

# NOT FOUND, not lost

After the long search, a path of homecoming

JOEL AGEE Artwork by CHACO TERADA

In the mid-sixties there was a yoga teacher who published an announcement for the Space Age: “CALLING ALL ENERGY: COME HOME! COME HOME!” I loved that bulletin. I pinned it to my wall.

Now a different slogan is circulating among students and teachers of nondual spirituality: “Call off the search!” The idea is that we already are where we want to be, and that we need only to stop searching.

It’s a tricky proposition: enlightenment by declaration. Maybe it works for some. It didn’t work for me.

I traveled the long road of seeking. Lots of suffering, lots of confusion. Then one day it came to an end.

When I was in my early twenties I had a prophetic dream. A stern and very thin man gave me a large mirror and a cloth. The mirror was stained in several places. “Polish it until it’s clear,” the man said. I started polishing the mirror. The stains were not easy to remove. It would take a lot of work. “Make sure the stains are gone by the time I come back,” the man said, and turned away from me.

A few years later I read about the poetry contest that determined the successor to the Fifth Patriarch of Ch’an Buddhism. Shen-hsiu, the senior monk at Huang-mei Monastery, wrote a verse that excelled all others in succinctly summarizing the Buddha’s teaching:

The body is the *bodhi* tree,  
The mind, a mirror bright.

Joel Agee is an author and essayist, and a translator. His most recent book is *In the House of My Fear*.

Make sure to wipe it hour by hour  
So no dust can alight.

“Amazing!” I thought. “That was my dream assignment! A Buddhist dream before I knew anything about Buddhism!”

But Shen-hsiu didn’t win the contest. Further down the page was another poem:

There never was a *bodhi* tree  
Nor any mirror bright.  
Since all there is is emptiness  
Where could the dust alight?

This rebuttal raised its author, an illiterate kitchen helper named Dajian Huineng, to supreme eminence in the hierarchy of Ch’an Buddhism. His four lines have brought enlightenment to many seekers. To me they brought bewilderment. Or rather, they cast their clear light into a mind that was not yet prepared to receive it.

I was distracted by so many things: the urgencies of love and sex, the need to make a living, the angers and fears of political protest, the sociable pleasures of pot,



*Use Less Power, 2007,*  
sumi ink and archival  
pigment ink on silk,  
7 x 5 inches

hash, and speed, the phantasmagorias of LSD, and above all, books—religious and spiritual books, occult books, books on psychology. I read hundreds of them, and in my thoughts the incompatible premises of a dozen philosophies sought common ground.

If it hadn't been for that dream, I might have forgotten the *Platform Sutra*. But I returned to it, feeling that in some deep way it concerned me personally, especially as in subsequent dreams I came to identify the thin man as a representation of death.

**I NEVER APPLIED** myself much to polishing the mirror, at least not in the way Shen-hsiu recommended.

Once I planned to spend a summer with Shunryu Suzuki Roshi's Zen community in Tassajara. But I needed money to do that. To make the money, I wrote an autobiographical essay that had the good fortune of being published in *The New Yorker*. So I became a writer instead of a Zen Buddhist. I've often said that I write in order to clarify my consciousness. It's true. In this way, I've been polishing the mirror all along.

But before embracing this monkish vocation, I was swept up by the counterculture of the late sixties and early seventies. The zeitgeist made a virtue of impatience. Mirrors, particularly mind mirrors, were there to be smashed or else painted in DayGlo colors. Some people

took to making bombs and planning insurrection. The more inward-driven dropped LSD. We really believed that Heaven could be taken by storm, if not in a single raid, then with many. Some of us—the wiser ones, it seems to me now—were content with a few hours of ecstatic adventure, or terror, as the psychic roulette wheel would have it. Others, more enterprising and in their own estimation more spiritual, were after Enlightenment, which I conceived of as a transformation of my little self with its fears and ambitions into a great, wise, and loving No-Self that would be widely recognized as a sage.

Around the same time, I came under the influence of a charismatic spiritual teacher named J. Krishnamurti. He taught a quasi-Buddhist philosophy that denied the reality of the self, rejected all spiritual tradition and authority, and charged us all with the task of bringing the mind to the end of its machinations. Thought, by its nature divisive and violent, was the maker of all the world's multiple crises; therefore each of us was duty-bound to "die psychologically." It didn't occur to me to ask him how a nonexistent self could be held responsible for anything.

what am I saying, "mind?" It was immensity itself, power without limit, comprising all things past, present, and future. At the end of a fantastically rapid, unimaginably complex chain of reasoning, I was delivered the proof (I know now that it was nothing of the sort, but that is what I took it for then: iron, incontrovertible truth) that I, with my uncontrolled, self-centered thoughts, was the source of all the misery in the world, and that only I could redeem it. How? By taking upon myself the infinity of pain *forever*.

This cruel joke repeated itself periodically, with and without chemical inducement. The intervals of sanity could last weeks or months, but when the new attack came, its duration was eternal. No words can describe the horror of those spells.

I don't know what gave me the strength, during one of those ordeals, to face the accuser head-on and say NO. This absolute refusal displaced all thought, and it took the visionary form of a giant rock, golden yellow and suspended in space. "This is my faith," I said. Big mistake: with that claim I was back in the dialectic, virtually asking for a rebuttal. Sure enough, the rock exploded with-

## Exposed to the lucidity of simple awareness,

There were other teachers around—gurus, charlatans, saints, and pied pipers. I shunned them all, secure in the authority of Krishnamurti's judgment. But I continued to read books about the traditions he repudiated. I remember coming across the line "Your everyday mind is the Buddha-mind." How could that be? How could the petty, frustrated, time-bound, everyday mind be the Buddha-mind? The Zen literature was altogether full of maddening paradoxes. Puzzles too. The koans drew me like magnets.

The principal theme in Krishnamurti's talks was the destructiveness of self-centered thought: "You are the world. You have created the brutality, the wars, the misery." The corollary, as I understood it, was: "Therefore you must come to an end." This ferocious admonition became my secret mandate: "Die or be damned."

Was I the hunter or the hunted, the seeker or the sought? The dream of divine union became a nightmare of self-persecution.

One day, released by a few tokens of hash, the mind shook off the confines of logic and language and displayed itself in its primordial and superhuman dimension. But

out a sound. Pulverized fragments flew in all directions. I was devastated, demolished, so totally that there was no ground left on which to resurrect a defense. The prosecution rested. In that silence, recognition awoke—of emptiness, of space, of boundlessness, of freedom. Stunned and exultant at once, I said: "This you can't destroy!" And then: "On *this* rock I'll build my faith!" The rock, that is, of no-thing-at-all, which is truly indestructible.

I have often wondered why it had to happen this way. Maybe some people need an apocalypse to persuade them that it's really all over. But the trouble with this kind of showdown is that the defeated ego knows what to do with it: set it up in memory as a shrine or a monument and then dream of returning there, this time forever.

That is in fact what I ended up doing. For a while I was free of the anguish of seeking. I renounced drugs. I found myself playing, with contentment, the parts of a husband and father, a teacher's assistant, a writer honing his craft. A popular song said, "These are the good old days," and it really felt that way. Then gradually, almost without my noticing, the search began again. I went into therapy, attended dharma talks, visited non-

dual teachers, practiced zazen, went to Vipassana retreats, steeped myself in the sutras and studied their commentaries. I was polishing the mirror. Let the thin man scold me when he returns, I thought—it's the best I can do.

As for the meaning of Huineng's verse, it still escaped me. Maybe that vision of the exploding rock held a clue. How could I, even just for a moment, retrieve the experience? The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that something essential was missing. Often, when I cast the *I Ching*, I drew the line that says: "There is a ripe fruit still uneaten."

**SEVEN YEARS AGO** I stumbled upon the website of an Australian university professor who offered telephone counseling informed by "Eastern Wisdom." That offer held little appeal, but the professor's name, Peter Fenner, sounded familiar. Then I remembered: He was the author of an astonishing essay I had read two years earlier with the odd sense, as I reached its conclusion, that the top of my head had been taken off like a lid. Excited though I was at the time, I had put

chance of finding the jewel without price on the strength of this stranger's assurances, if he gave them? The answer was yes.

I no longer have the response he sent me, but I remember one sentence: "I can show you this over the phone." I was both skeptical and intrigued, attracted and averse. But the fee he proposed for an hour-long session was modest, and he would pay for the cost of the call. Why not? Maybe I would learn something.

Our conversation began with hello and how are you, do you hear me all right, followed by a brief exchange about the nature of my interest. I told him that I had been attracted to Buddhism for many years, that I believed I had experienced something like kensho a number of times, but found myself still searching, still convinced that something essential was eluding me.

"And what is that?" he asked.

A brief search for an answer: "I don't know."

"If you don't know what it is, how do you know it's eluding you?"

"I don't know. All I know is that most of the time I'm living at less than my full capacity."

## practice dissolves into a practice of no practice.

the article on a shelf in the hallway, visible on top of various stray papers, where I suppose it addressed me subliminally, reminding me of its theme every time I glimpsed the cover of the magazine it was in. Now I read it again.

The practice in question was one of simply observing, steadily and without interference, the *perpetuum mobile* of attraction and aversion that prompts most of our actions and supplies the fuel of practice itself. Exposed to the lucidity of simple awareness, practice dissolves into a practice of no practice (which is not the same thing as abandoning practice) where no one is doing or not doing anything, and natural freedom, no longer yearned for, naturally prevails. Something about this made me intensely curious.

I wrote Peter Fenner an email. I asked him if his impossible practice wasn't essentially what the Dzogchen texts call "non-meditation." Was he by any chance able to help me to experience *rigpa*, the nondual nature of mind? Vaguely, as I composed my message, I was asking myself: Would I fly to Melbourne for this? Should I risk a few thousand dollars for the unlikely

"And now?"

"You mean right now?"

"Yes."

I didn't know what to say about that.

"Take your time," Peter said.

*Take my time with what?* I wondered. But I took my time. We were silent for a while.

What was his question? I no longer knew. What was going on? Were we meditating? Was this a test? Was there some insight I was supposed to have?

A flash of suspicion, hilarious on second thought: that I'd hooked myself up with a Buddhist con man. *He's selling emptiness. But that's what I want, isn't it?*

Finally I spoke: "This is strange, being silent with someone on the phone. Especially someone I don't know. I feel I should be telling you something."

"I know what you mean. Maybe it helps if I tell you that I have no preference for speech over silence. I feel connected to you either way. We're sharing the silence, after all."

What a concept—sharing silence on the phone! I could do that. I listened. Then thoughts came, and I listened to those: *If he has no preference for speech over silence,*

does the opposite hold true as well? Maybe I should talk. But why? I have only one question, and he knows what it is. And so forth. This mental gnawing and questing had been going on for so long that it had become automatic, like a tic or a compulsive worry. Now, in the stillness, I saw that, and felt myself drop into a deeper, steadier attention.

“How are you doing?” he asked.

“Okay. But I don’t understand *what* we’re doing.”

“We’re not doing anything. At least I’m not. Are you doing something?”

“Yes. I’m trying to understand.”

“Oh. There’s nothing to understand.”

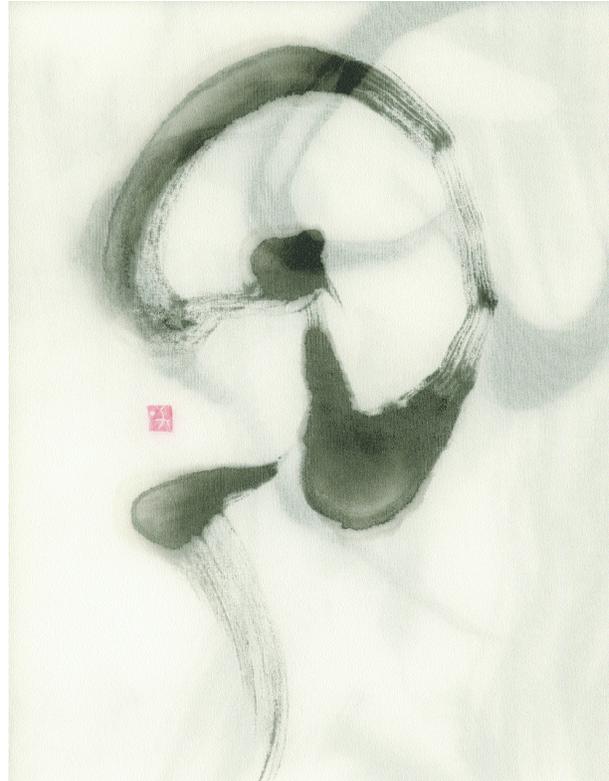
Silence.

“There’s nothing to work out either.”

Silence.

I’m noticing now that this bare transcription (I took it down from memory shortly after the call) does not communicate the extraordinary delicacy of the exchange, or its radical difference from any conversation I had ever engaged in. That difference was partly due to its purpose—an inquiry into something that

*Self II*, 2007, sumi ink and archival pigment ink on silk, 8 1/8 x 5 3/4 inches



## Often, when I cast the *I Ching*, I drew the line

was by its nature not communicable through words. I knew that, and yet here we were on the phone, and he was letting me know at each moment—with and without words—that what I was listening for would not—because it could not—come to me by way of conceptual clarification.

My listening was, consequently, extremely alert—like the alertness one feels when the lights go out at night in an unfamiliar house. You don’t know where the next step will take you. There is no memory, or very little of it, to guide you, so the other senses, which were half asleep while the dominant sense of sight was in control, take over the unfamiliar task of navigation. But I was restricted to the single channel of hearing. The other senses were of little avail. And there was this pleasant voice advising me, in a tone of gentle precision and with an Australian accent, that my expectations were leading me astray.

Buddhist psychology recognizes a sixth sense, the mind, with its corresponding mind objects. That was the one that was really stumped. There was nothing to think about, no point of reference—no orientation at

all. Not that I felt disoriented. I felt myself in good company, supported by the friendly presence at the other end. But where, in fact, was that other presence, the one that was not my own? The stillness was vibrant with ambiguity.

“Can this be enhanced?”

What did the “this” in his question refer to, I wondered.

“I have no idea.”

“Great!”

We fell silent again. Then I thought of something: “I can think of several ways in which this could be enhanced.”

“Like what?”

“My shoulders are tense. There’s tension in my face. I’m uncomfortable not knowing what’s going on here. If those factors weren’t present, it would be better.”

“Good. Now you can observe how you construct dissatisfaction.”

That was surprising. So obvious and yet so hidden! That I could be at ease with my tension, and make nothing of it! That discontent was a mind-made thing, an interpretation, not a simple given! Dissatisfaction: when

had I not felt more or less chronically dissatisfied, incomplete, and therefore driven? The truth of it rippled through memory into my body, and something like gratitude answered from the depths. At the same time I could feel my thoughts racing. It was a strange dissociation: a glow of contentment in the body, and this panic of thought scrambling for something to grasp in the void.

“My brain is still trying to figure this out,” I said.

“I call it ‘spontaneous deconstruction,’” he said. “It takes a while.”

Silence. The body was comfortably settled and stable, content. *I could sit here forever*, I thought. And then: *It could be that I’ll never get this*. And then, happily: *It doesn’t matter*. Maybe that was the turning point. The seeker came to rest, but without resignation.

What happened then . . . but when I say “happened,” it suggests an event, and there was no event. In a way, nothing happened. But this nothing that happened was a revelation. Unconditioned awareness, no longer sought as an object, shone in its own light, a luminous clarity without limit. I was look-

gone. It seemed I was again at the beck and call of the dualistic mind, believing its judgments, controlled by its fears. But in the course of several more telephone sessions with Peter I realized that something irreversible had occurred. The seeker had disappeared. He had never existed in the first place, but now it was obvious. For forty years I had been searching, never realizing that what I was looking for was this which was looking, and that this which was looking could neither be lost nor found.

Seven years have passed since then. I am sixty-eight years old. The thin man may not be long in coming. What can I say when he asks for his mirror? There is no mirror, only stainless, impeccable clarity. Still, not a day passes without some apparent fault arising and seizing hold of the mind—a sharp fear of blame, for example, set off by the innocent remark of a friend—and my thinking: “I have to fix this.” But no sooner does that thought present itself than awareness reveals the falseness of the belief in a solid, separate, permanent self that could be secured against damage. Nothing needs to be done. Wit-

that says: “There is a ripe fruit still uneaten.”

ing out of my window. Trees, a wall, the sound of chimes stirred by a breeze, the humming stillness in the receiver, the man in Australia who had guided me into this miracle—everything was made of the same subtle substance. What was it? Just this—silent, self-knowing awareness. The walls in my room stood as solid as ever but seemed immaterial, as if painted on air. Thoughts came and went. They too were made of awareness. So was the sound of an airplane as it etched a long curve into the stillness and vanished.

And where was I in this? Where indeed! Everything that I normally associated with the sense of “me”—sensations, thoughts, feelings, the body as a whole—was emptied of “me”-ness. The sense of self, still palpably present, was indistinguishable, as was everything else, from this vast, clear, open space.

**EPIPHANIES ARE BEAUTIFUL.** Like fairy tales, they suggest the possibility of an “ever after.” The day after that call, I looked around for at least a residue of the bliss I had experienced. It was

nessed without judgment, the spasms of defense and aggression, the hint of a child’s tears behind the eyes, relax and dissolve. The story of injury and humiliation dies on the vine.

That, in a nutshell, is the practice of no practice as I am living it. It’s not something one does—it happens. Yet it requires discipline—the effortless discipline of letting things be as they are. Paradox abounds on this pathless path. It is, in a sense, the inverse of the spiritual path as that term is commonly used. One cannot get off it, for one. And one isn’t going anywhere. The release of one’s self-identifications—physical, emotional, and mental—is an ongoing process; at the same time one is always already at home in self-knowing awareness. Even when awareness appears to be lost because, once again, the “me” has assumed center stage, there is awareness of that. Then awareness remembers itself and knows itself as the presence of everything that arises.

Sometimes I sit on a cushion for short or long periods of time. A person entering the room might think I am meditating and apologize for the disturbance. But that’s not what I’m doing. I’m just sitting. ▼