to the red zone on my motorcycle and stopped at a bodega off Greenwich Avenue. I hadn't showered in over a week. My entire body was covered in grime and sludge, the mere thought of which a decade later still makes me retch. I returned to the bike with some water bottles and crackers and, as I began pulling away, a small girl ran out of the bodega and called for me to stop, and I did. She's maybe 12 or 13, Pakistani or Indian, I can't tell. I switched off the bike and slumped down on the front bars. I'd never been so tired in my life. The girl lifted my head, and I sat up straight once again. She handed me a pair of old work gloves, helped me get them over my swollen hands. She wiped my face with a wet, warm towel. Her thin arms trembled. Her hair covered face. She cried the entire time. I cried, too, with her. For a long time I didn't want to move, but there were things to do. She hugged me hard, for at least a minute, and I left, tracking through inches of sludge and human muck.

This is not a false utopia. This is who we are, underneath. The real religious experience is the experience of life. This is why we meditate on the subways. This is why we wear suits and go to work. This is why we shun the monastic life. This is the essence of Tantra.

Shortly after those dark days I began to meditate again. I stripped down my life once more. I'd forgotten who I was but remembered who I wanted to be. And I don't think a single day has passed without that small girl weighing on my mind and my spirit.

A decade or so later I sit alone in a remote Central American jungle to celebrate the winter solstice. I meditate for hours immersed in plants and wild animals and the pure chaos of nature. I remember, briefly, the people I used to be. But mostly I remember that small girl. I hope she grew into an extraordinary woman. I hope her corner of the universe is filled with light and wonder and

brilliance. I hope she shares that same kindness she'd shown me with everyone she encounters. I hope she remembers nothing of those horrible days, and discovers, through some slower, gentler way, how important she is to the world.

And I hope, someday, we can all become her.

