

8/3/21

In the Stream of Consciousness

Chapter 16.55555 – Becoming No Body

Our ISP, Century Link—the Enron of internet service providers, with a monopoly in our area—unintentionally cut off our internet last Friday. If you're reading this, they may have managed to restore it. Fingers crossed. (Naaaah!)

The same Friday two dear friends left us. Beverley Hammon, living in Leicestershire, England, the closest friend I've ever had that I never met in person, died of heart failure after a long decline. You'll remember her most recently from her amazing haikus contributed to our Tao Te Ching study. During our continuous back-and-forth for more than a decade, she called every premise of mine into question, and we wrestled over each one, until she was well satisfied with the result. It was excellent discipline for me to separate the wheat from the chaff in my thinking. She gradually came to deeply admire Nitya's legacy and her creative involvements via internet with his work. She was an excellent artist, teacher and lover of life, inwardly shining ever brighter even as her body slipped away.

Steve Weckel died the same day, of lung cancer, in his home near Guadalajara, Mexico. He was most active in the Gurukula in the Seventies and Eighties, his boundless energy contributing to many projects, including the construction of the Press Building at the Bainbridge Gurukula, and installation of the actual press, a multi-ton monster. He was a consummate and original artist, who I met in firefighter training in 1972. Talented in woodwork as well as many other skills, he built the dovetail joint bookshelf now sitting next to my computer, holding the primary books I use for reference, when we lived together that year. Early on, I guided him with LSD and we became close friends and psychonauts thereafter. His art and cartoons were often featured in Gurukulam Magazine. He is survived by his wife, Darlene Dehlin, also an artist, jewelry maker, and calligrapher. Both Steve and Darlene contributed to the

reminiscences of the Portland Gurukula 50th anniversary celebration. Write me if you'd like to receive those, if you're not on the mailing list.

Part of the silver lining of the internet disaster was moving the class to Susan's lovely home and garden, which provided a most comfortable and blissful setting for a transitional session in between the first and second parts of *In the Stream of Consciousness*.

In my reading this week, I encountered a chapter of the autobiography *Being Ram Dass* that begged to be shared with the class. It reprises the famous account of his first psilocybin trip, during the great snowstorm of 1961 in Boston, but with additional context, along with the added wisdom of a highly engaged lifetime. I felt it formed a bridge between the complex, theoretical first half of SOC and the simpler, more practical second half, by presenting a traditional conception of consciousness in a most accessible way.

Becoming No Body is the chapter title, referring to the vivid way Richard Alpert, the future Ram Dass, serially discarded his cherished various personas, finishing with his name—a big struggle, going very deep—and finally, his form. He was relieved to know after all his discards that at least he had his body left, except when he looked down, he couldn't see that either, just empty air. He freaked out and was about to scream for help, when he realized he was still conscious despite losing everything he identified with. It's what's left that matters most: conscious awareness. The realization immediately changed his perspective forever, and calmed him down for the moment.

I highly recommend the entire book for fellow seekers, and I'm not going to type up much of the text. Most of you know the bare bones of the tale already, I'm sure.

Once Richard makes peace with having only consciousness, not even a body, he realizes he has come Home to himself. All that other stuff is beside the point to self-realization. Here's what I have typed up for you:

I instantly felt a new, profound kind of peace I'd never before experienced. I had just found the "I"—that perceptual point of view, that essence of identity, that scanning device. I'd found that place of awareness beyond form, where "I": exists independent of social and psychological roles. This "I" was beyond time and space.

And this "I" *knew*, it really *knew*. It was wise, rather than just knowledgeable. It was a voice inside that spoke truth. I recognized it and was one with it. I felt as if my entire life of looking to the outside world for affirmation and reassurance was over. Now all I needed was to look within, to that place where I *knew*.

I was just *presence*, unfettered by the usual slipstream of random thoughts, images, and sensations. I nestled into this sense of pure *being*, feeling my way into this timeless, inner self that was independent of outer identity. I felt no need to *do* anything.... I was home, home in my spiritual self in a way I'd never before felt or thought possible. It was nonconceptual, indescribable. (67-8)

After he comes off the trip, his "neuroses" creep back in—they're how we live in the world, after all—but he has a new perspective where they are comfortably secondary to his core foundation in the heart.

His main takeaway was realizing the extent to which his life had been guided by the demands and expectations of other people, and he was now able to add himself to the list of guides, recognizing that many of the external influences we are driven by are unnecessary and binding. At some point in our life we forget how tightly we are constrained, being straightjacketed in place by fear, and simply "live with it."

"It was scary, in a way, to reject those long-inculcated values and trust my heart. But I was asserting myself from my soul. I was free." Yes, it's a bit glib, and as Bill perceived, his attitude reflects the later understandings he came to after his lifetime of search. Of

course it does! And that's a good thing. It's valuable to not understand what's going on for a period of time, letting the newfound openness expand unhindered, but making sense of it afterwards allows us to integrate the wisdom into our daily life. That's what Ram Dass soon found in the Indian and Tibetan scriptures, and after those, in his guru: a way to make useful sense of the experience. It's a key element for those of us who want to remain in touch with the world while we're alive.

Later in the book, after taking LSD and then discovering *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Richard and Tim Leary were delighted to find that:

The process of dying described in the book was eerily identical to the dissolution of the ego on psychedelics. Here we had reference points for our acid trips, though from a very different cultural perspective.

As Western psychologists, Tim and I had thought we were delving into unknown territory, making up theories as we went along to explain our experiences. But this ancient book from the East offered a detailed understanding of this very terrain. Other beings had traveled before us, charting how to navigate the inner planes. The maps we'd been searching for already existed. (87)

By the end of his life, Ram Dass knew perfectly well that "Psilocybin... was the beginning of an awakening of my soul." (69) There was plenty more awaiting discovery. There always is.

Deb opened the discussion noting that when our habitual ways of being are shaken, as Ram Dass' surely were by the medicine, we may suddenly find ourselves outside them, being part of some greater awareness. She wanted to reassure us that psychedelics weren't the only way to access our essential nature, which no one was arguing with. She invited everyone to share examples of similar experiences they've had, in whatever context.

One of Tim Leary's most famous lines is that LSD is a weird drug, as it instills fear in those who haven't taken it.

Deb was gracious to start the sharing by relating two moments in her life where she suddenly found herself out of her limited self, once when walking in the fields of the Pioneer Valley in Western Massachusetts, and another time doing drudge work as a third-grade teacher, after her class had gone home for the day. Both times she was suddenly aware of a kind of vibrancy, where she was no longer separate from the environment. She did admit that she had been in states like that in meditation with Nitya, and she did not admit to any trips in her past, both of which could have made the experiences more likely to occur, if we're being scientific. Deb was grateful that those moments happened, in perfectly ordinary moments, and she felt that we couldn't *make* them happen. All we can do is be open, since the openness is all around us anyway.

I agreed it's important to know that there isn't anything special we can do or have to do to bring about transcendental states. Taking a walk in a beautiful place is as good as any. What no one would admit, oddly, despite most of us having taken those magic medicines, is that they make a breakthrough event nearly certain, while an effort like taking a walk has a far less than 1% chance of doing it. With boring work, it's much closer to 0%. Walk all you want, meditate, stand on your head—you might get lucky. But if you want to have a glimpse of pure being, there are very good and time-tested ways to go about it.

The really curious thing is that, for all our proclamations, we don't really want to break out of our habits. We like them, and fear their absence. It might help to adopt Ram Dass' technique, without the psilocybin: thoughtfully examine and discard all our cherished identities, and see what's left over. Even that's too hard for a comfortable adult to take seriously. It's being shaken up that precipitates us into a transformation, and it's very hard to shake ourselves up. The polite techniques we adopt are already co-opted by the ego, so they don't have the pizazz.

The takeaway here should be that we were all raised to *take on* identities, to display ourselves as our identities, and it's actually counterproductive to keep doing that. It takes courage to dare to walk around naked, without being cloaked in our role playing.

Deb agreed the ego is fine if it's taken only as a reference point, as Nitya taught, but if we don't we become utterly committed to it. She could see this technique as a way of letting go of the binding commitment to your favorite images.

I added it's very hard to shuffle those identities away by simply dismissing them. Those voices lose their power over us only when we have rediscovered our own voice, what Ram Dass calls our soul, and Shankara our true nature. The endlessly intriguing Gita verse II.59 teaches this:

Objective interests revert without the relish for them on starving the embodied of them. Even the residual relish reverts on the One Beyond being sighted.

The starving is when we wrestle with the ideas, denying and suppressing them, but that doesn't get them all—there is a residue of samskaras, of traumatic memories. The One Beyond is our true self, which is so absorbing all other interests wither away completely, as long as we're in tune with it.

Deb suggested thinking is not the vehicle to get there, so I asked her, what is? She responded: vulnerability and openness. I cautioned that for many people, being vulnerable and open was dangerous and frightening. The soul needs a safe haven to be let out, at least initially. So much effort is employed to keep a barricade in place to protect our imaginary "openness." Plus, *trying* to be open is an oxymoron, inherently paradoxical.

Trying with a fixed program is antithetical to openness, yet not trying has even less likelihood of success. Vedanta advises synthesizing trying and not trying, bringing them actively into balance, whatever *that* means.

One key point is that the openness we seek is *with our self*. Being open to other people, even gurus and therapists, is problematic, and can easily bring about a contrary outcome. Friends and family rarely have the skills to avoid bungling such interactions, and it's fine to be adequately cautious in our various relationships. Not only that, but being outwardly open can be a perfect disguise for staying closed off to frankness in self-reflection.

I wondered aloud if any of us actually feels constrained by their identities anymore. After all, we've been batting these ideas around forever, so maybe we've already gotten past this business. One of the marvels of growing old is that we don't feel the need to cling so tightly to our identities. Is this need changing for anyone? Mitigating? Do you rue the absence of your former identities, if they are melting away, or feel relieved? I suppose we should even be careful of identifying ourselves as "old people." Think of the baggage that carries! Even as our joints pop and creak, we can reside in infinite being, knowing it's just the body sending certain unpleasant signals to another part of the body.

Deb has a dear friend who has had four previous marriages. She was telling Deb about how crushed she was by what her last ex-husband said about her at the end, demeaning all her identities. She was so ashamed she literally had to hide in the basement when he came to pick up their son, and she obsessed about his hurtful opinions all the time. As she slowly came out of the miasma, she learned to care about those things less. She strove to be what the moment called for. That's the trajectory we're talking about here.

This was the same friend who gave us all a related revelation back in the Sixties, an era which was all about identity. We identified as anti-war, anti-discrimination, anti-sexism, pro-liberation, pro-drug, pro-this or that. She said it was like we were all wearing ID badges proclaiming our positions, and she thought we might take those off. She is herself an extremely opinionated person, so it was a good idea, not a *fait accompli*. But we loved the concept, and did find that being less absolute about your position

invited a wider range of contact with others. Our identities were powerfully limiting, even though they were “right.” Mostly. You don’t change very fast if you’re 100% sure of what you believe in, and cannot imagine any exceptions. So, at the least we can treat everyone as *potentially* okay, and give them a hearing.

Anita brought up the out-of-body experience she told us about last week, and affirmed that it showed her that altered states can happen to anyone at any time. She hadn’t been doing any drugs when it happened, she was only dancing, and she knows dance can induce trance states. She reflected that the experience allowed her to be more open and vulnerable, as Deb had mentioned. If you can overcome your fear of being open, those states don’t have to be triggered by anything.

Yet they *were* triggered by *something*.... Or were they?

Andy recalled Aldous Huxley’s famous description of a vase of flowers during a mescaline journey, in *The Doors of Perception*, how he was sitting at the kitchen table and really looking intensely at the flowers, and they were vibrating with the full intensity of their being. What impressed Andy was that our lives are presented with the full intensity of their being, *all the time*. There is no break. God is presenting itself to us at every moment. At no moment has the intensity abated. There’s a saying that reality is here to teach us, and to Andy it means that we’re constantly being given the opportunity to choose to be open to reality, or not.

We didn’t talk about it, but Huxley astutely proposed the brain as a reducing valve, which has turned out to be true. In the very last class, concluding Part I, Nitya was talking about the exact same thing, the “selective functioning” of the brain, necessary so we aren’t overwhelmed and thus paralyzed by too much sensory input. Reducing the workload of our waking consciousness is absolutely necessary! But for our peace of mind, taking a trip beyond our firmly-fixed parameters is an incredibly healing opportunity. It’s most satisfying to know from experience that the little box of ideas we hold on to for dear life is floating in an ocean of loving light.

Andy is an artist, so he looks incredibly closely at many subjects, so he can convert them to visual images. Still, he will admit that it doesn't necessarily lift him into the empyrean. He did affirm that we all have within us a connection with 'being' that allows us to receive the intensity that is given to us, whenever we're ready.

Andy concluded that at the end of the day you just say aum, the word of acceptance. "Here" is the great stage of consciousness. Aum is the totality. We can be comfortable with the totality, and say aum.

Telling us that broke something open for him. A lot of totality is mundane, he admitted, and he listed a batch of common faults he shares with the rest of us, getting upset at friends, or running himself down. One of our most human faults is trying too hard to be blameless. Couldn't we just go, "Oh, there is something in me that is seeing this"? Then we could forgive our friends, and even ourself. He ended by admitting that the states you can attain with psychedelics are very compelling, as he knows from personal, long-ago experience, but he's afraid of them because of what they might allow to emerge.

It seems no number of friendly reassurances like the beautiful chapter by Ram Dass, can really cut through our fears. Even close friends are rarely able to. An important step in true self-awareness is to realize below the surface we're terrified, so we'd prefer to retain mundanity in place of spiritual enlightenment. We have to screw up our courage to change, or it's no go. A shy place in us is terrified of openness, of exposure.

The last thing I read in Ram Dass' book, today, in line at the pharmacy, was "Fear keeps you alive, but it also keeps you from letting go into your soul, your true inner self." (96) He learned this from a bad trip that brought out his death fear, on LSD. Psilocybin doesn't take you that far, so it's less unsettling.

This reminds me of a story Steve Weckel once told me. He used to boast that he wasn't afraid of death, back in the days when we equated death with the transcendental state. When we died, we

were just going to be permanently tripping. Fear doesn't come up when you're walking on clouds. Steve loved boats, and eventually became a sea captain in Alaska. One of his first purchases was a small motor boat he liked to tinker with. One day he was alone, down in the hold working on the engine, in a very tight space. A gust of wind blew the hatch closed, and it latched on the outside. He was stuck in a space that now felt like a tomb. Steve later told me, white-faced, how his fear of death surged up in him in a terrifying rush. Adrenaline gave him super strength, and he blasted the hatch open with raw ferocity, bursting out in a tempest of terror, to lie panting on the deck. He was very circumspect about his fear of death after that.

Andy fully conceded that an important aspect of openness is acknowledging a part of you is actively opposed to it. He rued the well-known Zen saying that Ordinary Mind is the Way—what a disappointing thing to hear! And yet, it is true. We are so enmeshed in Ordinary Mind that we can't grasp it. We sit in a room like this, full of physical objects, and they are stamped with memory and emotion. So the ordinary mind is extraordinary; it's just we don't like to pay attention to it.

Jan offered that coming to a peaceful acceptance of those contrary parts of ourselves has been an emotional process for her. She didn't give any details, but she recently has been coming to terms with something, embracing something about herself she didn't want to embrace. On her recent trip to New Mexico, while she was alone she started dancing, and it brought her to crying about it, which after some time allowed her to break through it. When she got to the other side, she felt love and joy and freedom, and the aftermath was beautiful.

Jan hit the right balance in class between openness with us and protecting her feelings so she could share that much, and we all respected it, despite secretly wishing we could know more. It's a good plan to share just enough to get the point across while not exposing oneself to feelings that would shut us back down. Hers was a perfect situation for yoga dialectics.

Jan was grateful that we have talked so often in class about being open, as well as learning ways to look at ourself and get some distance from all our attachments, allowing us to better see who we are.

Deb talked about the way she can be right in the middle of being hurt or angry, and all of a sudden she gets a little space and sees herself doing repetitive, reactive things, and it gives her a chance to choose openness (or non-clinging?) instead. Anita agreed. She's always reminding herself to be kind to customer service people on the phone, when her insides are screaming at them. I've been getting bounced around the ISP for 5 days now, so I knew exactly how she felt. Luckily I've had enough practice to assure the person I'm on the phone with that I don't blame them for the faults of their company, and we usually have a nice visit while we're attempting the impossible. Some of them, feeling relieved at my kindness, seem to want to keep talking with me after we're done, though it's strictly against the rules of the machine world.

Impatient with the implicit excuses I was hearing, I assured everyone that this wasn't about needing to take psilocybin, but we can still take the example of someone who did. We can do the work personally, and no one else needs to know anything about it. (In fact, telling others about our program before it's enacted is a sure route to ego supervision.) We can examine our own identities and roles, all the ways we think of ourself, and deny their hold on us. We don't have to go all the way, either—just take on the most flagrant offenders and leave the rest for another day. Even a small amount of this lightens the load: “Even a little of such a way of life saves one from great apprehension.” (Gita II.40)

Here's an example of the public side of openness. For the first half of my life I had low self-esteem, and described myself routinely in negative terms. Most of them were false, and the rest exaggerated. In class I thanked my classmates for being kind enough to called me on them—telling me I wasn't like that—and it slowly led me to a more neutral stance. We all exaggerate, one way

or another, because of the traumas we carry, and in healing with friends those are mitigated. I didn't have to switch from one set of lies to another, but just stop defining myself at all. I realized nobody wants to hear what I think of myself, not even me! This readjustment brought up my personal motto, "self-description is stultifying." Meaning, it shrinks your brain, makes you stupid. I apply it primarily to myself, and it has lightened my excess baggage amazingly. When I slip up now, mainly out of habit, my close friends know they can just tell me to shut up, and I'll realize immediately what is amiss.

The bottom line is, as long as we hang on to our ideas of ourselves, we won't be able to be fully open. Ram Dass puts this eloquently in his famous story. He preserves the mystical taint, while in the Gurukula we are trying to make it more plain. We've already been mystifying ourselves long enough, I'd say.

Paul agreed. It scares him how those patterns, those conditioned behaviors, become so engrained in us. He admitted that much of it is natural, as he observed with his children growing up: they had certain needs at certain stages, and it was hard for him to know what to do when. Our insecurities are like immature children within. Part of our conditioned personalities can assist us negotiating life, and a lot can inhibit us, and it's neat to spot their differences. Paul believes we were designed by a creator with inner beauty, and so it's not possible to get rid of insecurity as much as simply realizing it's a lie. Like turning on a light in the darkness.

I added one last practical piece of advice we can infer from Ram Dass' account. Whatever we decide to do about our own roles, we can put less pressure on our friends by not demanding they fit into certain roles themselves. Let them be who they are! On a more subtle level, the less we hold onto our own narrowness, the more we invite other people to let go of their feelings that they need to limit themselves in our presence. Animals can easily feel the difference that attitude makes, so why couldn't people?

When all is said and done, there is a leap to be made here, out of our comfort zone. Nataraja Guru's fabulous mixed metaphor was "Armchair philosophy bakes no bread."

We grow from passionate involvement. The NY Times of August 1, 2021, has the obituary for the astonishing writer Roberto Calasso, It's an inspiring obit:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/30/books/roberto-calasso-dead.html> . Here's a timely excerpt:

"Calasso carved out a new space as an intellectual, retelling myth as true, certainly as true as science," Tim Parks, who worked with Mr. Calasso on the English translation of "The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony," said in an interview. "His implication is always that we are as subject as our ancestors were to the forces that find their names in Zeus or Venus or Yahweh or Shiva."

In a 2012 interview with The Paris Review, Mr. Calasso spoke about humanity's search for transcendence, be it through art, nature or religion, as his central intellectual pursuit. "All of my books have to do with possession," he said. "Ebbrezza—rapture—is a word connected with possession. In Greek the word is mania, madness. For Plato, it was the main path to knowledge."

The bottom line is we have to stir things up to get the juices flowing. Quietude is nice, but it ain't everything. Sparks must fly when we take on our ego-centrism, or it's just make-believe. We could welcome the clashes in our encounters, face our fears with gladness, and maybe even set aside time for a brief chemical adjustment that promises to pry back the veil for a moment. How we go about it is up to each of us, but outside assistance in some form is essential.

Part II

The book details:
Ram Dass, with Rameshwar Das, *Being Ram Dass* (Sounds True,
Boulder, Co. 2021).

* * *

How about this gem from Rene Daumal, a letter late in his
brief life to his wife Vera:

This is how I sum up for myself what I wish to convey to those
who work here with me:

I am dead because I lack desire;
I lack desire because I think I possess;
I think I possess because I do not try to give;
In trying to give, you see that you have nothing;
Seeing you have nothing, you try to give of yourself;
Trying to give of yourself, you see that you *are* nothing;
Seeing you are nothing, you desire to become;
In desiring to become, you begin to live.

* * *

For those who aren't interested in taking on the Self, or who
are charmed anyway by unpretentiousness, here's a glimpse of
Ordinary Mind, the last paragraph of chapter 4 of *The Wind in the
Willows*, Kenneth Grahame's masterpiece:

As he hurried along, eagerly anticipating the moment when he
would be at home again among things he knew and liked, the
Mole saw clearly that he was an animal of tilled field and
hedgerow, linked to the ploughed furrow, the frequented
pasture, the lane of evening lingerings, the cultivated garden
plot. For others the asperities, the stubborn endurance, or the
clash of actual conflict, that went with Nature in the rough; he

must be wise, must keep to the pleasant places in which his lines were laid and which held adventure enough, in their way, to last for a lifetime.

Part III

From my Gita commentary on chapter XV:

As Rousseau described, we are like a tree that enters the world perfect and straight, but as it grows it becomes warped and deformed by the various environmental factors it is subjected to. Lack of nutrients stunts its growth, branches are broken off, and prevailing winds cause it to lean away from them. Ordinary therapy or the support of a group with vested interests often merely props up the deformed plant as it has grown. To restore its true nature one has to go to the root, prune away the necrotic and deformed matter through conscious awareness, and correct the environmental factors of false beliefs and poisonous attitudes. The result will be new healthy growth that if permitted to flourish will be symmetrically beautiful and might eventually provide shade and sustenance to others.

Part IV

From Dipika:

Thank you
Great notes

To your question...

Is this need changing for anyone?

Mitigating? Do you rue the absence of your former identities, if they are melting away, or feel relieved? I suppose we should even be careful of identifying ourselves as "old people."

Yes....over the years, many identities have blurred and as I change and grow older....I find the need to 'identify' myself as a so-& so or believer of such & such has faded away into the distance. In fact I hate being compartmentalised 'cause then I'm shutting myself into verticals when actually I am a free bird....and have far more to learn if I am fluid and free. Unfortunately as we age we all start looking it... but by no means do we feel it except with energy levels dissipating somewhat, so I do get a bit shocked when I read about 'an old man/woman aged 60 being helped....' and realise that is my age group!!! 😊😏