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S. I. Shapiro

Department of Psychology University of Hawai'i

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Stepping Stones

S. I. Shapiro

Department of Psychology
University of Hawai'i
Honolulu, Hawai'i, USA

No Rain, No Gain

I USED TO be a rain-huncher. You know—you're out walking, no umbrella, suddenly it starts raining. You try to contract your body and hunch up against the rain. Keep it out.

One day I got caught in a serious downpour. No umbrella and a long way to my appointment. Hunching didn't help. A thorough drenching was inescapable. So I finally unhunched, relaxed, and enjoyed a long wet walk.

Later on I came across an anecdote told by Suzuki Rōshi, the founder of the Zen Center in San Francisco:

When my Master and I were walking in the rain, he would say:

*Do not walk so fast,
the rain is everywhere.¹*

Losing the Scent

EVERY MORNING I was at the corner of Hunakai and Wai'alaie by 6:08 to catch the bus to the university. Not many people were on the bus that early—just a handful of regulars. One day a new guy climbed aboard a few stops after mine and sat down nearby. He was unshaven and looked disheveled. And he smelled bad. For the next couple of weeks I watched him get into the bus, each time hoping he would sit far away from me.

One morning, it happened—he sat down right next to me. I pulled a book out of my bag to distract myself. Absorbed in reading, after awhile I lost sense of my surroundings. Suddenly, I was awakened from my literary reverie by a dignified voice next to me asking, “Isn't this your stop?” Startled, I muttered a quick thanks and rushed to the door just in time to get off. The man never reappeared.

Cool Zen

LATE JANUARY, 1984. I'm sitting with my son in Shakey's Pizza Parlour on Ke'eaumoku Street. The air-conditioner is on full blast. David's birthday was just a few days ago. I lean over to him expecting some child Zen wisdom and ask: “How do you feel now that you're 5-years-old?” He responds: “Dad, it's cold in here.”

Chaste Thoughts

I FELT PRETTY virtuous trying to save the baby gecko from the inquisitive, life-threatening claws of Whiskers, the family cat. Off to the kitchen to find a glass jar to capture the baby lizard and put it safely outside. But the little gray guy showed a lot of speed and ingenuity. It took me a dozen or so grabs before I had my beneficiary in the bottle—now bleeding and missing limbs. Watching the little one limp off into the bushes cooled my compassion-high.

Hindsight

ENTERING THE bathroom at work, I sat down on the toilet, my shorts and pants bunched at my feet. My eyes felt tired, so I dropped my glasses into the safety of my shorts and closed my eyes for a welcome rest. After awhile, my business finished and my eyes refreshed, I pulled my pants up and made my departure. It wasn't until halfway down the hallway to my office that I noticed an odd sensation in the seat of my pants.

Out-of-the-Body Experience

MIDWAY THROUGH my rowing machine routine I felt a slight irritation on my left foot. At first, I thought the cause was a wrinkle in my sock, and without breaking stride, tried to smooth out the spot. Didn't work. I tried to ignore the sore spot for awhile, but soon it began to really distract me. The problem must be something lodged in my shoe. I stopped and checked it out. Nothing there. Resigned, I kept on rowing, doing my best to ignore the situation. At the end of the hour, I got off the machine, and, examining the inflammation, realized there was no need to invoke an external cause.

Wired

THE BLUE plastic Biofeedback Monitor was on sale at the corner Radio Shack store for 10 bucks, batteries not included. So I decided, at last, to invest in techno-zen. When I got home I played around with the little gizmo for awhile and then consigned it to the back of a closet—too primitive for my more advanced meditation status.

Years later, when my son was about eight years old, I rediscovered the electronic personal trainer during a major cleanup. I thought it would be cool to demonstrate meditation to David (or really, what an advanced meditator I was). The demo progressed badly. A high-pitched, annoying squeal loudly proclaimed I was a flop. David grew understandably impatient and wanted to try out the apparatus himself—whereupon he succeeded in demonstrating in three minutes what I had failed to accomplish in twenty.

See Spot Run

I WAS FINALLY inspired to clean up the coffee stains that had accumulated on top of the steel file cabinet in my office. I went to the bathroom for a cup of water, only to discover that the water supply for the building was shut down for some plumbing repairs. Not wanting to lose my cleaning resolve, I improvised. I was astonished to discover that the old coffee stains could be removed by pouring some fresh coffee on them from the thermos I had brought along.

Stunning Entry

IN WASHINGTON D.C. for a conference, I left the hotel one evening for a short walk before dinner. After a few blocks I came across a Roy Rogers fast food store. I was curious just to see the place—the chain doesn't exist in Hawai'i. (Furthermore, I was reminded of a story I heard that when Trigger died, Roy Rogers wanted to have his famous horse stuffed and kept in the house. Whereupon his wife, Dale Evans, threatened to have *him* stuffed when he died.)

So I mindlessly started to enter the establishment to check it out. Trouble was, the spotlessly clean door and entire storefront were seamless panels of plate glass. In short, I “entered” the store where there was no door. Several hours later I was released from the emergency room of a nearby hospital safely stitched up.

No-Fly Zone

I REMEMBER my breakthrough very well. It was only our third session. I was meditating in half-lotus position facing the accordion-like, koa wood room divider. Suddenly the “wall” started to undulate in front of my half-closed eyes. The movements were quite compelling. I smiled inwardly, trying to contain my delight—obviously I was experiencing *makyo*, usually characterized by Zen teachers as seductive hallucinations to be ignored. But I had also heard that they are likely to appear only to advanced beginners. Hence my barely concealed elation: I was ahead of the pack.

I was immersed in self-congratulatory bliss when the Zen Master sounded the bell signifying the meditation period was over. Looking at the room divider with wide-open eyes, I realized it must have become unanchored awhile ago, shaken by the strong gusts coming in through the window.



Room With a View

YEARS AGO, a highly respected Indian guru arrived for a stay in Honolulu. My good colleague, Abe, invited me to come over one day to visit with the teacher. I happily accepted the invitation, but walking over to the house that afternoon I had second thoughts about the coming meeting: What did I really have to discuss with the guru? How could I avoid squandering the time? Would my profound ignorance be exposed?

My mind still in a turmoil, I reached the house, opened the door, and found myself in a large living room. The distinguished visitor was wearing a white robe and sitting on a couch at the far end of the room. He motioned for me to sit down beside him. Then he pointed across the room to the opposite wall upon which hung a large colorful yantra he had painted on white cloth. He invited me to look at it with him. Several hours later we emerged from our contemplation of the yantra. No words had been spoken.

Random Acts of Kindness

THE LAST few blocks to the clinic I picked up the pace. I didn't want to be late and risk irritating the person who would be giving me the prostate examination. Sitting in the waiting room, I started some deep breathing to relax for the impending probe. A young woman wearing a staff tag entered the room. Then, she bounded over to me with a big smile and greeted me warmly with a hug. It was one of my current students. Inwardly terror-stricken, I tried desperately to look happy to see her. After a few minutes of conversation, I realized that Marilyn was not my designated examiner but worked in a wholly different part of the clinic. The rest of the day I felt an all-embracing sense of universal love.

LSD-Therapy

BACK IN the '60s I was reading a biological essay² that linked LSD-experiences with the production of serotonin in the pineal gland—claimed by some to be the third-eye in spiritual literature. According to the author, figs are a rich source of serotonin and the *Ficus religiosa*—the Bo tree under which the Buddha sat when he reached supreme enlightenment—is an especially rich source of the chemical. Did the Buddha have a chemical assist?

Just a couple of hundred yards from my office on campus stood a large fecund *Ficus religiosa*. Hundreds of figs lay splattered on the ground below. My inner experimental psychologist sprang to life.

Early the next morning, before the campus aroused itself, my friend Harry and I arrived at the Bo tree with a brown paper bag. Reverently, we began filling the bag with holy relics, trying to choose ones that had survived their fall relatively intact. Our specimen bag filled, we could scarcely wait to get home and eat our way into Supreme Enlightenment. We alternated ingesting the dharma, eagerly waiting for the figs to kick in. The bag was soon empty. Regrettably, so were the anticipated results. Nothing. Nada. Zilch. Enlightenment, supreme or otherwise, eluded us. The Buddha is a hard act to swallow.

Notes

I am indebted to Tõnu R. Soidla, Philippe L. Gross, and Asa Baber for their encouragement and suggestions.

¹Suzuki, S. (n.d.). *Lectures on the Blue Cliff Record* [mimeograph]. San Francisco: Zen Center. (p. 23)

²Bleitreu, J. N. (1969). Cyclical time. In *The parable of the beast* (pp. 31-83). New York: Collier Books.

