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THE LAST WORD

To Bernard

I first met the snakes properly at an ayahuasca session. I didn't see them, but I did feel the two twisting out of one, curving out of the jug of Daimé as it was brought around, and they made my stomach turn. Reading through my notes, however, I realise that this was not our first encounter. I was introduced to them by a Mancunian building contractor who ran a Buddhist group. We met every Sunday afternoon at the Manchester Students' Union for half an hour of meditation as brass bands and theatre groups rehearsed next door, and after a softly spoken dharma talk, Bernard would meet us individually in an adjoining room.

One-to-one was always very intense. He would sit there, intimidating in his serenity, volunteering nothing at all, not even a word, until I began to babble nervously about kabbalah, tarot, magick, drugs, Castaneda, Thelema, whatever devilry I was getting up to at the time. It was ten years ago and I was a blue-haired tekno fiend with fire in my balls and a Mercury obsession, but the quiet of those sessions stands out in my memory against a backdrop of high-volume chaos.

I don't know what Jedi master he studied under, but he could see right through you, and the veil was always thinner in his presence. One time I told him I had seen the letter K during meditation, and interpreted it as a something to do with my favourite magicKal sacrament at the time. He asked me to close my eyes and bring it to mind. I did so with a degree of scepticism, because I was dreadful at visualisation. I had tried for months, but despite sitting in

uncomfortable positions, staring at cards, branding symbols onto my skin, moulding hashish into the glyphs of gods, and complicated perversions, I had never managed to visualise anything at will. He patiently told me to bring it to mind, however, and there it was, a K, minus the vertical stroke. It looked much more like a <, and more like a hint to be aware of my posture, which was sloping to the right, than an instruction to take more ketamine.

I once complained to him about how my eyes watered during meditation, breaking my concentration. He asked what I felt as I wept. I felt nothing. Meditation was a profoundly uninspiring practice, with no feeling of flying, no angelic voices, no profound realisations, no bliss, no dhayana, no ananda, no banana. I only persisted because it made the chaos in my brain manageable. How strange to weep and yet not feel anything, said my teacher, passively confrontational as ever.

According to the Samartha tradition, the body has a centre in the head, another in the heart, and a third in the gut. They all have different functions and foibles, and suffering arises when they go out of balance. Bernard used the analogy of three chicks in a nest, competing for the food brought by the mother. He told me my head centre was consuming all the food, and the others were starving. I told him I was happy being cerebral, and wasn't really interested in grief. I dismissed his judgement. At that time I dismissed everything that didn't make sense.

Bernard asked me to concentrate on my heart centre and describe what I felt. 'What, here?' I asked, pointing at my sternum. Are we talking about the organ, my chest, my solar plexus, or what? 'Move your hand and concentrate,' he said quietly. I suspended my theoretical objections for a minute, and moved my awareness to the general area of my ribcage. 'What do you feel?' he asked.

The impression I had was of two fleshy tubes inside my chest, lubricated and shiny, like intestines sliding past and twisting around each other. More specifically, it was the point of contact between the two as they moved. I felt this physically in my chest, and was even a little repulsed by the slimy corporality of it. 'It feels like two snakes, sliding past each other,' I told him. He chuckled, obviously amused. 'Well, I guess you could describe it like that,' he said. I had no idea why I should find that shape there, and he offered no explanation. He didn't talk about it any more than that, and I forgot about it for years, but I felt the same shape six years later, emerging from a jug of ayahuasca.

Around the same time that ayahuasca showed me the snakes, though well before I remembered finding them in my chest, I understood what he was getting at concerning the three centres. It took

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a few gallons of ayahuasca and a little magick from a certain someone special, but my mind is not as greedy as it was, and my heart is a little better fed. It feels like I have been thawed out. I am more open to pain, but also to joy, and I really like people now, even stupid people. I used to like getting wasted with people, talking to them, sharing antics and fluids with them, and deduced philosophically that I liked them, but now I really adore people, sometimes people on the tube I have never even spoken to.

I started to weep one day, quite suddenly, during *The Shawshank Redemption*, and then quite often during cheesy films, including really bad ones, and sometimes during cartoons. It took a little while for real life to catch up, but I weep often and freely now, not usually for sadness, but for intensity of emotion. My eyes still water when I meditate, when I am tired or high, and there is still no grief associated with it, but then I don't think my teacher was trying to answer my question. I suspect he was using my tear-ducts as a crowbar on the freezer door. He could be quite sneaky when it suited him. The first time we met, I told him I didn't have time to sit for half an hour each day. Oh that doesn't matter, he assured me, five minutes is fine. He told me to meditate for five minutes the first week, ten minutes the next week, fifteen the next, and soon enough it was 30 minutes every day. He duped me long enough for me to get hooked.

He was sneaky, but he was brilliant. One time I was talking about the magnificent strides I had made in my magickal training, and he asked me to visualise a pentagram. Well, visualisation is not really my thing, I explained, I was talking about casting spells really. He asked me to visualise a pentagram on the wall. I turned my mind to it and there it was, I found to my surprise, sleek and shining. He told me to flip it upside down, which I did. Hey, this is easy, I thought. Then he asked me a completely unrelated question, but as I answered, he interrupted me:

'What did you do with your hand?'

'Nothing,' I replied.

'Yes you did,' he insisted. 'What did you do?'

I had, of course, done something. I tried to think back, and when I paid attention I realised, as he had realised, that I had thoughtlessly traced a tiny circle in the air. He asked me why I had traced a circle, but I had no idea, so he told me. I had flipped the pentagram back again to its original configuration with my finger. 'When you open a door,' he said gravely, 'make sure you close it again.' This was a very important lesson. I have crashed through many doors with impunity,

but always understood the importance of closing them again, sooner or later.

I have had the honour of meeting two really great Buddhists in my life; one was my teacher, and the other was the Dalai Lama. Two humans could not be more different. The builder would sit motionless, even after the meditation session was finished, imposing so pervasive a silence that you could hear a spoon going into the sugar as the tea went round. The stillness around him was deafening. The Dalai Lama, however, sat grinning and laughing in front of an audience of thousands of Japanese, fiddling with his spectacles and his beads as the interpreter translated, moving things around the desk and waving at monks. I had gone to his lecture sceptical of finding anything special in yet another man with a title, but some people are different.

At one point he took a maroon handkerchief from his maroon robe, raised it to his nose, and did the unthinkable. In Japan, people leave the room to blow their noses. It is something akin to farting in public, but His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso let rip. He gave his nose an unholy trumpet, first one side and then the other, and cheerfully inspected his bogey. Keeping snot in a handkerchief is even worse, according to Japanese sensibilities, but the fourteenth Dalai Lama, the earthly incarnation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, meditated upon the contents of the handkerchief briefly before returning it to his robe.

This struck me as an act of subversive genius, interrupting the train of thought of everyone there, forcing a rethink on the nature of convention, and by extension, the nature of conventional reality. My ex-wife thought it was adorable, and she giggled like a little girl. She was a student of Tibetan Buddhism and language, but like most Japanese women, the thing that really made her tick was cuteness, and that is what she saw. The subversive in me saw subversion. A guru is a perfect mirror. He touches each individual individually, and teaches with every step, with every breath and every excretion. It was probably not a conscious decision to attack Japanese mores, nor to charm Japanese women. It was a fully conscious man doing what he felt like doing. We project our expectations onto others, but a real sage breaks the mould, whether it is the fidgety King of Tibet, or a mindful Mancunian builder. And he does it by being himself.

Friends and adversaries, geniuses and fools, sages, tricksters, and dogs; it is time to close the door. The excluded has been included, the forgotten remembered, the Good News fused with rainforest brews. The dying god is revived and reunited with his other side, and all the Maries have come together. We have worked through deities, entities, and endless complexities, from Abraham to BABALON to bust, and now the

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Reverend takes his leave. Nemu's End has come, my brothers and sisters, and just in the nick of time.

May The Lord bless you and keep you.

May the snake bite you and beat you.

May they both lift up their countenance upon you,
and give you peace.

ΛΩMmm...

**THE
END**

APPENDICES

(was it nigh for you?)