



The Inner and Outer Elements of Contemplative Practice

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*That the self advances and confirms the ten thousand things
is called delusion;
That the ten thousand things advance and confirm the self
is called enlightenment.*
– Dogen Zenji

At the heart of yoga and Buddhist meditation lies an invitation that appears as impossible as it is compelling – to realize our true nature, or true Self as a human being. The perennial question – *Who am I?* – may very well be the master koan of contemplative practice: it's resolve the ultimate goal, its elusiveness ensuring a life-long path of self-inquiry.

As contemporary practitioners of these ancient traditions, one of our greatest teachers and sources of inspiration is growing ill, suffering new calamities almost daily: the wild, undomesticated world of nature. At the same time, the psychology of the human species is plagued by increasing stressors; the routines of an increasingly mechanized world often has many of us seeking something more simple, while disease attacks our physical bodies in new forms and at alarming rates. The case for the interdependence of humans and earth may no longer be restricted to the discoveries of yogis in caves and may be evidenced in the daily struggles we endure to find ease, contentment, and joy within our lives as we make sense of a disappearing natural world alongside the accelerated pace of modern living. The question of whether we are separate from nature or not may no longer be a matter of philosophical luxury, but rather, one of the most relevant and pressing dilemmas of our time.



Yoga and Buddhist practice explore what it means to be fully human. As practitioners of a path committed to balance and healing dualistic perspectives, yoking opposites into healthier, integrated wholes, perhaps our path would be wizedened through the consideration of what it means to be alive and to be human amidst a non-human world?

Current trends in yoga and Buddhist literature consider many of the questions relevant to the integration of ancient tradition into western culture, typically focusing on its impact on western values and whether or not an authentic practice is being transmitted, all of this amidst a broader and more controversial debate over what it means for tradition to change and evolve over time. But this inquiry has yet to include a comprehensive discussion of what it means to maintain and evolve a practice tradition that originated in close union with nature within an increasingly urbanized world. How might yoga and Buddhism help us remember our bond to the more-than-human world? What might the impact of this be on both consciousness and the modern struggle to sustain living systems so that they, in turn, can sustain us?

The growing influence of posture practice and meditation in contemporary society appear at a unique time in human history. These philosophical and psychological systems, comprehensive maps for understanding consciousness, ultimately reveal the distinct nature of our humanness as well as our connection to the rest of life. If, according to ecological theory, natural systems self-regulate, and if human-nature is but one part of a larger whole, perhaps it is less mysterious than predictable that Hatha yoga and meditation, paths that reshape self-knowledge within an inclusive and integrated framework, are being revitalized as respected vehicles for personal healing and transformation at the very same time we are also trying to address what is, arguably, an imbalance between humans and the natural world. Today, cultures around the globe are seeking new, sometimes old, ways of understanding how to live viably and sustainably. One emerging principle reflected by deep ecology and eco-psychology, fields that merge ecological and psychological theory, is the idea that if we can heal what blinds us from a deeper realization of our truth as human beings, it seems plausible we can also transform our relationship to nature. In other words, if we are to heal our relationship with nature, it might be helpful, if not essential, to undertake with conviction one of our species'



most ancient pursuits: self-knowing. Asana, pranayama, training in ethics, along with meditation, support this inquiry. Additionally, we might also benefit from turning directly to nature as a source of our learning. Venerable Ajahn Amaro, one of the guiding monastic teachers in the Forest Tradition of Thai Buddhism, speaking of the mind-body complex, explains how the material and non-material strands of life can be revealed through nature connection as interrelated dimensions of an all-pervasive natural order:

There is a profound physicality involved in living in a wild environment...when we are not caused to refer incessantly to our name or social role among other humans, when we can just be another creature in the forest, it changes our perspective on things.

The forest itself is recognized as our body, even the great earth itself. Its cycle of seasons, its moods of weather, reflect our own moods back to us, and all that we habitually think that we are – this body and mind separate from this world – is revealed as simply dynamic patterns of nature, irrespective of whether they are conventionally called “inside” or “outside,” “me” or the “world.”¹

The contemplative teachings of yoga, including the *Buddhadharma* attributed to Siddhartha Gautama, reveal that the conditions of human life arise within a mind-body continuum. The unfolding of life is recognizable as body/physical form; feeling and sensations; perception; mental formations: thoughts, feelings, emotions and consciousness itself, the human faculty of cognition.¹ Over and over again there is contact with an “object” through one of the human sense doors – eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind – and sensations, feelings, perceptions, concepts arise and the phenomenal world as we know it is born alongside the pervasive experience of “me,” a distinct entity standing apart from a world “outside” ourselves.

¹ Skandhas. Five aggregates or components, which together constitute the human individual: form (rupa); feelings (vedana); perception (samjna); volitional factors (samskara); consciousness (vijnana).



As practitioners we can look closely at where contemplative practice and nature–connection intersect, how they might support and inform one another, and how the most subtle experiences of heart and mind shape our understanding of a universe that either stands outside the skin of our human bodies or is but part of a larger whole of which we are part.

Is spiritual experience nothing more than a neurological construct created by and within the brain, or does a state of absolute union that the mystics describe in fact exist and the mind has developed a capacity to perceive it? Science offers no clear way to resolve the question.²

Patanjali’s Eight Limbs and the Buddha’s Eight-Fold Path provide a comprehensive system, or yogic science, well suited for spiritual as well as practical life questions.

Who am “I” and where does this “I” leave off and the world around “me” begin? How is it that “I” am aware or unaware from time to time of this spectrum of perception? How might the clear seeing that comes with sustained attention of the present moment help “me” understand who “I” am as well as my place within the world?

How might this inquiry shape understanding, kindness, and skillful behavior in our daily life and in our formal practice? Regarding our relationship to each other, do we perceive ourselves as practicing in isolation or practicing amongst one another in community, *sangha*: How might an inquiry into the human-nature relationship support us in understanding each other, our shared health challenges and spiritual dilemmas? Whether or not others articulate a clear understanding of the complexities of modern life, they are still subject to its turmoil’s. They, like us, are fragile human beings trying to find their way in the world, and that effort alone, despite its necessity, has inevitable impacts on their bodies, hearts, and minds. The reality of modern life threatens to alienate each of us from the natural rhythms of an integrated and balanced life, essential foundations for health and vitality, just as it threatens to separate us further from one another. This raises important questions about our relationships in which the challenges and inevitable obstacles of our human lives persist within an ambiguous relationship between self and other, human and nature. Are we



compassionate stewards of one another's difficulties through our ability to be fully present and are we able to face the unfolding of human consciousness from the clarity of our own personal practice and experience in life, and from our own inquiry into that which we perceive as self and that which we perceive as other?

The health and healing of the planet and its temporary inhabitants (that's you and I) could be served by an emerging tradition of yoga and approach to meditation that acknowledges the human as part of a larger whole, and which is receptive to the educative power of nature.

Nature connection can support our physical and emotional wellbeing while enriching and deepening our spiritual life through greater intimacy with what we might otherwise call mundane. Feeling connected to something larger than oneself can help to soften tension in our lives. Sometimes nature is experienced as a sense of being held or supported by something un-namable and un-localized, yet perceived as real. It seems that for many people it is almost instinctual, animal-like, to go for a quiet walk in the woods when life's challenges feel too heavy.

My eyes settled on a single cottonwood at the river, its branches and upper leaves waving in a slow rhythm above all the others... Tension crawled up and out of me. It seemed to twist in the air above the green field. Then it was gone. And something better took its place... Twenty-four years later, I often think about the cottonwood at the river's edge, and similar moments of inexplicable wonder, times when I received from nature just what I needed: an elusive "it" for which I have no name.³

When the unexplainable somehow holds and befriends us, while strangely felt as if "it" is part of the fabric of our own humanness, our worries and fears may begin to dissolve; we are reminded that there is more to life than our current personal, subjective experience: grief, sadness, self-doubt, and all the different forms of stress that arise out of identification and the creation of personality. Somehow after all our effort to become someone other than who we are, our smallness becomes exactly what we need, a welcome antidote to all the struggles in becoming something or somebody and trying to hold it all together,



a process always wrought with pain and dissatisfaction. Paradoxically, in nature we find in our “smallness” the humility of belonging to everything around us; our life-force revealed in our connectivity to life rather than our attempt to stand apart from it. In the same way we learn to receive sensation in the body during asana or meditation practice without turning away, we can learn to turn toward nature mindfully. The wind on our skin, the sound of river water, the sight of leaves falling invite presence, ask us to slow down; the sensate reality of moment to moment experience says “pay attention.” When the rhythms of nature are allowed to engage the whole body-mind organism, we ourselves return to a more natural rhythm and way of maneuvering in the world.

The way of the squirrel is to eat corn late into the fall and hibernate in the winter. The way of the tree is to gather her energy into her central axis each winter and, if lucky enough to be a maple or birch, to produce the most memorable syrup each spring. What is the way of the human? Who are you? Such questions, whether of the natural world or the wild ecology of the human mind-body process, have been the main thrust of yoga since beginningless time.⁴

As yoga and meditation practice develop, the practitioner is confronted with an inevitable reality: the experience of self is not as solid as we had thought. Thoughts, feelings, and beliefs evolve in a mutually codependent “soup” of highly conditioned mental and physical phenomena that we have little agency over, but which affect how we perceive the world and how we relate to our life circumstances, other people, and the environment in which we live. As practice deepens we begin to challenge much of what we took to be true, further revealing the relevance of the abiding question: Who am I, really? As this contemplation matures we are confronted with a host of considerations about the real nature of our emotions, our physical health, the source of separation or connection felt within our relationships, and whether or not we feel aligned with a sense of purpose in our life or cut off from authentic self-expression. The arising of such questions and many others like them are evidence of a ripening contemplative life, confirmations of the early breakdown of the conditioned self and the start of a more permeable self-other membrane. As our awareness becomes more fluid, flexible, expansive, not only do old constructs appear less concrete, but the outside world begins to make its way inside, and the inside



world expands to the outside. We begin to see the world as if through an emerging perceptual lens that colors our external environment based on our internal state. Ultimately, what we are examining in practice is the relationship between awareness and the world of objects, that which is seen and that which sees, the knower and the known. Before contemplative practice offers deeper freedom, it shakes the very foundation of what we took to be true and leaves us in a place of not-knowing, which becomes the open, fertile ground upon which new insight can develop.

We often take yoga to mean postures and meditation to mean sitting still. But yoga and meditation are mere terminology, whose definitions and popular interpretation sometimes get in the way of their deeper meaning. Through yoga and meditation we learn to observe the body and mind as it is. We develop presence, fostering a relationship with the world in real time, RIGHT NOW. Breath and bodily sensations, as the objects of our attention, are the source of awakening to what is true. Direct contact with nature is experienced through the inhalation and exhalation, the exchange of oxygen between the *Body* of the cosmos and our human *body*. We become aware of sensations in the body, how they arise and fall away, always coming and going. We learn essential lessons about the laws of unsubstantiality and change that governs all life – universal principles of nature are acknowledged and experienced *in* and *of* the body. In asana practice we learn to listen to those sensations, allowing them to guide us in movement as we begin to trust our intuition: messages from the *body* or from the *Body*? As we develop stillness in meditation, the fluctuations of mind are recognized as passing mental constructs; sensations in the body and inconstant mental states reveal how our entire phenomenal world is impermanent.

Frank Jude Boccio, commenting on the elemental qualities of nature, reminds us they are the same constituent properties of the human body.

Contemplating the five great elements (earth, water, fire, air, and space), we bring attention to the solidity of the body; its composition of various elements such as carbon – the very same carbon that gives us coal and diamonds. The liquid element, manifesting as blood, interstitial fluid, and other bodily fluids, is not separate from the water flowing in our rivers and streams and that falls as rain. Our bodies



generate heat, and the food we ingest is literally the solar energy captured in the vegetables and flesh of animals. The air we breathe sustains our life, and all experience arises and passes away in space. Through contemplating the elements of the body the yogi begins to understand that life is not isolated in her own body... ⁵

Boccio, one of the first American teachers to articulate a Mindfulness Yoga, in his example alludes to the Buddha's own Mindfulness Sutta, which poses an important question in its description of the body: Where is the self in all of this? As our capacity for observation develops, we see more clearly in the interplay of stillness and movement that we are sometimes caught up in doing, becoming, and at other times embraced by wholeness, a felt sense of union. In momentary experiences of non-separation, which is awareness, which is yoga, feelings of connection put us in direct contact with the basic ecological principle of interrelationship. Nature is whole and we are not separate from it. We are beginning to experience directly our own expansiveness and connection to nature in moments when the solidity and felt sense of self is punctuated by a state of coalescence "revealing... the body and the infinite universe as indivisible."⁶

Through contemplative practice we learn to abide in the human body and cosmic Body simultaneously. Awareness is already free, always: expansive, inclusive, un-localized and boundless. In practice we learn to liberate ourselves through the freedom of non-attachment and non-striving, resting balanced neither here nor there, in this very moment. Oak tree does not try to be maple tree. The earth's soil receives rain on some days, and on others, the dry heat of sunshine. Somehow, mysteriously, nature has a way of moving between chaos and order. We can learn so much if we slow down and pay attention to the ways of nature, both within ourselves and within the more-than-human world of wild nature.

If we practice in way that explores the inner workings of human nature, we understand that we do not live in a mutually exclusive universe: the body affects the mind and the mind affects the body; emotions and thoughts condition each other and both play out in the body's muscles and fascia; our inner "environment" conditions how we envision and relate to the world around us.



Afflictive mind states see the world with a tinge of aversion, while personal wellbeing shapes an embracing optimism that is engaging and joyful. Are we at odds with a world that stands in our way or do we gracefully embrace the changing circumstances and challenges of this precious human birth?

Both yoga as a practice form, and the direct experience of feeling connected to nature and inherently whole, remind us of the innumerable ways different life forms interrelate. As our own human path is framed experientially in relational contexts, our life becomes imbued with awe and reverence; we open more fully to the mystery of life. Eventually, protecting life – compassion – is no longer ethical or moral, rather it becomes an extension of self-care; interdependence is no longer conceptual. We care for the world and others less out of ethical dogma and more because we understand that protecting the natural order of things *is* self-care. Likewise, self-care takes on new meaning, as it becomes a way of caring for others and the more-than-human world. We recognize in our actions that we feel balanced living in a sustainable way, both ecologically and personally, and that we sometimes experience discord within ourselves when we live out of balance with the ways of nature. In this understanding we find permission from the universe to live our truth, to seek our purpose and authentic way in this lifetime, to optimize health and vitality, both in the world and within our own personal life. Through formal practice and connection to nature, we see more clearly the truth of things as they are. Our own awareness becomes a reliable source of guidance for our lives, and we learn how to harmonize our inner and outer environments. This, for many of us, *is* the essence of a contemplative life. From time to time along the way we might recognize that this *self* we are seeking is at once both nowhere and everywhere.

There is good testimony that long familiarity with meditation – months, years, decades – contributes to a person’s clear-headedness, focus and good humor. Beyond such personal benefits, it’s possible you become a better citizen. A heightened sense of empathy seems to emerge – one that even crosses boundaries between nature’s “kingdoms,” human, animal, insect, or plant.⁷



1. Ajahn Amaro, “The Body of Truth,” in *Freeing the Mind: Writing on the connections between Yoga and Buddhism*, ed. Michael Stone, (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2010).
2. Newberg and d’Aquil, quoted in, *Ecomysticism: The Profound Experience of Nature as Spiritual Guide*, Carl Von Essen, M.D., (Rochester, VT: Bear and Company, 2010), p. 6.
3. Richard Louv, *The Nature Principle*, (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill: New York, NY, 2011), p. 2.
4. Michael Stone, “Practice Maps of the Great Yogis,” in *Freeing the Body: Freeing the Mind: Writing on the Connections between Yoga and Buddhism*, ed. Michael Stone, (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2010), p. 224.
5. Frank Jude Boccio, “Mindfulness Yoga,” in *Freeing the Body: Freeing the Mind: Writing on the Connections between Yoga and Buddhism*, ed. Michael Stone, (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2010), p. 154.
6. Chip Hartranft, trans.,. *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali: A New Translation with Commentary* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2003), book 2 verses 46 and 47.
7. Andrew Shelling, in the Introduction to *The Clouds Should Know Me Now: Buddhist Poet Monks of China*, Eds. Red Pine, Mike O’conner (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications), p. 9.