

**Quieting the Mind:
Connecting Body, Earth, and Spirit**
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This retreat is a gentle invitation to awaken from the trance of everyday life and to be refreshed by the richness and aliveness that is available by connecting body and spirit with the healing earth of “Mother Molokai.” During our week together we will have opportunities for meditation, mindful movement, and small group experiments drawn from the Hakomi Method. We will teach restorative practices which connect us deeply to our bodies, the spacious mind beyond hope and fear, to the earth, and to the wisdom of our ancestral lineages. We will work with all of these energy streams in an organic, restful, and playful manner with the intention of revealing our Basic Goodness.

[The following series of blog entries were posted throughout the retreat week and can also be read on the Ordinary Mind blogspot. They are reprinted here in the order in which I posted them.]

The above description was the original invitation to this week's retreat. Today and tomorrow (Friday, April 25 and Saturday, April 26), fifteen participants are traveling to Hawaii to find out what actually happens when we gather in response to this description that Richie and I manufactured nearly a year ago. No one actually knows the deepest intentions, privately held expectation, and hidden fears of any of the other group members. Sunday morning we will begin to give voice to all of this for the first time in the group, sitting together in a circle in the yurt nestled among tropical foliage, cooled by the island breezes, and serenaded by the exuberant birds.

It is quite a pilgrimage to travel to the tiny island of Molokai, only 52 miles from the bustling traffic of Honolulu and crowded beaches of Waikiki. On a clear day you can actually see the majestic outlines of Diamond Head from the east end of Molokai. However, this relatively short distance belies the enormous distance you travel in the 17-minute flight between airports. When you land on Molokai and step off the plane you enter what the locals call "the most Hawaiian island", and what Riki Cooke (one of our hosts at the Hui) calls "an island in time." My experience, year after year, is that upon arrival I feel a relief, an opening, a simple joy, and a deepening that is totally visceral. The shift is physical. Certainly I have memories and appreciations from past visits. I

have ideas about the week and hopes for its "success." But Mother Molokai greets you as an undeniable and immensely intimate embodied presence. This is why I return year after year and this is why I continue to invite others to join me here. You are also invited to join us, in a way, through these daily accounts. I will do my best to offer you brief, ongoing accounts of our daily practices and experiences as they unfold. I hope you enjoy the reports and maybe find yourself encouraged to practice along with us as we open to the ever-deepening awareness of the body and the natural quieting of the mind.

Day 1: Travel to Honolulu and on to Molokai



As I type these words the bright screens above us on the new Boeing 767 indicate that we have traveled over three thousand mile since our departure from Dallas earlier this morning. We are flying at more than 34,000 feet through the vast sky over the Pacific, hurtling along at nearly 600 miles and hour. It is an unfathomable -54F outside the plane and we are about ninety minutes from landing in Honolulu where it is currently partly cloudy, with a light breeze, and 81F on the ground. This is how we automatically and habitually orient ourselves, isn't it - measurements, numbers, comparisons, evaluations, anticipations, and memories? Sitting in this relatively comfortable seat, drinking endless bottles of water, and feeling rested from a brief nap, it is easy to forget that all of this is a strange thing to do to a body. Spending the equivalent of an entire workday (nearly 8 hours) in a pressurized cabin in order to travel to a dormant volcano (now called an island) rising from the ocean floor in the middle of the ocean is stressful challenge. Not to mention that the day will somehow be 29 hours long and even though it is bright and sunny as we travel on to Molokai, my body will know that it will be midnight, not 7:00

PM as shown on the face of my iPhone. The phone simply changes without any apparent resistance or stress. My body, however, takes time, and that is what we will begin doing tomorrow - taking time to sit in silence and stillness and the fullness of the moment. I hope you will take some time to sit, even for only a few minutes, and enjoy your life just as it is.

Day 2: Forming the Circle

We Clasp the Hands

Wendell Berry

We clasp the hands of those that go before us,
And the hands of those who come after us.
We enter the little circle of each other's arms
And the larger circle of lovers,
Whose hands are joined in a dance,
And the larger circle of all creatures,
Passing in and out of life,
Who move also in a dance,
To a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it
Except in fragments.



This morning we stood together on the lawn in front of the lodge, our toes in the grass, our fingers entwined, joined in a circle in which we honored our personal ancestors as well as the family of Hawaiian people who helped make this retreat center sacred ground. Bronwyn Cooke, the director of the center blew the conch shell in the four directions and intoned a beautiful and powerful Hawaiian chant that calls on us to be present and listen deeply. Part of the translation is an aspiration: "may we be granted the possibility of hearing the wisdom of the song." Following the circle we finally descended the hill to the yurt and began our first formal session. Richie told a beautiful story drawn from Africa about a tribe in which each newborn is greeted with a song given to their parents even before their conception; a song which encourages them to the day of their actual birth, follows them throughout the ups and downs of their lives, and finally sends them on at the time of their death. Following the story each participant offered their aspiration and intention for the week and placed a shell or rock on the altar as a symbolic offering of themselves to the process and to the practices. These were fragments - broken bits of shell mostly - worn down or incomplete, yet perfectly themselves, like each one of us.

The songs continued through the afternoon as we left the retreat center to hear the local "kapuna," the elders who pass on the culture of Hawaii through their music and hula. It was a joyful and powerful event to see the old women, the young children, the locals and the transplanted residents, all singing, dancing, and playing the music that hold the community together. In so many ways we today we tasted the music "so subtle and vast that no one hears it except in fragments." Tonight after dinner we sat together in darkness as the electrical power on the island failed. After such a full day, it was surprisingly easy to find peace and harmony with what life was offering us. Tomorrow we will continue to move deeper into that vast and subtle music of our lives, played through our bodies.

Day 3: Entering the Body



Yesterday Richie began a series of Feldenkrais exercises to assist people in opening very gently to sitting meditation. This morning, Amrita led us in mindful movement as a way to teach the fundamentals of mindfulness itself - through the body. She had previously taught these sequences with Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts in his well known mindfulness based stress reduction program. Later, I offered a dharma talk focusing on the Buddha's Four Noble Truths as an embodied practice. So we are moving from body practices, to teachings, and back to the body, weaving a practice series we hope will assist in deepening each participant to the realization that it is only through having a body and entering wholehearted embodiment with others that we awaken fully to life as it is.

The day actually started quite powerfully, well before these man-made sessions. Most of the group went to watch the sunrise at the Kalaupapa overlook, an old stone wall at the top of a three-thousand foot cliff high above the leper colony of Molokai where Father Damien did his work. Kalaupapa is an entire story in itself of course, full of tragedy and

great triumph, but this morning we stood in awed silence for more than an hour as the sun made its way up and out of the ocean offering us an indescribable display of light and texture. It was still mostly dark - at least very gray - when we arrived. A deer bounded across the road as we drove to the overlook parking lot. The moon still lit the sky. The cool morning wind whipped the ironwood trees vigorously and the waves broke forcefully against the shore far below. Later, in the morning check-in, one of our participants, JoLynn, offered this startling poem. It captures the teaching of the entire day better than I could describe.

What I Learned Before Breakfast

The birds do not keep the rule of silence
except when you least expect it.

Even the grays - all of them - are beautiful.

You cannot tell the difference
between the sound of the wind
and the sound of the water, nor
the sound they make together.

There is a line where the
sea stops and the sky beings,
isn't there?

The moon keeps watch till the
sun takes over and when it
does, it aims right for you.

The clouds shape shift before
your eyes offering feathers,
a purple Agapanthus, frosty
meringue, a fiery salmon dragon
sent as an emissary.

Apparently this happens frequently.

Day 4: Loosening the "I"



We began today with a dharma talk by Richy using Tsoknyi Rinpoche's Four Types of "I". This is a Tibetan teaching on the construction of a solid sense of "I" where none exists. He actually starts with what he calls the "Mere I." This is the actuality of our functional sense of self. It is what Mu Soeng calls "a provisional floating center." This is, of course, neither solid nor enduring, but fully functional and integrated. With just a tiny bit of grasping however, we then move to "Ego Fixation." It is here that the sense of self starts to become frozen. There is no more flow or sense of the dance of phenomena.

There is always an "I" as the reference point in life. This, of course, results in subject/object fixation - we want happiness and must maintain the "I" in that pursuit. This tends to lead to the next level of "Self-cherishing." We are always putting ourselves first, consuming in the service of "I", increasing the amount of investment in preserving the self. Life becomes more complex. Next comes the "Social I." This is the coarsest sense of "me" generated by social role, work, and identity. This is very well developed and highly valued in the West. The "Eight Worldly Winds" appear at this level because they are what buffet the ego about. I will mention them here although there is much more to them and they deserve a more complete teaching than I can offer in a brief blog post.

They are: gain and loss, pleasure and pain, praise and blame, fame and obscurity. These are the guiding forces that push around the Social I. They are not hard to understand are they?

What happens when we release back through these four senses of "I" to the Mere I? Here is a tiny taste - more of a portal into the release to the Mere I - but a beautiful example nonetheless. We did practices today to help us experiment with releasing into Mere I.

Below is an report from one of our sangha members in Austin following a recent intensive. I read it to the participants here on Molokai as an example of the fruit of these kinds of teachings. This is what I really love, assisting students so that the teachings emerge from them and then pointing out that they have arrived through them, not me.

This is thrilling. Take a look:

"Since the Intensive, I have been experiencing everything through the lens that "nothing is what I call it." It has impacted everything, whether I am sitting or speaking or watching the world around me. I've gone back and listened to talks and read poetry that I thought I "got" and in doing so realized this dimension that was there all along - something I've spoken to other people about but now actually realized instead of interpreting it in words which I heretofore thought defined life. For example, "all things have Buddha nature" turns into "all things share a reality and a life before and after any reference we can make to it." Then, before I name the moon as beautiful, it is already true - active and fully responded to in me and all others in a communication that far exceeds any verbal expression. Then, Dogen says we are "actualized by the myriad things;" speech and thought are just name tags that are just one infinitesimal acknowledgement of the whole and is already flowing through us as vibrating expressions of this ever expansive truth. It has been breathtaking and makes the notion of separateness an organic impossibility."

What can you actually say about the picture of the flower above (thanks to Cassie Weyendt)? Do those six letters - "flower" - contain the explosion you see? What about the light - not to mention the smell? What about you, or what you call you? Is it really so solid or so necessary? These are good questions. Just to be mindful helps us begin to penetrate the ways we cling to the self, cherish the self, and maintain a social I. Here is the final poem of the day by Mary Oliver.

Mindful

Mary Oliver

Every day
I see or hear
something
that more or less
kills me
with delight,
that leaves me
like a needle
in the haystack
of light.
It is what I was born for -
to look, to listen,
to loose myself
inside this soft world -
to instruct myself
over and over
in joy,
and acclamation.
Nor am I talking

about the exceptional,
the fearful, the dreadful,
the very extravagant -
but the ordinary,
the common, the very drab,
the daily presentations.
Oh, good scholar,
I say to myself,
how can I help
but grow wise
with such teachings
as these -
the untrimmable light
of the world,
the ocean's shine,
the prayers that are made
out of grass?

Day 5: Returning to the Circle



I've been coming to Molokai for almost ten years and have never experienced "vog" - the equivalent of smog, only produced by the massive eruption of Kilauea happening currently on the Big Island of Hawaii. The haze comes and goes depending on the strength of the eruption and the direction of the winds. It was reported that the pollution level on the worst days has been similar to LA smog on a regular day, only we have sulphur dioxide, ash, and smoke in the mix rather than the primarily carbon dioxide of auto pollution. When the trade winds return from the north, the air clears and we can see far off into the distant horizon. The island of Lanai suddenly appears as if by magic and

our breathing is relaxed and easy once again. This dramatic environmental shift is not too different from the internal shifts we discover in practice. One moment we are caught in the haze of the "self-centered dream" and feel real suffering. We experience it in the body and in the breath. As our thoughts change and our perspective shifts, the mind begins to clear and what was previously occluded by "holding to self-centered thoughts" is suddenly revealed as delusion. The entire island of Lanai was not destroyed, we just couldn't see it because the fog made it impossible to see from our personal viewpoint. Neither is our True Nature destroyed when we are caught in the self-centered dream. However, we do lose sight of who we truly are as our horizons contract back to self-clinging, self-cherishing, and the relentless social "I". This doesn't just happen in the midst of work stress and family difficulties, this happens during beautiful and grace-filled retreats as our conditioning is triggered and within the container of practice we have the opportunity to look closely at these patterns which we usually play out as ordinary and automatic. We chant, "each moment, life as it is, the only teacher." This is only true if we are willing to look deeply and if we are willing to help each other look closely in the reflective benevolence of loving relationships. In this way our horizons expand. We become a larger container for experience, more able to "bow to life as it is." The air clears and the breath is easy again.

Caught in the self-centered dream, only suffering.
Holding to self-centered thoughts, exactly the dream.
Each moment, life as it is, the only teacher.
Being just this moment, compassion's way.

Day 6: Releasing and Healing



These posts are such small snapshots of each day, rich with experience, both delightful and challenging. As someone once said, "transformation is not for the faint of heart."

Hui Ho'Olana, the name of the retreat center, means "where inspiration rises up from the heart." Inspiration rises rather easily here in this beautiful and welcoming environment, but so does everything else along with it. When we open, everything comes, not just the joy. Today we ceremonially honored what wanted to be released - especially anguish and grief - but first it had to be witnessed. This understanding is most beautifully offered in another Mary Oliver poem, "Heavy" (below). It rained gently in the morning, as if the sky was weeping softly. We moved the large rock from the altar to the deck outside the yurt. We began to ring the bell as might happen in a temple in Asia whenever a death has occurred. As we counted each striking of the bell with the beaded mala - 108 peals of the bell - participants came forward and poured water over the rock to honor their loss or grief as one might do at an ashes site in Japan. The silence was filled with only the bell, the wind, the birds, and the tender hearts of the participants. Later in the day, after dinner, laughter and music could be heard echoing down the hill. How does this happen?

Heavy

Mary Oliver

That time I thought I would not
go any closer to grief
without dying
I went closer, and I do not die.
Surely God had his hand in this,
as well as friends.
Still, I was bent, and my laughter,
as the poet said,
was nowhere to be found.
Then said my friend Daniel
(brave even among lions),
"It's not the weight you carry but how you carry it -
book, bricks, grief -
it's all in the way you embrace it, balance it, carry it
when you cannot, and would not, put it down."
So I went practicing.
Have you noticed?
Have you heard the laughter
that comes, now and again,
out of my startled mouth?
How I linger to admire, admire, admire
the things of this world that are kind,

and maybe also troubled -
roses in the wind,
the sea geese on the steep waves,
a love to which there is no reply?

Day 7: Completion and Return Home



The photo above represents how the yurt looked before the participants arrived. This particular image was recorded by Rikki Cooke, one of our hosts and a long-time National Geographic photographer and talented teacher (see www.thealohabear.com for more of his work). The elegant arrangement you see here shifted and changed, was rearranged and reordered all through the week to match the needs of the group and each event - meditation, small group work, mindful movement, and even hula. Light slowly filled the room each morning and then faded each evening. People came and went. Many of us were, in alternating waves, inspired and discouraged, joyful and sad, angry and fearful - just like the rest of life. But the room was always ready and held it all, along with the trees, birds, and wind. The earth supported everything below us and the sky, with its many moods, nevertheless remained open above us. In the end, we reflected on our week together and then dismantled the room, put everything away, leaving a clean, empty space ready for the next group. Unlike the typical Western ethos that suggests we "leave our mark" on the world, the Zen teacher Suzuki Roshi suggested that "we leave no trace." The "eight worldly winds" I briefly described in the Day 4 entry point to the storms stirred by clinging to the personal: gain and loss, pleasure and pain, praise and blame, fame and obscurity. There is an alternative, however. We can leave (and live each day) with gratitude and respect, which is certainly how I feel about the Hui and also about

everyone who participates here. In many ways it is a long and challenging trip for most people who travel to Molokai. I have a profound appreciation for those who choose to do so -who offer themselves wholeheartedly to the process, who discover the benevolent welcome of Mother Molokai, who are reminded of their shadows and contractions of conditioning they thought they had left behind on the mainland, and who are willing to "take the backward step and turn their light inward," as Dogen poetically wrote in his old Zen meditation instruction. To have the willingness to meet it all with the support of the setting and each other is the beginning of not just personal healing, but of peace. Without this willingness, we feed the seeds of discord, hatred, division, and ongoing suffering for all. But, with a simple turn, we save not only ourselves, but the whole world. Toward this end, I offer the dedication we chanted all week together:

By the power and truth of this practice, may all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness.

May all be free from sorrow and the causes of sorrow.

May all never be separated from the sacred happiness which is sorrowless.

And may all live in equanimity, without too much attachment and too much aversion,

And believing in the equality of all that lives.

Mahalo ("Thank you" in Hawaiian)