

This is a spiritual autobiography of an average man who dares to ask and attempts to answer the biggest questions in life. As he struggles to understand the meaning of life, he confronts the ultimate question, "What is real happiness?", and stumbles upon its answer at an intensive meditation retreat.

About Life

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Where do we go from here?

How can I **WHAT IS REAL**
BE GOOD? HAPPINESS?

What is ^{What causes religious people to be intolerant?} *What is Christianity?*
a good person? Is there **life** after **death?**

What is the best way to **integrate** all religions? What is real?

Does *Where do we* **WHY SHOULD I BE GOOD?**

GOD ^{COME FROM?}
exist?

If God is **good and omnipotent**,
how can there be so much
suffering in the world?

What is the **MEANING**
VO NHAN of life?

What is enlightenment?

ABOUT
LIFE ^{Why are we here?}

^{What is the}
Truth?

What is Buddhism? **What is**

How does **HYPOCRISY?**
^{What is the self?}
hypocrisy happen?

Which religion is the best? **How**

If most people **can we**
want peace, **find the**
why do we have **Truth?**
so many problems
in the world? **WHO IS**

JESUS?

Who is the
Buddha?

Why do people **kill**
in the name of **God?**

Can we be moral without religion?

IS IT POSSIBLE TO RECONCILE
RELIGION AND SCIENCE?

Is it OK to be spiritual
and rich?

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CHAPTER 3:

HOW CAN I STEAL WATER WITHOUT GETTING CAUGHT?

When my oldest boy, Ho, was in sixth grade, he read a book about Cambodian refugees called *My Clay Marble* by Minfong Ho. After he told me about the book, I asked him, “Where was this place?”

“On the border between Cambodia and Thailand,” he said.

“What is the name of the refugee camp?”

“I think it’s called Nong Chan,” he said.

“And the kids in the book said it was like heaven to them?”

“Yes,” he replied.

I laughed. “Well, it’s more like hell to me.”

I will never forget my first image of Nong Chan. After the land pirates took our names and ages, they led us through the jungle for another hour. At the end of the walk, we reached a small hill. Standing on the hill, I looked down into the valley below and saw a big Red Cross sign on top of a gigantic hut. Hundreds of tents and straw huts dotted the landscape. Tens of thousands of people roamed all over the place. While I was grieving my white hospital, the rest of my group dashed toward a tall Caucasian lady. By the time I came down, the poor lady was under siege. Some grabbed her skirt, others held tightly to her arms, a few even put their palms together (a sign of begging in Viet Nam). Our translator frantically tried to convey everyone’s messages: “Please help us”...“We were robbed by land pirates”...“Please don’t abandon us”...“Please take us in.”

I can still see her right now. She was tall, skinny, blond, and had clear blue eyes. She spoke softly with a high-pitched, bird-like voice. Consoling us like an angel, she walked us into a hut. There, we received first-aid and water. What happened next, I don’t remember. The next thing that comes to mind was being strip-searched by Cambodians, again. This time it was a bit more personal, but I got used to the procedure. I pulled down my pants, turned around, bent down

completely, and opened my butt wide so they could make sure there was no gold hidden in it.

Next, we were given a blue tarp to build our tent. The next couple of weeks were tough. A dozen of us had to squeeze into a little tent, sleeping side by side on the ground. As weeks passed, a few more hundred Vietnamese refugees came, and the Red Cross found a giant tent to house us. This was quite an improvement. The tent's roof was much higher and we could sleep without touching one another.

After the sleeping situation improved, my mind was confronted with a new enemy: boredom. There was absolutely nothing to do in a refugee camp. I woke up, wandered around to look for water or food, found shade to gossip with friends, ate lunch, took a nap, sat around to wait for sunset (the average temperature was 110°F), ate dinner, walked around the camp to scavenge food and water again, then went to bed. The same exact schedule was repeated day after day. Boredom was not an evil in itself. What was bad about it was that it allowed pessimistic thoughts to seep into my mind. I was anxious about my next meal, wondered whether there would be water tomorrow, worried about people stealing my belongings, and worst of all, thought about the future. What could be worse than thinking about a bleak and nightmarish future?

The morning was the best part of the day. The scorching heat hadn't yet begun and I had lunch to look forward to. It was the afternoon that scared me most. One way to fight boredom and not think about the future was sleeping, but how could I sleep in 110° weather? Even if I could find shade, I couldn't be alone for five minutes before my face was covered with flies. Other people complained about mosquitoes at night, but I hated the flies much more. At least I could get some satisfaction from squashing a mosquito. But I wasn't stupid enough to kill a fly; it would only attract more of them. No matter where I went during the day, they followed me like a shadow. They had the most fun at lunch. As soon as my plate was filled with white rice, it was blackened with a horde of flies.

About three weeks into this camp, my boredom was relieved by an incident. A Vietnamese woman and her daughter had recently arrived with new clothing and belongings. For most of us who had been

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robbed a few times over, escaping unscathed was too much of a miracle for us to believe. Rumors were floating around, but the mother/daughter pair kept to themselves, so even more rumors were generated. A few days after they arrived, we found out the truth—or possibly a better rumor. Land pirates (yes, the same gentlemen who robbed and sold us to the Red Cross) showed up at the camp and asked for these two ladies. The camp leadership refused to turn them over. The pirates got upset. It turned out that one of the pirate leaders had saved the young girl from rape during her escape. Then he had fallen in love with her. She must have decided not to reject him, since doing so would have gotten her thrown back into the jungle. This odd living arrangement went on for weeks or months, until one day he had to leave his camp for an expedition. Instead of leaving her at his living quarters, he allowed her and her mother to come to the refugee camp until he returned. Why? Maybe because he didn't trust his subordinates. So why didn't he take her with him? Nobody really wanted to ruin the story, I guess.

Anyhow, now that he had returned, he wanted her back. She refused and asked the camp leaders to help her. Our camp leaders took advantage of the situation to convince the Red Cross to move us away from the Cambodian refugees who hated us for invading their country and had been making our lives miserable.

Some of this story must have been true, because my older friends—I lived in the same quarters as some of the camp leaders—seemed to be genuinely scared. To make things worse, I came down with flu. I remember sitting in the shade one day next to a young girl who was licking a lollipop. I was running a high fever, so my mind wasn't clear. The image and memory of tasting pure sugar must have been quite strong because I kept peeking at her. One time she turned her head and caught my eye. She smiled, but returned to her licking without saying much. I was so embarrassed; I wished I could disappear into the ground. But I was too sick to move. For the first time since I'd escaped, I pitied myself. "Poor me! In Viet Nam, I had everything a kid could want. My bike was the best in the neighborhood, nobody I knew read more than me, and none of my friends were good at as many

sports as I was. Now, I can't even afford a candy." I huffed and puffed, blaming Mom and everyone else for my misfortune. Interestingly, I didn't cry. Had I done that and begged, the girl might have given me a candy.

That night, my fever got worse. The pirates had vowed to come back and capture the girl by force. The Red Cross couldn't help us move to another refugee camp. After dark, the pirates did come, but still couldn't find the girl. They ransacked the camp and threatened to kill our people. Somehow, the camp leaders managed to convince them that the girl had gone into hiding on her own and they asked for one more day to find her. I was too sick to follow all the activities, but heard a lot of yelling, screaming, and a few gunshots.

When the Red Cross arrived the next day (they worked at the camp from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.), the whole camp literally came out to beg them to move us to another location, far away from this place. Somehow, these folks found a few trucks and shipped all of us out in the afternoon. I was still quite sick, but managed not to be the last person climbing on the trucks. As we were driven away, I looked back at Nong Chan and shuddered at the thought of having to live in that hell indefinitely.

I'll never forget the day we arrived at NW9—April 21, 1980. After going through so much, we finally had a camp of our own. We didn't care where we were. We didn't know what would happen to us. We just made a big circle, put up a fire in the center, and sang. We ate all the canned food and drank all the water, but we weren't worried. We tried to forget the past and enjoy this night as much as possible. The grass was our bed. The sky was our blanket. We slept like there was no tomorrow.

The next morning, we gathered to hear our fate. "We don't know how long you will be here. The Thai government has not yet accepted you. This is not an official refugee camp. No international delegation will be here to interview you for a permanent migration into a new country, but we promise to help you the best we can."

To this day, I don't know what NW9 stands for. My first impression was how shady it was. The soil was red-orange like the land outside Sai Gon. I think it was 10 to 20 miles from the Cambodia-

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Thailand border. To reach it, we had to cross a bridge, under which was a huge trench about 30 feet wide and 20 feet deep. Ex-military men told me that this was designed to slow down Vietnamese communists' tanks in case of an invasion.

The first few weeks at NW9 were actually fun. Compared to the last few days at Nong Chan, it seemed like heaven. Soon after our arrival, the Red Cross brought bamboo, saws, nails, hammers, huts, etc. We spent the next two weeks building huts. At night, we built camp fires, shared horrific stories of our escape, and laughed at each other. After tales of robbery, rapes, bravery, and narrow escapes, we reminded ourselves to live day by day and not worry too much about the future.

The camp was run by Thai soldiers and supported by the Red Cross. No contact with outsiders was allowed. The Thai government was suspicious of Vietnamese land refugees. They worried about communist infiltration. International volunteers only worked from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Although food, water, and other necessities were supplied by the Red Cross, Thai soldiers transported and distributed them.

About one month after our arrival, basic commodities like sugar, salt, toothpaste, and soap ran out. A few weeks later, rice became the only food available. We loathed Nong Chan, but there we'd received more food, water, and basic supplies. It was not unusual for us to receive a can of Spam once or twice per week. Gradually, salt became rare and we had to eat bland rice. Next, rice had to be rationed. Some days, we could only eat rice soup. We were hungry constantly for the next two months. When I ate, I never looked up. I tried to eat very slowly, making my meal last as long as possible.

Hunger wasn't my biggest fear, however. For whatever reason, I was quite scared of the possibility of a water shortage, maybe because I ran out of water during my walk in the jungle. When the camp leaders announced that each person was only allowed two to four liters of water a day, I hit the panic button. "How can I steal water without getting caught?" became my daily mantra.

Every morning, we lined up to receive our ration. The process was quite disorganized. A few Thai soldiers stood on top of giant metal

water tanks, pulled up the water in a plastic bucket, and poured it into our buckets. The waiting line was semi-orderly at the end of the line, but near the water tanks it was every man for himself. I literally had to fight to get my turn, make sure my bucket was filled fully, prevent others from stealing my water by scooping it with a bowl, and then fight my way out without spilling too much.

It took me a couple of weeks to pick up the tricks. Every morning, I woke up and vowed to do whatever was necessary to steal an additional four to six liters to have enough to clean myself. Sometimes, I got up very early to be the first in line, then got my water and waited a while before coming back for a second and third time. Other times, I snuck into the kitchen. The lowest method was to use a bowl to scoop some water from others' buckets.

One time I got caught. In addition to the metal water tanks, rain water was accumulated in a giant hole which was dug in the ground and lined with a blue tarp. One day, a friend came up with a brilliant plan. One of the reservoirs was almost empty; we could slide down and take a real bath. "Genius!" we all screamed. We headed to the reservoir and slid down the tarp to the bottom. It was a blast for a few minutes. Of course, we screamed our heads off until someone heard us. The soldiers tied our hands, dragged us back, and called a meeting for the whole camp. They made us apologize to everyone and promise not to do it again. Our punishment was to transport water for the kitchen for a month. Twice a day, a pair of us had to carry a 50-gallon water container from the distribution center to the kitchen.

Right after the meeting, I rushed back to my hut feeling angry, not ashamed. Grown-ups lied, cheated, and stole and got away with it. Why did I get caught on my first big one? One guy who lived in the same quarters admonished me to stop stealing. I smirked at him and said, "Everybody else is doing exactly the same thing. They were just good at not being caught."

Working at the kitchen, I saw more wheeling and dealing, even by the camp leaders. The kitchen was the place to be. While everyone else was only allowed two to four liters of water per day, the camp leaders and kitchen staff could take a real bath. The meal ration was

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one small bowl of rice without salt. Our leaders, their friends, and relatives somehow had meat.

Everyone knew it was wrong, but as long as the corruption wasn't blatant, most of us were resigned and accepted it as a fact of life. Of course, I joined in. I stole and bartered just as well as the grown-ups. The main currencies were cigarettes, salt, sugar, and water. My specialty was selling dirty water. First, I would do whatever it took to get about 10 liters of water; then I would stand inside a big empty bucket, soak a towel with water and carefully wet myself while keeping the dirty water from falling outside the bucket. While I washed, I focused only on the body parts that were most dirty and smelly, and I didn't use soap, since rinsing took at least 15 or 20 liters. When I was done, I would trade the dirty water for cigarettes, salt, or sugar.

During the third month in the camp, the food and water shortage became less severe. They were still rationed, but our individual portions were gradually increased, so much that some of us actually had enough water to take a bath. For the first three months, I lived with a few camp leaders, the same folks I stayed with at Nong Chan. One day, I was told to wash dishes after lunch. I fought it tooth and nail. I had done it many times before, but for some strange reason I just refused to perform the menial task that day. "Nobody tells me what to do," I yelled, "Not even my mom!" For a moment, I genuinely felt that it was beneath me.

"Tough luck," one person said. "You're not a prince anymore."

Hearing that, I burst into tears. But I still didn't wash the dishes. Instead, I moved out. I don't remember exactly what happened next, but somehow I was allowed to move into a hut occupied by ex-military officers. These guys were super nice. They took me in as one of their younger brothers. Although they ran a tight ship, I knew they gave me favorable treatment, probably due to my age. I enjoyed learning about military subjects. They liked to share their knowledge and stories with me. One was an intelligent colonel. I especially loved to hear his tales of political and military intrigue. Another was a paratrooper captain, Cuong, who became my mentor. Although all of them were nice to me, he took care of me personally. I think he was the one who gave me my first bed: a hammock made out of a big rice bag.

One day, I went to the toilet, which was really an open dump covered with straw. There was no toilet paper; we had to use leaves. Because of the issue with flies, this area was placed far away from the living quarters. While I was taking care of business, I heard a few gunshots. I tried to finish my bowel movement, but the shooting became louder and more frequent. Soon, people in the camp began to evacuate. The more people screamed and yelled, the more nervous I became, but my stomach wouldn't cooperate. By the time I started running, I could hear machine guns at my back. I hauled ass as fast as I could. When I reached my hut, most people had already taken off, but Cuong was still there waiting for me. Before I could gather my belongings, he rushed me out of there, yelling, "Your life is more important! Run! Stay with me!"

We ran for about 30 minutes. I had no idea which direction was the best. I just followed Cuong. It was almost dark by the time we stopped. There were a bunch of other people nearby, but I stayed closed to Cuong. We waited for another hour, after which the shooting began to die down. Some people started to walk back, but Cuong told me to wait. I worried about my hammock. A few people actually took advantage of the mess and returned early to steal. When you live in this environment, property ownership has a different meaning. There is no such thing as my soy sauce bottle or your can opener. You are an owner of an object only when you are using it. The next day, it might belong to someone else. Sure, you can mark it with your name, but what can you do if the thief is bigger than you? Cuong and I were among the last to return. Fortunately, our hammocks were still there. Until this day, I have no idea what happened that evening.

When food and water became less of an issue, we began to worry about the future. Planning, according to science, is one of our most treasured cognitive abilities. It is what separates us from animals. Yet this is the exact human trait we don't need in a refugee camp. As soon as our basic necessities were met, we began to beseech the Red Cross to upgrade our camp status so we could receive representatives from potential sponsoring countries. My first activity in the morning changed from stealing water to visiting the Red Cross office.

"Is there any news?" I asked.

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“Not really,” a worker replied.

“Can I have a pen and paper to write a letter?”

“Our camp does not yet have a physical address.”

To make things worse, there was a rumor that the Thai government might return us to Vietnam. The Red Cross tried to help by convincing the Thai government to let one Red Cross official sleep overnight at the camp. However, the rumor persisted. The longer we didn't have access to mail, the more we worried, since we officially didn't exist. Hunger and thirst gave way to stress. Some people started to act up. One kid tried to run away and got shot by Thai soldiers; luckily he survived. A woman went crazy and walked around naked. A camp leader got caught for stealing money from Thai soldiers; he was shaved and paraded around the camp in underwear. A few girls got pregnant, so the Red Cross had to start distributing condoms and pills. I tried to stay sane by playing soccer.

Fortunately, we got a post office address at the end of the fourth month. Everyone was ecstatic. We wrote as many letters as we could. I wrote to my mom, my brother, friends, and a cousin in America. Every day, I woke up and immediately walked to the front office to check for mail. A boy who lived nearby ran home one morning and yelled, “I got a package!” Everyone gathered around to watch him open his mail. It turned out to be a box of salt from his brother in another refugee camp.

I wasn't the first person to receive a letter, but mine came with money, \$100 U.S. dollars from my cousin. It was incredible! For the next few weeks, I lived like a king. I smoked Pal Mal, drank Coke, ate rice with chicken, sucked lollipops, brushed my teeth with real toothpaste, and crunched on chocolate candies. I even took a bath with soap. I shared the good life with my friends. We threw parties almost every day. And just as quickly as the money came, it went. After about three weeks, I was back to my normal self, waiting in line to receive water and food, hoarding stolen salt or sugar, and bartering it for cigarettes.

About one month after I received that first letter, international representatives began to arrive and conduct interviews. Thanks to my cousin, I was one of the first persons to receive sponsoring paperwork. It also helped that I was still a minor and traveled by myself. On

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September 26, 1980, I left NW9 along with about 150 refugees. As we crossed that small bridge, I looked back on the 3,000 people left behind. I cried. I told myself, "I will never forget you. When I eat beef, I will remember the rice without salt. When I drink Coke, I will think about the stinking water. When I take a shower, I will remind myself of the four liter water bath."

My next refugee camp was called Chonburi. I stayed there for three months, after which I moved to another camp called Galang in Indonesia. After living there for three months, I finally had all the paperwork to immigrate to my dream home, the U.S.A.

CHAPTER 13:

HOW DOES THE MIND WORK?

I'm a typical left-brain, analytical-rational type of person who doesn't have the slightest inclination toward anything remotely intuitive. Before taking up meditation, I never really understood Tu, who belonged to the psychic category. Whether it's people ("Can you feel her aura?"), houses ("Don't you just love the ambience?"), or daily decision-making (based on dreams), she seemed to live in a different universe. For the spouses who are in my shoes, I feel your pain. Don't you notice that because they make decisions based entirely on gut feeling, they tend to treat those decisions quite personally? What is even more frustrating is that they are right most of the time.

That was why I wasn't surprised that I didn't have visions or white lights beaming from my third eye, or see ghosts. The coolest thing I experienced was a rise of kundalini energy. It happened twice; both incidents lasted about 15 seconds. It felt like someone punched a small hole in the back of my head and air was blowing out at high pressure. There was no warning. I didn't do anything in particular before the incidents. They ended just as suddenly as they began. When I told my teacher about them, he didn't even comment. I got his message, "They are not important. Go back to your meditation practice."

My first significant meditation experience occurred at a week-long Vipassana retreat at Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, Massachusetts. Unlike Tathagata Meditation Center (TMC), IMS was a mansion-like farming estate situated in the beautiful rolling hills of Western Massachusetts. The place was so captivating, I daydreamed most of the first two days. While others laboriously performed walking meditation inside (walking back and forth within a 20-foot distance), I roamed aimlessly outside, sightseeing the forest, an adjacent lake, and nearby farmhouses. During sitting sessions, I let my mind follow the breeze through the windows outside to chirp with birds and chase after squirrels. Even better were the accommodations; I actually had my own

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room with a real bed. There was also a yoga room. “This is a five-star meditation resort,” I told myself.

Despite the lack of serious effort on my part, something major did happen. On the third night of the retreat, I returned from the restroom around 2:00 a.m. or 3:00 a.m. and couldn’t go back to sleep. I was lying in bed enjoying the quiet of the mind. Occasionally, thoughts and images popped up, but they didn’t initiate other thoughts. They just came up and passed by. I noticed that thoughts seemed to occur more frequently during the waking state. As sleep crept in, images became more dominant. Then came a state in which the mind had no thoughts or images at all for a long time. The mind randomly jumped from one object to another (e.g., breath, heartbeat, wind blowing outside, bodily sensation, etc.). After another two hours, I began to realize there appeared to be another “person” who monitored everything that was happening to the mind-body. I became excited (excitement in deep meditation is a very subtle feeling—even if someone points a gun at you, your heartbeat won’t increase), but continued to lie in bed to enjoy the new experience. It felt like there was a camera taking pictures and recording my thoughts, sensations, and bodily movements. I moved my left arm; It knew. I shifted my right leg; It recorded. I blinked an eye; It followed. No matter what I did, It seemed to track all my activities like a shadow. After another hour, the excitement wore off and I had some nervous thoughts, *What if It goes away? What can I do to make It last?*

I rose, went to the meditation hall early, bowed three times, and prayed for help. *Dear Kwan Yin (the Buddha had gone so I needed a bodhisattva), ancestors, teachers, God, and Jesus, please do all you can to help me.*

I sat by myself in the meditation hall, but didn’t feel lonely. Thousands of spiritual seekers had sat in this hall before me listening to great teachers from all over the world (the Dalai Lama, Mahasi Sayadaw, Ajaan Cha, and Dipa Ma). Their energy and spirit were with me. Normally this could have been an opportunity for melancholy thoughts (e.g., *Ah... this is what a spiritual life is like...too bad Honey is not here to share this moment with me...I wonder when I should bring the kids up here...*), but the mind was unusually calm and

concentrated, sustained by the constant awareness of the Observer. There was no more expectation (such as sitting for a certain duration or achieving one-pointedness in shorter amounts of time). The mind was truly enjoying the presence, one breath, one sound, one bodily sensation at a time. Occasionally there were anxious thoughts (*Is it possible to keep this mode of consciousness all the time? What happens if it disappears?*), but they just popped up and passed away.

Breakfast was experienced like never before. Most revealing was how often my mind paid attention to women. Before the retreat, I had vowed not to make eye contact, but as soon as a lady passed by, a thought arose, *I wonder what she looks like?* When a woman walked toward me, I intentionally lowered my gaze, but that didn't stop the mind from making a comment, *Hum, such small feet!* Sometimes, as soon as I caught sight of a woman, my head automatically turned in that direction. I swear it did this by itself! Regardless of what happened, however, the Observer coolly monitored the activities without distraction. By noon, It was gone.

I could tell right away because I wasn't as amused with my judgments and thoughts. During lunch, the thought popped up, *These folks need to pick up a few recipes from the San Jose meditation center.* Immediately, it was followed by, *Shame on you!* Most of the time, my mind was occupied with how to regain that mode of consciousness. Here was my plan:

1. Learn how to sit and stay with my breath as often as possible. Other objects like sensations can be used, but the main goal is to let the mind rest on its most natural object. The expectations (e.g., sitting longer or sitting until seeing something) and the aversion to wandering thoughts actually consume much energy. The attachment to one-pointedness and its blissful feelings prevent the mind from going "further."
2. Learn to walk more mindfully. The trick to walking meditation is the same as that for sitting meditation. I have to find meditation objects (e.g., lift-forward-land) that come most naturally to me. Don't try to see too many details of walking yet. Make an extra effort to keep the mind away

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from wandering thoughts during walking, especially from planning (e.g., when to get a drink, go to the restroom, or take a break).

The Observer came back the next morning, but disappeared again in the afternoon. As my mindfulness deepened, I was able to gradually prolong that mode of consciousness during the day. It wasn't easy by any means. By the end of the retreat, I was ready to go home.

On the last morning, I came early to the meditation hall to sit. Again, I cried and thanked everyone and everything that I could remember. When the taxi came to pick me up, I wanted to scream my head off, "I LOVE YOU ALL!" as he was driving away, but I didn't. When the Observer was there, an idea, no matter how great, was simply another thought.

I recorded these words after the retreat:

The alternating periods of sitting and walking combined with the effort to stay mindful continuously throughout the day created a separation between the mind-body and a new mental ability. This ability is nothing but a constant awareness developed from the continuous practice of Right Concentration and Right Mindfulness. Even though it was a mental capability, which was subject to impermanence like everything else, it had the power to generate insight because it could monitor the mind-body objectively.

Had a good sitting this morning. Felt the Observer again for the first time since the retreat. Need to look at the rising and disappearance of this awareness more closely to know how to describe it in more specific terms. Is it present only when the mind can return to its background object (e.g., breath) frequently during the day without effort? For example, when I'm walking, the mind should just focus on "walking." If a nice lady walks by, the thought "she's beautiful" might be followed with "my hair is messy," which is followed by a smile. And if the

mind returns to my breath or the act of walking after that smile, then would the Observer be sustained?

Last Sunday, the Observer lasted for several hours. Its strength lessened after I started talking to the kids. Is it practical to expect the awareness to be present all the time? Right now, the mind-body seems to attach to it because: a) it is accompanied by a mild bliss; b) the mind was in a state of equanimity (i.e., no attachment to sense objects); and c) it was fun to monitor the mind-body with complete detachment.

The day after I came back, I called my teacher. He confirmed all of my observations.

“This Observer mode is so wonderful, but how long does it usually last?” I asked.

“A few days, a week, or a month,” he answered. “It depends on your mindfulness practice.”

I sighed. “It’s so hard with a family, Su (Teacher).”

“I know,” he said.

“I’ll be happy if it lasts a few days.”

“Right now,” he said, “your practice is young. It will go away, but the memory of it will help you deepen your practice.”

It lasted two days. I was sad when it ended. It motivated me to sit more frequently during the day. My mindfulness practice was still weak, so whenever I caught myself becoming unmindful (e.g., talking too much, getting too emotional, or being occupied with trivial thoughts for too long), I reminded myself to sit down and breathe for a few minutes. For the first few months after the retreat, I once in awhile found the Observer mode again, usually for a few hours in the morning. But as the retreat’s residual effect wore off, I unintentionally slackened my mindfulness practice -probably because it was simply too hard to keep it up continuously throughout the whole day.

The most important insight I had gained, and kept reminding myself of, was that my thoughts, feelings, and actions were NOT mine. I didn’t laugh, cry, feel, or judge; the mind-body did. So who was I? Ah...It took me another two years to even ask that question. The immediate result of this new insight was the belief in the teachings of

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the Buddha. Before the retreat, although I sat and tried to be mindful, I didn't really understand the reasons. Even when the Observer mode was not present, I noticed a definite difference in my ability to monitor my thoughts, action, and feelings. Here is an example.

My daughter, Dinh Nhi, was born about six months before the retreat. She had problems with sleeping. Tu and I tried practically everything: music, raising the mattress, vibrating the crib, etc., but nothing worked. She would fall asleep for an hour then wake up and cry. Sometimes, she screamed like she was having physical pain or a bad dream. We checked with her pediatrician, who cleared her of any physical problems. Most nights, we ended up taking turns holding her, rocking her, singing to her, or doing whatever it took to help her—and us—sleep.

One evening, as I was horsing around with Ho (seven) and An (five), I suddenly realized that I should, instead, calm them down so they could go to bed early so I could have some time off before another challenging night with Dinh Nhi.

"Hey boys," I said, "let's wind down. You need to go to bed in fifteen minutes."

"Who is the best running back?" Ho quizzed me. I had made the mistake of introducing sports to him two years ago. Now he was reading *Sports Illustrated Kids* and watching ESPN.

"Right now, or ever?" I asked.

"Ever," he said.

"Who do you think it is?" I told myself to speed up the conversation. Suddenly, An body-slammed my back, mumbling something about Captain Underpants.

I noticed a slight irritation in my voice when I said, "An, don't do that again."

"Emmit Smith," Ho answered proudly.

"He is not even top five," I protested. As I was planning to explain to him the nuance of football, I realized that I was very tired and this was not a good time to drag this conversation on or else he would ask another ten questions.

Ho pointed to his magazine. "But he just passed Walter Payton's total rushing record."

Although I was aware of my intention, I couldn't stop the conversation. "Ho, you have to take into account the total number of games they have played, whether their team was any good, whether they have support from a passing game, etc." Before I could finish my sentence, An body-slammed me again.

"An, if you do that one more time, you'll be in big trouble, Buddy!" My voice was raised; irritation had turned into anger.

While Ho rushed to his room to verify the information I gave him in the ESPN Sports Almanac, I bent over to kiss Dinh Nhi, who was still lying on the floor. Just then, An rammed his body onto my back for the third time.

"That does it, An!" I screamed at him. Startled, he began to cry. Immediately, I came over to hug him and said, "I won't put you in time out, but you need to go to bed, right now, okay?"

"You scared me, Daddy," he sobbed.

I patted his back. "I'm sorry, but I warned you twice."

This was one of those episodes when I was mindful enough to watch my thoughts and feelings, but not enough to control my actions. It was an interesting state of mind. I was observing myself. I thought I was in control, but I was not. The mind-body seemed to have a mind of its own.

A mindful mind can be described as a combination of calmness, concentration, and awareness. Calmness can be gauged by a low pulse and resistance to arousal by senses, feelings, or thoughts. Concentration can be measured by the frequency of thoughts per cycles of breath. Awareness can be identified by the number of thoughts right after the mind makes contact with a sense object. For example, I am sitting in a coffee shop and typing. A guy walks by; he is wearing an Adidas Samba (an indoor soccer shoe). As soon as my mind perceives a sense object (a specific type of shoe), it automatically has a few associative thoughts, such as playing soccer on the street with my buddies in Da Nang. If my mind is mindful, it returns to my breathing. If not, I would spend the next few minutes day-dreaming about the good old days; how I had to play with bare feet, how my friends and I didn't have money to buy a leather ball and had to settle for a plastic ball, how this situation helped my dribbling skills, but hurt my shooting techniques, and so on.

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Because of this ability, a mindful mind can pick up subtle thoughts and feelings. Before anger arises, the mind would notice irritation. If mindfulness is stronger, it would first detect annoying thoughts. At an even stronger level, it would pick up the very first irritating thought. The average person usually doesn't notice any of these mental events. By the time an emotion arises, it is too late to prevent action. But with mindfulness, he will be able to control his actions even in an accident.

One time, An accidentally stepped on my toes with his shoes. I yelled, "Ouch!" and felt a strong painful sensation, which was immediately followed by the thought of kicking him. Then I said, "An, be careful!" Note that I detected a reflexive thought (an urge to kick), but did not experience any angry thoughts. If I hadn't been mindful, I would have kicked An through reflex, but I didn't, simply because I was able to pick up the thought even before the kicking reflex had occurred.

A mindfulness practice is much more difficult than meditation. I don't get to sit alone with my eyes closed. I have to practice it while driving, talking, walking, eating, working, even going to sleep. Some days everything is clicking and mindfulness stays with me from the time I wake up until the time I go to bed. But my practice is still weak; most days I have to make a concerted effort throughout the day. The key phrase is "throughout the day." This is why mindfulness is so difficult. This was why I struggled so much after the retreat at Deer Park Monastery. Back then, no matter how much willpower I possessed or how serious my commitment, I simply didn't have enough concentration to carry me throughout the day. By "concentration" I mean specifically that the mind has an object (e.g., breath) to return to during waking hours. The average mind does not have such an "anchor." Throughout the day, it simply jumps from one sense object to another. If an object is boring (a lecture), it ignores it. But if it is interesting (e.g., a beautiful skirt, a bad perfume, a praise, a criticism, etc.), it will occupy the mind for minutes, hours, days, or even weeks. Remember that an interesting sense object can be pleasant or unpleasant.

A person with a strong meditation practice has an object (e.g., breath, mantra, or sound) that serves as a background or an anchor for the mind to return to. That's why she is calmer and less affected by the ups and downs of life. Even if a person has reached this level, if she does not attend an intensive meditation retreat to learn the art of mindfulness, she will not be able to take full advantage of her concentration. After her morning sitting, her "tank" of calm energy will be full, but without a strong mindfulness practice, it will be depleted during the day. With a mindfulness practice, her energy tank will not be emptied. In fact, if she learns how to be mindful with every task she carries out during the day, her tank will still be full at bed time.

Mindfulness not only helps me control my feelings and actions, but also generates wisdom. One day, I showed Ho and his friends an outdoor game. Ho was very excited at the beginning, but became upset when he was the first one to lose and had to stand for his friends to throw water balloons at him. As soon as I heard him crying, I sensed irritation arising. "It's only a game, Ho," I told him. When a water balloon hit his face, he cried harder. I became upset. I walked him inside and gave him a lecture for being a sore loser. Poor Ho! The harder he tried to be a "big boy" for Daddy by wiping off his tears, the harder it was for him to stop crying. I stood there watching him cry, feeling mad and guilty at the same time. I walked over, patted his back, left him in the house, and went outside to continue supervising the game. He came out about five minutes later to join us.

After a sitting the following day, I became curious about my behavior. Why did I feel anger instead of compassion for Ho, even when he cried very hard? Although I failed to come up with an answer right away, I told myself to start keeping track of similar incidents. Over the next few months, I found many more similar situations. Most of the time, they involved an annoying thought when I saw or heard others complaining, whining, feeling sad, or crying. One time, I even got upset at Ho for crying during a very good sitting.

After a few months of observing the mind-body and focusing on this one behavior, it began to dawn on me that I disliked crying because I viewed it as a sign of weakness. As a child, I was able to keep from crying even when I was whipped. No matter how bad it was in the

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refugee camp, I could always suck it up and move on. My way of handling adversity was suppressing my feelings. My mind almost took adversity as a challenge. If an experience was bad, I ignored it if I couldn't do anything about it. But if I could, I did whatever it took to get even.

More importantly, I realized that Ho's natural way of handling adversity was accepting negative experiences. When something bad happened to him, he readily accepted it, felt sad, and cried. Crying, in this case, was very therapeutic and needed to be encouraged because it helped him ease his pain and hastened his recovery.

Once a certain part of me was discovered, I seemed to get a kick out of knowing more about the "new" me, even from the most mundane moments of everyday life.

During one dinner, Ho asked for a Coke, but I said, "No." When he continued to push for it, I reprimanded him. After about ten minutes, he seemed to get over it. For some reason, I raised the subject again and gave him a lecture. He cried and ran to his room. He continued to cry for another few minutes until Tu came into his room to console him. Afterward, he came out and told me, "Dad, I got over it. Why did you keep harping on it?" I apologized and we hugged.

As I was falling asleep that night, I was amazed at how insensitive I was as a kid. A remark like that would mean nothing to me. I could intentionally break a rule to have fun, get caught, take a harsh physical punishment, and repeat the exact process again the next month. No matter how many times I got beat up or was lectured, I simply didn't have any guilt. Even when I was caught red-handed for stealing or lying, I never considered the possibility that I was a bad person. Ho is my complete opposite. He wants to do the right thing not only because he wants to please his parents and teachers, but also because he has a strong sense of shame.

Mindfulness might have helped me observe my mind, generate wisdom, and become a better father, but it couldn't help me handle one important part of my life—babysitting. In the fall of 2003, I invited my teacher to lead a four-day Vipassana retreat at the local temple. The idea seemed so right at first, but as the retreat was taking place I got cold feet because I had to babysit my kids so Tu could attend. Men's

genes are not naturally selected for babysitting. Yes, we hunt for food and will do anything to protect our family. We can even play with our kids. But these activities don't require patience, caring, nursing, and—my worst fear—handling crying in public. When I see a mother with three kids at a restaurant, I marvel at her calm, especially when one of them begins to act up. I had done my share of babysitting over the years, but my record up to that point was one weekend. Now, all of a sudden, I needed to occupy a seven-year-old who couldn't sit still, a five-year-old who talked non-stop, and an infant who could scream like an ambulance for FOUR STRAIGHT DAYS. When a friend asked me if I would attend the retreat, I told her, "No, I have a much harder job - babysitting three kids for a long weekend." She laughed, but I wasn't joking. I would take four days of sitting with pain, walking around like a zombie, not talking or even making eye contact with others, and not eating after lunch over babysitting any time. Ohhh...the things we men do for our wives!

Who did I turn to for help?

"Mom, Tu has to attend a silent retreat; would you *please* help?"

"Okay," she said, "but I can only do it for two days."

Oh well, two days were better than none. Now all I had to do was plan enough activities for them during the weekend and I would be fine. Wrong!

As long as my mom was in the house, I felt confident. Somehow, I needed a woman's presence to make me feel secure. She cooked while I did most of the other chores. After the kids went to bed, I wanted to relax with a movie, but convinced myself not to. "You need to sit as much as you can," I told myself. How on earth do homemakers survive? I have always told Tu how much I appreciate her for deciding to stay home after An was born, but I really had no idea how tough it would be. We men like to deceive ourselves about how hard work is, but the fact is that we would not survive even a week at home with our kids. Things went along well enough the first two days, so when I dropped off my mom, I actually felt like I could not only handle, but even *enjoy* the weekend. Wrong again!

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I woke up early on Saturday and sat for about an hour. The kids woke up soon afterward and we had fun horsing around in bed. An was so fun-loving. He played like nothing else mattered. He made goo-goo-ga-ga sounds while rubbing his head against Dinh Nhi's tummy, making her giggle. He sang, danced, and piled up pillows to jump over them. Whatever he did, he did it with 100% of his energy. I told myself to remember these moments so that one day, if I could play like that I would know I was making progress with my practice.

While I cooked breakfast, Ho and An played with Dinh Nhi. When she chewed one of An's new Pokemon cards, he cried like nothing else mattered.

"It's only a card, An," I consoled him.

"But it was a rare card," he protested, then yanked all of his cards from Dinh Nhi, who in turn began to cry. She had an uncanny ability to shed tears the moment she started crying. Her crying must have gotten to me; I raised my voice to An.

"Why don't you let her have one of your old cards?" I suggested.

"No!" An said.

"Okay, Ho, bring Dinh Nhi to the living room and watch TV with her. An, you need to put away all of your cards."

An just sat there trying to straighten out his crumpled card. "NOW, An!" I yelled.

He was startled and began to cry again, while slowly picking up his cards. After another ten minutes, most of the cards were still lying on the kitchen floor. I got mad, stopped cooking, and walked over to An. Squeezing his arm, I yelled, "You have ONE minute to clean up this mess."

He finally got the message and put his cards into a basket, crying all the while. Now, had I been mindful, I would have realized that An was still grieving his bent card; he needed time to cry. If I had been able to catch the irritating thoughts before they became anger, I wouldn't have asked him to pick up those cards.

Things got worse. As the day progressed, I became more unmindful. My mind kept planning for the next activity: taking Ho to a baseball game, dropping all of them at my mother-in-law's house so I

could shop at Home Depot, renting a movie, picking up Ho's allergy medicine. While I was driving around, I felt tired and restless; I munched on whatever was available in the car, but I didn't stop and sit. Had I done that, I wouldn't have hit An at the baseball game.

While we waited for Ho to finish his baseball game, An goofed around and spilled the ice chest. Nothing major happened. We just lost some ice. But when my body was already tired, my mind became easily irritated. Without any warning, I hit An on his back and said, "You just can't help but be a bad boy today, can you?"

He cried hard. I knew right away I was wrong, but didn't say anything. Had I been able to acknowledge my anger, I would have apologized to him. But I didn't. I wisely decided not to cook for dinner. We ate out; the kids had fun, but I was simply relieved that tomorrow was the last day. Sunday was uneventful. All I could remember was how much my mind kept thinking about 4:00 p.m., the transfer time. The kids and I arrived at the temple a bit before four o'clock. I laughed at myself when I saw my teacher was still giving a lecture, but after another hour, I began to have bad thoughts about him. He finally finished at six. Tu sat in the front because she had to translate for my teacher. I walked in, letting the kids charge directly to Tu. *THE RETREAT IS OVER, PEOPLE!* I yelled... internally, of course.

Note how my anger had been born simply from unmindful thoughts, feelings, and actions, which accumulated as the day progressed. Without a mind-training program, the average mind would have no chance against unwholesome thoughts and feelings because:

- Our normal mind is like a robot. Most of our actions in everyday life are carried out semi-automatically. So we can never catch the first moment of contact with sense objects that cause us to have negative thoughts or aversive feelings.
- Once these thoughts and feelings—pleasant and unpleasant—begin to snowball, they generate stronger feelings, but many times we still don't recognize them (e.g., "I'm angry").
- Even when we are able to acknowledge these strong feelings, the Self intervenes to rationalize or make excuse

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(e.g., by blaming others or the external environment). So we are still far away from being ready to address or resolve these feelings even when we know that they are causing suffering to ourselves and others.

- A small percentage of us might be able to admit these feelings, but we don't know what to do with them.
- Even with folks like me who practice meditation, if we don't keep it up, we still fall in the same trap.

There was one funny incident on Sunday. While we were eating breakfast, Ho yelled, "Dinh Nhi is pooping, Daddy!" I turned around and found Dinh Nhi smearing herself with poop from her diaper. I panicked: "Oh nooooo!" I hastily picked her up and ran into the back yard like someone trying to throw away a grenade. Why the back yard? I had no idea. No amount of concentration and mindfulness could prepare me for such an experience. From the time I saw the poop until the time I finished cleaning Dinh Nhi, my mindfulness vanished. How did I know? Because as soon as she was cleaned, I found my breath again. Why was I so scared of poop? You might think this is hardly a spiritual question. But it is.

CHAPTER 18:

HOW DOES HYPOCRISY HAPPEN?

As I was making progress in my practice, I couldn't help but share my enthusiasm with others. I told stories about my wonderful experiences, tried to convince others to meditate, and sent emails to spread the gospel. During one of our weekly meetings, when someone questioned the importance of meditation, I said, "You're not a real Buddhist if you don't meditate. Not only do you need to meditate daily, you must attend silent retreats."

Twice a year, I organize Vipassana retreats led by my teacher at the local temple. When not enough people sign up for a particular retreat, I convince my teacher to divide the retreat into two programs:

- Vipassana meditation, regular retreat schedule.
- "How to be a Buddhist for a week" Participants will meditate for 30–60 minutes at home, try to keep the Five Precepts during the week, and attend a dharma lecture at the temple in the evening.

But after a few years, interest in retreats waned significantly. In fact, only two people showed up for the last retreat. Like thousands of spiritual nerds before me, I've made the mistake of assuming that:

1. Most people are interested in spirituality like me.
2. Everyone should be spiritual.
3. Whatever works for me will work for others.

When I began to reap the benefits of my practice, I couldn't wait to teach meditation to my kids. I didn't pick it up until I was in my 30s. Imagine how much better they would become if they started at six! Just like a typical religious development program, I, out of good intentions, wanted to foster and instill moral and religious behavior in my kids and the rest of the society. I sincerely believed in my religion, its philosophy, doctrines, and rituals. I believed that I knew what was best for them. "Here are the things that are good for you. Learn them, believe in them, practice them, and you'll be good."

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Let's view this approach through a child's point of view. At three, a child is punished for not being able to control her impulses. At five, as soon as she is barely able to do that, she is told to manage her needs and self-interests. At eleven, just as she begins to control her needs, she is expected to regulate her emotions. At sixteen, when her body is filled with emotions, she is asked to lower her Ego, which is just beginning to shape up.

What a typical religious program does is add one more layer of pressure (religious beliefs, rules, and rituals) on top of the biological constraints, social responsibilities, past karma, and psychological limitations.

Another problem is that children are repeatedly told to practice and believe in what they are taught, yet there is little motivation and/or opportunity for them to practice what they have learned in the real world. Let's say we want to help a child who is obese and inactive by nature. If we teach her every Sunday about good eating habits and the need to exercise, then tell her to go home and do it, would we be surprised if she doesn't make any progress? Should we be disappointed in her if she stops going to class? Many of us adults have tried to eat right and exercise, but how many actually succeed? And here we are dealing with only two specific habits: eating right and exercising. Imagine the list of skills and habits required for a person to become spiritual? Yet, that is precisely what we are doing to our children.

Believe it or not, some children actually "make it" through the religious boot camp. They are faithful, pious, and devoted. They perform all the required rituals, participate in community services, and try to live up to the moral codes. Let's see what happens to them.

Let's strip away all the differences among religions and focus only on a few universal moral rules such as "Don't kill", "Don't steal", "Don't lie", and "Don't have pre-marital sex". Pretend you are one of these young adults. In trying to meet these moral rules, you get a piece of paper and write, "For the next 30 days, I vow to keep these rules to the best of my ability. I promise to uphold not just the letter, but the spirit of them." You sign the letter, post it on your refrigerator, and proceed to live normally, except when you break a rule, you record the incident. How many violations do you think you will have? I gave up

counting them after two months and I consider myself as strongly will-powered. Now add hundreds of other rules traditional religions expect you to keep and you get a sense of how ridiculously difficult it is to be religious.

Ah, but that is the easy part. Jews had it easy back then when all the rules were specifically prescribed. And when they didn't understand a rule, a rabbi was there to explain it. Then came Jesus, who actually made it tougher. He didn't want us to just obey the rules blindly. Instead, he admonished us to repent. A repentant is one who confesses her sin privately toward whomever she has harmed, asks for forgiveness, and is ready to accept whatever consequences resulted from her sins. The hard part about repentance, for me, isn't knowing whether or not my sins will be truly forgiven, it is confessing the same sin again and again sometimes toward the same person. During my first few years of repentance, I kept having dreams in which I walked around naked. I didn't do anything unusual, just normal everyday activities, except I was not wearing pants. To repent is to surrender one's Self/Ego to God. That's why it is a huge step above simply following a bunch of rule, rites, and rituals.

The Buddha wants us to push beyond repentance. To surrender to God, to be with the Divine, according to the Buddha, is simply a subtle way to enlarge one's Self/Ego. If we understand our minds, he says, we will realize that all the religious and spiritual activities, all the mystical experiences are actually done to boost the Self. That's why true repenters like St. Augustine and Martin Luther still rigidly cling to their interpretation of the Bible and persecute other Christians who believe otherwise. A Buddhist, no matter how misguided, cannot use his teachings to persecute other religions, to force others into becoming Buddhists, to conquer others' lands and to steal their resources. The Buddha knows how the mind works and designs his teaching accordingly. However, it is simply too difficult.

The history of Buddhism speaks for itself. One hundred years after the Buddha's reaching Nirvana, a few monks argued that one could be enlightened and still have wet dreams, others wanted to eat after noon, yet others thought it was okay to receive monetary donations. A few hundred years more and sutras began to spring up

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making it easier for normal folks to practice Buddhism. But once a can of worms was opened, everything was permitted. So, according to “The Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life”, a person only has to recite ten times the name of a Buddha called Amitabha before death and he will reach “The Western Land of Bliss,” where he can later become a Buddha or return to earth to help others. A few hundred years after that, Chinese monks systematized these sutras and developed Pure Land Buddhism.

Western intellectuals might see this development as a real travesty of the original teachings of the Buddha, but I beg to differ. It’s not a coincidence that Pure Land Buddhism has the largest following. Faith is one of the most basic and fundamental aspects of the human mind. We all need it. Children need it to grow up. We use it every time we fly or have a surgery. Because of the religious conflicts in the West, faith has been given a bad name, but actually it is just as legitimate as any other approach to spirituality (like rationality or intuition), providing it’s based on a sound moral framework. Without Pure Land, my mom would not have been able to make it in the U.S. The local temple and the community provided her with something she could never find anywhere else.

Here we find a bottleneck of religion: it sets goals that are unreachable. When religious founders preach about absolute faith, repentance, or enlightenment, they don’t take into account the fact that we used to be animals. Killing, stealing, cheating, lying, and having multiple sex partners were what our ancestors did best. That was how they were able to survive, procreate, and evolve.

I approach the theory of evolution the same way I do any other philosophical or scientific concept: with complete objectivity. Because my practice is observing my mind objectively, I treat any new concept or idea the same way. Instead of rehashing the debate, I simply point out one fact to my Christian friends who might still have doubts about this issue. The beauty of a scientific theory is that one ugly fact can ruin it. The guy who discovers this fact will be heaped with praise and recognition. Sure, scientists are human. They have been wrong in the past and will be wrong again in the future, but they also have

established a great system to ensure that facts and truth prevail in the end.

The evolution theory is important to spiritual seekers because it clearly explains why and how most of our “animalistic” behaviors and feelings exist and evolve. The very fact that we call them “sins” or “unwholesome” shows that we completely misunderstand them. Anger, greed, fear, lust, etc. were simply parts of our animal ancestors’ behavioral repertoire, without which they would not have been able to compete and survive. If they couldn’t survive in their own environment, we wouldn’t be here. As I was reading about the theory of cognitive dissonance from *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me)*, a thought popped up. The whole human existence is a giant cognitive dissonance generated by an oxymoron: *We are a thinking animal*.

Realizing this point is critical because a major part of a spiritual path is dealing with “sins” while trying to live according to moral guidelines. If we understand that these “sins” are genetically wired into our brain, we might accept our own faults and weaknesses more easily. The quicker we can do that, the sooner we can apologize and/or forgive others for their mistakes.

If you are 1,000 pounds overweight and your trainer is harping on you training for a marathon, how long would you stick with him? Would you stay with a piano teacher if she keeps teaching your seven year old daughter Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata”? What do you do when you want to learn about yoga, but your instructor only focuses on the headstand?

Well, we can always find another physical trainer, piano teacher, or yoga instructor, but how often do we get a chance to find another Moses, Buddha, Confucius, Socrates, Patanjali, Jesus, or Mohammed? To appreciate how an average person reacted to these sages two thousand years ago, we must go back to our childhood and try to remember the first time we became awed at another person. The first person I really admired was one of the “uncles” who tutored me. Unlike other tutors, he never physically punished me. I snuck out one night to play with friends and was late for dinner. On the way home, I braced myself for dozens of bamboo lashes and a long lecture, none of which happened. He arranged for the whole house to sit and wait for

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me. As I was walking in, nobody said a word to me. I rushed to wash up and sat down. Everyone began eating. The silent treatment was more painful to me than a hundred bamboo lashes. For the first time, I genuinely felt shame. Dinner seemed to last forever; I couldn't wait for it to finish so I could get my whips and rid myself of the guilt. But after the meal, he simply told me how disappointed he was in me and hoped that he could guide me without physical punishment. Amazingly, that simple lecture did more good than hundreds of previous whips. I didn't become a model child by any stretch of the imagination, I just started to think more before I acted.

I idolized him. I liked his clothes, his food, his friends, and most importantly, his books. Without him, I would have never become a bookworm.

Now multiply this idolization a hundred times and what we have is worship. If we can idolize a person from a simple act of kindness, imagine what we would do to someone who can heal the sick, walk on water, levitate, or read others' minds. These wise men don't just possess super powers, they advise us to love our enemies (Jesus), encourage us to examine our lives (Socrates), remind us to be charitable in everything we do (Muhammad), and challenge us to train our minds (the Buddha). And they don't just preach these virtues, they live them. Even after they die, their teachings are so powerful and beneficial, how can we disagree with them? More importantly, we aspire to be like them and to follow in their footsteps because their teachings point us toward the best of what humans can achieve. We know the moral standards and spiritual ideals they set are unreachable, but keep them we must. Right off the bat, we are bound to fail. But ever adaptable, as we take a look at reality (our animalistic nature), we come up with two solutions:

1. Modify the goals (moral and spiritual) into something that can be achieved through the easiest routes (e.g., faith and rituals).
2. Co-opting

Much ink has already been spilled over the first solution; here, I will focus on the second one. By co-opting I mean we try to talk the talk, but not walk the walk. We talk a good game, but fail to consistently

follow up. In a word, we become hypocrites. How do we do it? Here are my tricks.

The first and most common technique is convenient memory loss. When Ho picked up a quarter in the Chuck E. Cheese's parking lot, I gave him a lecture about stealing.

"Put it back, Ho."

"But nobody was around," he protested.

"If you had dropped something, would you come back for it?"

"Yes, but it was only a quarter."

"It doesn't matter how much," I insisted. "It's the habit that counts."

After he put the quarter back where it was, I told him, "No stealing means don't take what doesn't belong to you."

During and after this incident, however, I, for some reason, didn't remember anything about the time I helped my girlfriend sell a defective car to someone. We weren't in a financial crisis. In fact, I was already working, so money was quite good. The car ran fine, but had smoke coming from its muffler. The buyer test drove it twice, but didn't take the car to a mechanic. A few weeks after purchasing the car, he called to ask for a refund. My girlfriend was concerned, but I told her to drag it out as long as possible. It turned out that he was a law student and threatened to sue. We eventually returned the money.

The second technique I use is rationalization. When a colleague made a mistake, I couldn't help but point it out to his boss. When guilty thoughts came up, I blamed it on the forced ranking system (made popular by Jack Welch, the former CEO of G.E.).

The third and most sophisticated strategy is "Use the rules to your advantage". I took an H&R Block course one year hoping to learn about tax loopholes, but was disappointed to find out that there were none for an average working professional. To beat the IRS legally, I either have to be really rich (e.g., if I was a CEO, I could negotiate to have my compensation consist mainly of stock options because the capital gain tax rate is always lower than that of income tax) or own a small business (e.g., I could accept cash more than checks or credit cards).

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Remember how my Ego still managed to have aggrandizing thoughts about itself even right after a powerful meditative experience? The Self is like a chameleon. It has an incredible ability to do whatever it takes to enhance its image regardless of the situation. If we make a mistake, it can blame others. If we achieve something small, it can turn it into a huge accomplishment. If we hurt others, it comes up with excuses. If we perform a community service, it writes stories to provide meanings. How would this cunning entity deal with the facts that (a) society has imposed a set of highly idealized and unreachable moral standards that are not consistently explained or enforced and (b) it possesses urges, desires, needs, talents, and intelligence? Well, it does what every smart teen would do when he really wants something that is forbidden:

1. It tries to have it both ways by satisfying its desires without getting caught.
2. It rationalizes that what it wants is also beneficial and important to others.

I was quite good at this game. It wasn't a coincidence that I loved history and politics. I took International Relations in college. The class was a breeze for me, but I got an F on my final paper for plagiarizing. Can you believe it? When a guy cheats for his country, he'll get a Congressional Medal of Honor, but when he borrows a book to describe these thoughts and feelings, he gets punished. What I dreamed about back then was becoming a diplomat. Whenever my friends and I sat around and dreamed about meeting celebrities, most chose movie stars, many picked scientists, a few mentioned politicians. I was the only one who chose Henry Kissinger.

I didn't know it back then, but what that young adult really wanted was to become a chameleon. He had just survived a year in refugee camps where he had to deal with "sharks" and "tigers". He hated their guts and was also proud of the fact that he could play their game. Subconsciously, he must have had that longing to control his feelings, to say the right thing at the right time to the right people, to convince people to do what he needed, to influence their lives, to talk them into doing things for him, and most of all, to solve problems, big

and gigantic social problems that thousands before him had tried but failed to solve.

There is one little problem: my people skills are average at best; my public communication style is terrible. I have interesting ideas all the time, yet fail to convince neighborhood kids to play my “games.” Sometimes, I scheme up a plan, even rehearse what to say, but somehow always fail to convince others. Maybe my ideas are weird, maybe they are too complicated, maybe I just can’t explain well enough. Sometimes, I’m so passionate about my ideas that I get tongue-tied when trying to sell my solutions. I’ve always marveled at people who want “E”, but methodically approach the right people at the right time only to get “A”, wait for a few weeks to achieve “B,” then a few more months to get “C” then “D”, and finally “E” is brought to them.

Fortunately, I had a role model: Henry Kissinger. Who else can write an undergraduate thesis so long (383 pages) that his school (Harvard) had to established a rule (Henry Kissinger Rule) to limit the length of future theses (1/3 of his), was voted as the most admired American in 1973, became the most powerful politician in the world even though he was a mere U.S. Secretary of State (both President Ford and Premier Brezhnev allowed him to single-handedly manage the U.S.–U.S.S.R. relations), and—this is my favorite—was chosen as “the man I would most like to go on a date with” by Playboy bunnies in 1972?

How on earth was he able to accomplish all that? The man was porky, nerdy-looking, and could be barely understood, thanks to his monotonous German accent. But I found out the reasons from reading *Kissinger* by Walter Isaacson. He was a master in the art of a courtier and a guru of the power game. Here is a list of realpolitik skills I compiled from the book:

- How to kiss up and kick down
- How to select future friends, benefactors, and even enemies
- How to flatter others
- How to manipulate your enemies into fighting each other
- How to say a lot without answering or addressing the issues
- How to put up a front

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- How to do or say things ambiguously so you can dodge culpability in case of trouble
- How to do or say things indirectly (just enough so people can read between the lines)
- How to control others by hurting and helping them at the same time
- How to stir up controversies to benefit yourself
- How to lie and believe in your lie
- How to play with words
- How to tell a white lie
- How to get rid of people you don't like
- How to let others do the dirty work but get the credit for yourself
- How to deny culpability when you are involved in a problem
- How to blame others
- How to let out information gradually to different people
- How to send information through a third party
- How to spread rumor and misinformation to benefit yourself
- How to play with others' minds
- How to use secrecy to control a betrayed subordinate⁸

The list is much longer, but you really need to read the book to appreciate and marvel at the intellect, charm, cunning, deviousness, and all the intangible characteristics that make him a practical definition of a human chameleon. Five hundred years ago, Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* to justify immorality by using the power game to unite an Italian city-state. Kissinger not only used this art to reach the pinnacle of world power, but also wrote a book, *Diplomacy*, trying to convince us that world peace depended on people like him. The scary thing is that he made a very convincing case.

One day, on a family bike ride, the conversation somehow turned toward politics. An casually asked me, "Daddy, what is the biggest threat in the world?"

"That's a good question, An," I said. "What do you think?"

“Global warming,” he answered quickly.
“What else?”
“Nuclear weapons,” Ho jumped in.
“Very good, Ho,” I said. “What else?”
“Religions,” Tu yelled from the back. She was with Dinh Nhi (five), who was just learning how to bike.
“How about business?” An added.
“That’s right, An,” I said. “A global corporation can be real bad.”
“What about bad countries?” Ho asked.
“That’s good, Ho! Is there anything else?”
“Bad guys,” An answered quickly.
“Good job, An,” I said.

What I didn’t tell them that day was that it wasn’t bad guys I worried about; it was a bunch of Kissinger-wannabes. And there are plenty of them out there. In fact, many successful politicians and businessmen belong in this category. Thanks to the confusion about morality, one of the best ways for a smart and capable person to succeed in today’s world is to play the power game. Kings, queens, presidents, prime ministers, CEOs, sports superstars, all do it. Some of you might ask, “What is so bad about this? At least they are the ones who solve our problems and make the world go around.” Well, as history has shown us time and time again, these people don’t just play the power game, they convince you, me, and billions of others to lie, cheat, steal, and kill for all types of “good” causes. Afterward, we write books memorializing them so our kids can study and dream of becoming one of them someday.

So the current moral and spiritual crisis might be caused by a disagreement over the question, “What is a good person?”, but to resolve it we must also address the question, “How can I be a good person?”

This is a spiritual autobiography of an average man who dares to ask and attempts to answer the biggest questions in life. As he struggles to understand the meaning of life, he confronts the ultimate question, "What is real happiness?", and stumbles upon its answer at an intensive meditation retreat.

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