ADAPTATION AND SURRENDER

My intention, for my year-end self-retreat, expressed through the posting of December 14, “Opening To Stillness”, was to practice accessing the experience of internal stability and quietude that can be verbalized as stillness, in order to understand how this process relates to the “selfing story”.

Since the end of the retreat, my experience has been a bit unusual in my history of post-retreat dynamics. Typically, I have been eager to report on my various insights, while this time I am more internally quiet, with less interest in talking about it. However, since a commitment was made to talk about the retreat, here are the notes prepared for this evening:

The retreats I facilitate involve alternating 45 minutes sitting with 45 minutes walking meditation, which is typical for the retreats I attended elsewhere. I have found that in the last 10 years or so of my individual retreat practice, that sitting much more intensively fosters greater internal quietude and stability; for many other folks on retreats, such unrelenting practice would be quite daunting and unnecessary—my current routine evolved over the number of retreats and was not suggested by any teachers.

The retreat involved a lot of sitting, primarily successive two hour sessions. I would alternate sitting on the cushion with sitting in the recliner. I sat from 4-6 AM, then broke for breakfast and a walk, resuming the sitting practice, from 8-10, then 10-12. Another break was for lunch, then resumed the routine, sitting from 2-4 PM, 4-6, 6-8 and 8-10. This pattern was consistent throughout the retreat; however, during the second week, I would sit for 3 hours rather than 2, either in the afternoon or at night. The first week or so, I primarily practice mindfulness of breathing. After that, I began routinely including body sweep meditation practices, with the intention to experience that stillness process, which would minimize any sense of embodiment and disregard any thoughts that would discriminate a sense of separation, such as “This is sound and this is what I think about the sound.”

For the most part, I sat quite comfortably, with no resistance to the rigorous repetitiveness of the routine. During the 3 hour sits, I would become physically uncomfortable and mentally agitated to some extent, but was able to be mindful of the flow of experience with openness and curiousity.

During on 3 hour sit, I had sense of energy flowing. I would read passages from Rodney Smith’s “Awakening-A Paradigm Shift Of The Heart” for inspiration. At one point he referred to influences from physics, particularly quantum physics, which represents and almost mystical representation of reality as a manifestation of universal energy. During that sit, I considered the possibility that everything is emerging into reality on a moment-by-moment basis, particularly subjective reality. It seemed that energy was emerging into awareness with no resistance, that is, all subjective experience was vibratory—physical sensations, sounds, and even thoughts, with little or no interest in referencing this flow of experience as myself. My later understanding of this experience can be reflected in a quote from Smith’s book, pgs 92-93:

“But concentration is also a conditioned state and therefore “impermanent, unsatisfactory and nonself,” and so it too waxes and wanes, moving the student back and forth along a continuum from a gross to a refined sense of self. The student often leans away from the gross appearance of self toward the more refined state of self because it is a less persuasive expression of the ego, and egolessness is often mistakenly thought of as the fulfillment of the spiritual journey….

If we attempt to fulfill our practice through the subtlety of form, we have merely substituted one transient world for another, and appearances, gross or subtle, have not been fully turned away from and adequately understood. The sense of self will arise corresponding to whatever thoughts are still believed, and as the refined state of concentration diminishes over time and the subtlety is lost, the sense of self relocates back into its grosser expression of life and we are left feeling that nothing has changed…

This world of refinement is often paired with an accompanying belief that if we could just stay here long enough, we would break through this quantum field into something unconditioned…Since concentration experiences need very protective and exclusive environments that cannot be maintained within the turbulence of normal activity, students who feel that the enhancement of concentration is their only gateway often lose their intention to know what is true once their focus becomes less refined…

…Experiencing the empty nature of ego still has someone who is experiencing it, and ultimately this someone will evolve into a more gross display. We need to understand how the self is formed and what it feeds on to limit its influence, and experiencing it as empty is only a baby step in this direction…After an intensive period of meditation, the sense of self then goes in reverse and renews its egoic life through its spiritual gains or wisdom accrued or the disenchantment felt. It springs back into full regalia with anything that can stimulate its rebirth…

The reemergence of the gross sense of self may result in feeling as if everything gained on the retreat has been lost, but that is because we usually think of ourselves a fixed point on the spiritual journey always moving in a progressive direction. We may believe that with more practice we will be continuously mindful, have sufficient concentration, and be kinder with more integrity. However, much of the spiritual journey is like a rolling wave in a closed tank, lolling from one side to the other in constant movement…Our understanding may grow accordingly over time, but even our wisdom will have periods of progression and regression. To the sense of self this may feel as if we were treading water or drifting in reverse, and it can take a long time for these reversals to be understood in a positive light.”.

One of the points that Smith develops during the book is the difference between *adaptation* and *surrender*. *Adaptation* operates through the sense of self to problem solve, while *surrender* represents a detachment from the selfing process involved in adaptation. This realization is liberating. It does not invalidate adaptation; rather, it liberates awareness from the burden of making adaption “personalized”, that is, *the adaptation doesn’t emerge from an imagined, solid, enduring adapter*. The way to realize this is through experiencing stillness, the absence of an authoritative internal narrative. This is often termed *choiceless awareness*, or *formlessness*.

Choiceless awareness is just that--awareness that doesn’t separate out any particular focal point in the flow of experience. Any thoughts that arise are not distinguished as self-identified, but merely as included in an inseparable field of awareness. Here are some excerpts from the book, pgs.173-174:

“When I speak about an end to the journey…I do not mean a final product, place or state of mind but, rather, an abiding, formless awareness that embraces all form but rests on none. Because formless awareness does not rest upon anything, it is at rest. Everything in life except awareness is in movement, but since awareness is not a “thing,” it is not fixed or locatable. As our practice moves into formless awareness, consciousness becomes less established and certain, less of a thing in itself. Since settling means locating ourselves in time and place, an unfixed consciousness does not land and stays formless.

Now let us align our practice with the principle a resting an unfixed awareness….Since formless awareness, which encompasses all ending points, is not locatable, it does not exist in time and place. This principle suggests that our pathway is not about the “I” landing somewhere and taking up residence anywhere in the continuum. The Buddha speaks of this in the following passage: “I do not claim to be All, I do not claim to be apart from All, I do not claim All to be mine, I do not affirm the All.” (Majjhima Nikaya 48:23)…

A life that does not land remains unformed as a ripe potential, while a life that does land becomes formed into a specific object…The sense of self lands and takes shape along with the objects…

This sounds more and more like the universe proposed by quantum mechanics, where subatomic particles remain a potential wave pattern until they are consciously noted, at which time they form a discrete particle…How is it possible that a portion of life called “me” would not have to play by the same rules that govern the fundamental particles of the universe?”

In Daniel Siegel’s book “Pocket Guide to Interpersonal Neurobiology”, he suggests a concept called the “Plane of possibility”. He describes an initial plane of infinite possibility, related to the trillions of potential coordinated firing of neural pathways in response to a stimulus. As the process of cognition emerges from this complexity, various memory driven exclusionary distinctions reduces the infinite possibilities radically, completed in a moment of conscious self-state organization. This moment provides momentum for the next emerging process to arise which, through craving and clinging, become “solidified” as “myself”. The infinite plane can be represented by the potential wave pattern described by Smith, and the resulting “myself” as a particle!

I hope these notes and the comments during the talk can be useful in understanding more about the process of awakening.