Thoughts from a Mountain Waterfall

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Many people find the sound of falling water to be calming, soothing, relaxing. Who doesn't love the sound of a gentle rain falling, as long as they are safely dry? It's as though there's something about water that speaks volumes to the human spirit about peace and tranquility.

And it doesn't have to fall from the sky, either. The rhythmic sound of ocean waves falling on the beach can ease the spirit, too. This is so well established that there are machines that generate sound that helps people sleep. The first one on the dial is ocean surf, the sound of waves on a beach. Falling rain is a close second.

Years ago I lived in a house that had a tin porch roof outside my bedroom window. While I came to enjoy the hypnotic rhythms of rain on the roof, it took a fair bit of time for me to come around. You see, I usually prefer to sleep in silence.

I generally find night noises annoying. Anything that interrupts my quiet tranquility tends to disturb me, especially barking dogs. So I usually make decisions that maintain the quiet.

So, when considering the available choices for where to pitch my tent, I usually try to find the quietest spot I can. As a lifelong camper, I usually can adapt to the night time whirrs and chirps of forest insects. But I have a history of seeking what I think of as peace and quiet. So, in 1999, when I started going to meditation retreats at the Southern Dharma Retreat Center near Hot Springs, North Carolina, I immediately noticed that there was a stream flowing past the tent platforms, and that it formed a small mountain waterfall near the first platform.

[play waterfall sound] So I naturally pitched my tent on the last platform, as far from the waterfall as I could. *[play quiet waterfall sound]*

But I have attended one or more retreats there almost every year since. And my relationship to the waterfall changed slowly as I grew more and more accustomed to its sound. I moved one tent site closer after a few years, and again

a few years later. By 2008 I had claimed the first tent platform right next to the waterfall as my retreat home.

Now, when I pitch my tent by the waterfall, its song is a greeting and a welcome. As I lie in my tent at night, it speaks of the intimacy and immediacy of nature. I let go of my thoughts and concerns and let its sound fill me with its natural rhythms and harmonies. No longer an irritation, the waterfall is my companion. The retreats often take place with little or no speaking or conversation, but, for me, they are never silent. The water speaks. *[play waterfall sound]*

The Southern Dharma Retreat Center is nestled into a small valley high in the Blue Ridge Mountains so getting there can be a challenging drive. In the final ten miles or so of Route 209, the road climbs steeply through switchbacks and canyons, cliffs and precipices. Its hairpin turns often need to be taken at 20 mph or less. Shadowed by trees and rhododendrons, the darkened forest will suddenly emerge into a breathtaking vista of panoramic mountain landscape with deep valleys and rolling peaks stretching off into the mists beyond. And no sooner am I transported by the amazing view than the road twists again and my eyes snap back to the vertical cliff on my right and the equally sharp drop-off on my left as I step on the brake and steer around the sharp bank, hoping that there isn't another car or truck coming around at me on the downhill side.

And then when you come to the end of the highway the easy part is over. The final approach is a dirt road so steep and uneven that shifting out of first gear is unthinkable. Twisting and turning, tires spinning, navigating ruts and drop-offs, it easily takes ten minutes to go the last mile. Finally the dirt road descends into the little mountain valley where the retreat center is located.

The road is beautiful, challenging, and for the uninitiated, frightfully scary. The first few years I traveled this way, it was a white-knuckled adventure. I often found myself clenching my teeth and holding my breath. But after a few years, I grew more accustomed to the highway; I became skilled at its challenges and drove with a feeling of competence and mastery.

But in the past five years or so, I've found that I associate the twisting approach so closely with the tranquility of the meditation retreats I've attended there, that as soon as I reach the hairpin turns and switchbacks, a deep calm begins to settle over me. My breath slows, my mind grows tranquil and my vision

clear. As I climb higher and higher into the mountains, I descend deeper and deeper into a meditative calm. And by the time I arrive I am already in retreat mode, ready to turn myself over to the teachings of the waterfall.

Once at the retreat center, life is profoundly different. Surrounded nature, one is invited to surrender to the splendor of its simplicity. While the retreat center has electric lights and flush toilets, attendees are completely off the grid. There are no outgoing phone calls; the office will relay emergency messages only. There is no cell phone signal, no internet, no radio, no television. No distractions, just the sun, the rain, the insects, trees, wind, and sky – day and night.

Of course, you aren't really alone. The retreat I'm talking about included 30 people: 28 attendees and two teachers. It was called an "Insight Dialogue Retreat" and the teachers were highly skilled leaders.

There tends to be an idea that meditation retreats are leisurely, blissful affairs. While mindfulness practice certainly can include experiences of tranquility and joy, the retreat itself may well be the hardest work I do all year. We spent a total of 9.5 hours a day in formal meditation posture on cushions or benches as we brought mindful attention to our bodies and breath, our thoughts and feelings. Joyful? Yes. Deck chairs on a cruise ship? No.

We began by focusing on the work ahead, its nature and quality. The teachers shared a quote from Andrew Olendzki's book, *Unlimiting Mind: the radically experiential psychology of Buddhism*. He says that, "People used to naively think the earth was the center of the universe, and that the sun and all the stars revolved around us. Then Copernicus came along and declared the thoroughly counter-intuitive truth that, appearances to the contrary, the earth in fact orbited the sun. This launched a scientific revolution that focused on attempting to study everything from an objective stance, as if we could hover outside ourselves and get a disembodied perspective on it all. This way, the objectivist story goes, our view is not cluttered by all that messy, subjective stuff that only distorts reality to conform with our personal illusions.

"Well, the last few centuries have been a pretty good run for the objective sciences, but the cutting edge of all our postmodern understanding is putting us right back where we started – at the center of the world. It turns out that the non-personal 'objective' perspective on everything cannot ultimately be sustained except as a sort of thought experiment. We are embedded in the world, whether

we like it or not. All views are a view from somewhere, and we are discovering again and again that where you are looking from makes a big difference to what you see."

Later, Olendzki describes our situation:

"Sensory information hurtles in at our eyeballs at the speed of light, crashes into our eardrums at the speed of sound, and courses through our body and mind as fast as an electrochemical signal can flash from one neuron to the next. And how do we deal with all this data without getting overwhelmed? By blocking out most of it, and stepping down the voltage of what little is left.

"The brain freezes the world into discrete mind moments, each capturing a barely adequate morsel of information, then processes these one by one in a rapid linear sequence. The result is a compiled virtual world of experience, more or less patterned on what's 'out there,' but mostly organized around the needs and limitations of the apparatus constructing it. It is like the brain and its senses are hastily taking a series of snapshots, then stringing them together into a movie we call 'the stream of consciousness.'

"The Buddhists have a pretty good word to describe this system: delusion. It doesn't mean we are stupid, only that the mind and body are designed (so to speak) to distort reality in some very fundamental ways."

The work of retreats like this one is to attempt to retrain the mind to see the world more accurately by carefully perceiving and examining the shortcuts and distortions our mental processes introduce into what we call our "sense of reality."

Spiritual teachers of all ages have sought to encourage this work. Kabir, the fifteenth century Indian mystic and poet, wrote about it in this poem:

The truth is inside you, and also inside me;
you know the sprout is hidden inside the seed.
We are all struggling; none of us has gone far.
Let your arrogance go, and look around inside.

The blue sky opens out farther and farther,
the daily sense of failure goes away,
the damage I have done to myself fades,

a million suns come forward with light,
when I sit firmly in that world.

I hear bells ringing that no one has shaken,
inside "love" there is more joy than we know of,
rain pours down, although the sky is clear of clouds,
there are whole rivers of light.
The universe is shot through in all its parts by a single sort of love.
How hard it is to feel that joy in all our four bodies!

Those who hope to be reasonable about it fail.
The arrogance of reason has separated us from that love.
With the word "reason" you already feel miles away.

How lucky Kabir is, that surrounded by all this joy
He sings inside his own little boat.
His poems amount to one soul meeting another.
These songs are about forgetting dying and loss.
They rise above both coming in and going out.

Caught in our own net of pseudo-objectivity, how rare is it that we truly and fully experience and appreciate life firsthand? This is the work of a meditation retreat, peeling back the layers of intellect, opinion and interpretation, to discover the gem of light that glows within, that Kabir has called "a million suns," and that "there are whole rivers of light. The universe is shot through in all its parts by a single sort of love."

An Insight Dialogue retreat combines traditional mindfulness and insight meditation practices with the interactive process of dialogue, where two participants sit face to face and share the truth of the moment as it unfolds in their experience. The dialogue portion begins with a simple sharing of personal sensations, asking, "What sensations are present in your body right now?" It's amazing how rarely we speak of our sensations with simple accuracy. When we try we begin to notice how often we tend to slide into opinions or attitudes about our sensations instead. Consider how different it is to say, "I feel a tight, sharp

sensation in my left knee," from "How annoying! My left knee is hurting again! I wish the darn thing would stop!"

Our culture offers us very little training in how to understand the difference between facts and opinions. This is the first step of a real meditation practice.

Insight Dialogue is a program developed and taught by Gregory Kramer. It is based on the practices of Insight Meditation, but with the addition of speaking within a carefully constructed relationship of trust with another person. Kramer lists six instructions as the basis for Insight Dialogue: pause, relax, open, trust emergence, listen deeply, and speak the truth. "Taken together," he says, "these guidelines offer essential support for awakening amid the rich challenges of interpersonal encounter. Each guideline calls forth different qualities, and all of them are complementary. In brief, Pause calls forth mindfulness; Relax, tranquility and acceptance; Open, relational availability and spaciousness; Trust Emergence, flexibility and letting go; Listen Deeply, receptivity and attunement; and Speak the Truth, integrity and care."

I can't get into the whole program in the time we have this morning, but I'd like to share a little of what Kramer says about the first step, the "pause." He says, "I invite you to slow down, to find the present moment, and explore Pause – here and now. You don't need another person's presence to Pause from habitual thoughts and reactions. Pause from reading and from thinking for a moment and notice the body. What is the position of the body right now? What is the shape and form of the body? You can ask, 'How am I feeling right now?' You can notice any sensations or tensions. At this first level, the Pause is a definite gap in our activities; it takes time. Notice the sense of letting go of whatever you were doing or thinking. Pause."

"As you Pause, I invite you to release, for a moment, automatic and habitual reactions. Feel the lightness as the clinging mind releases its grip on your present thought or feeling. . . You may notice a certain freshness about things. In this freshness you may notice the habit-mind at work. You might also notice new thoughts.

"Even though the Pause doesn't require stopping, . . . you may want to give the Pause more time. It can take a while for the body to calm down, for the mind to come to rest. If you are mindful and relaxed, the Pause is an easy slip into the

moment. In an instant we can release attachment to whatever occupies us and arrive in the present. As you practice, pay attention to the lightness associated with letting go, with the non-clinging of the Pause."

The poetry of Jalaluddin Rumi takes on a different perspective in the light of pausing and mindfulness, as in these lines from his poem, "Spring Giddiness.:

Today, like every other day, we wake up empty
and frightened. Don't open the door to the study
and begin reading. Take down a musical instrument.
Let the beauty we love be what we do.
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.

The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.
Don't go back to sleep.
You must ask for what you really want.
Don't go back to sleep.
People are going back and forth across the doorsill
Where the two worlds touch.
The door is round and open.
Don't go back to sleep.

[sound of waterfall]

May it be so.