

Within these pages lie brief snapshots of my life and understandings. On subjects of abandonment, mindfulness, the environment, creativity, connection, addiction and our often flawed approach to its treatment.

**The Accidental Buddhist:
And other Essays on Life, The Universe, and Nothing in Particular**
By Richard Lawson

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THE ACCIDENTAL BUDDHIST

*and other Essays on Life, The Universe, and
Nothing in Particular*

RICHARD LAWSON

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CONTENTS

Preface	7
Abandonment.....	9
The Accidental Buddhist.	11
Along came Polly	16
CREATIVITY	17
Creativity	19
The Vortex of Perception.....	22
2B or not 2B.....	23
THE BOOK OF TANQUERAY	25
A Brief History of Dependency.....	27
Addict or Alcoholic?.....	30
Just for Today	31
Opportunity.....	34
Renaissance.....	36
90 in 90	38
Abstinence Absent of Understanding	40
METAPHOR	43
The Gravity of Obsession.....	45
The Great Cyclepath of Life	46
The Man in the Road	47
Adrift.....	49
SUPPORT	53
Paying Forward, Giving Back.	55
Being of Benefit.....	58
Don't Tell Me What to Do.....	59
Quod Erat Demonstrandum	61
A PRELUDE TO PERCEPTION	63
I - Miserable in Comfort.	65
II - Murder in the Kitchen.....	67

III - Wisdom Where I Find It.....	69
IV - What you need when you need it.	71
POEMS	73
CLICK.....	75
A Profound Piece of Nonsense	76
Belief.....	77
Requiem for a friend	78
A Portrait of the Artist	79
Five-Sense.....	82
ELIMINATION	83
Gratitude	84
THE DANCE OF DHARMA	85
The Pursuit of Perfection	87
Everything is Relative.....	90
Your Best Self.....	93
Wisdom is Everywhere	95
64 years of Baggage.....	97
The Great Toolbox of Life.....	99
A Temporary Lack of Focus	100
The Door of Awareness	102
Cause and Effect	104
Omnes Viae Romam Ducunt	107
Will it Help?.....	108
Deep Listening.....	109
No Fixed Self.....	111
The Wisdom of Diminished Speech	113
A Walk in the Park.....	115
PROVERBS.....	117
Too Many Mind	119
Mind of No Mind.....	121
Leave it by the River.....	123
LIFE AND DEATH.....	125
Does Practice makes Perfect?	127

The Accidental Buddhist

The Visual Architecture of Scent	129
Life out of Balance	132
Parts Unknown.....	135
Empathy.....	137
In Body - Mind and Spirit.....	140
Oblique Objectives	142
Fear of Dying.....	144
Three Score and Five.....	146
Connection.....	148
Letter to my Children.....	149
Always In Sight	151
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	153
REVIEWS.....	155

Abandonment

I can still remember that frosty autumn morning when my mother delivered me to boarding school. The hoggin path crunched crisply beneath my feet and a cold wind whipped across my face, silently signifying the changes that were soon to come. The warm summer of childhood was over and the long hard winter of youth had just begun.

The House Master welcomed us at the front door and led the way inside. It was the first and only time I would ever use that entrance, preserved, as it was, for more prestigious people than myself. With a cursory wave of his hand, he consigned me to the dubious care of a small, rotund, redfaced boy who was barely much older than I. Together we embarked on a systematic tour of the sparse accommodations that would become my home for the next ten years. Along the way my guide solemnly recited a seemingly endless litany of the horrors that were about to befall me. In the dormitories I was to be stripped and pelted with slippers. In the changing rooms I was to be lowered, head first, into the toilet and flushed; a symbolic representation of my new status in life. Alone at last, I made my way slowly back to the dormitory. Sitting on the edge of my bed I struggled to make sense of my parents' decision to send me to such a place. In abject misery the tears streamed uncontrollably down my face. I was only eight years old and my entire world had just collapsed.

I can still remember the almost constant fear that engulfed me in those first few years, as each and every one of those predictions came to fruition. The 'Anti Campaign', where all the boys would unite in the persecution of one unfortunate individual, then beat and taunt him until the floods of tears washed away their hatred. All the diplomatic skills I could muster ultimately failed to save me from this inevitable fate. I resorted to concealment, hiding my feelings behind the tall walls I had built to protect my heart. I labored so vigorously and so often on these defenses that, before long, I had completely forgotten how they were

Richard Lawson

constructed. No one ever told me that, one day, I might need to take them down.

The Accidental Buddhist.

I - Dukkha

It's no secret that many monastic orders take vows of celibacy, but does a celibate lifestyle lead to spiritual insight? That would seem unlikely to me. An accomplished winter Olympian may wear skis, but putting on skis does not make one an accomplished winter Olympian. Nevertheless, it seems only logical that when someone's mission is to explore their relationship with the universe as a whole, a romantic relationship with just one person would cease to be entirely relevant. Thus, it would seem, spiritual insight might lead to celibacy, but not vice versa.

Such is my relationship with the texts of Buddhism. I do not read the texts to obtain insight, for however I choose to dissect the language, if there is no recognition then the end result is turbidity, not clarity. Nor do I adopt the trappings of ritual in the misguided hope that they may somehow confer enlightenment. Instead, I use these texts to illuminate and enhance understandings that already exist within, albeit hitherto unarticulated. If something doesn't resonate, I move along, secure in the knowledge that it is not yet my time.

In the halcyon days of my twenties I was on fire with creative passion and burgeoning spiritual insight. My design work was infused with the spirit of 'Mushin no Shin', (the mind of no mind), and I feasted voraciously on a diet of Lao Tse, Herman Hesse, Alan Watts and Thich Nhat Hanh. I was the tireless seeker, convinced that my nascent understanding might one day give birth to wisdom and fulfillment.

How ironic then, that thirty years later I found myself in a scenario that I can only compare to that of Al Pacino's at the end of the movie 'Scarface'. Alone in the temple I had built to material success, having killed almost everything I loved, the enemies of disillusionment, cancer, a broken marriage and alcoholism crept stealthily and

inexorably across the lawn towards me. Inside the empty cenotaph, my expensively attired and bejeweled figure slumped despondently across the desk, my face buried in the powdered toxicity of my own self-pity. The end had been written and I had only to walk out on the balcony to meet it.

But I was not to go out in a fiery blaze of bullets and prosaic glory. Although I lived with the certainty that death was imminent, life continued to toy with me like a cat with a mouse, observing inscrutably as I awaited the final coup de grace, teasing me with endless close encounters. In two category five hurricanes I saw death hover as the buildings tore apart. A head on collision with a Mack truck, which my disembodied self watched detachedly, appeared certain to herald the final curtain. My ultimate collapse in a Florida hotel room, unable to breathe, as radionecrosis closed its grip upon my airways and wracked my emaciated frame.

Throughout weeks in intensive care I floated in a surreal fantasy of drug induced delusion. Time ran neither forwards nor backwards, condensing days into minutes. Simultaneously and paradoxically, it seemed, minutes stretched out before me like hours. An incoherent haze lay heavily across my otherworldly existence. Nurses came and went, doctors made prognoses that I could never remember, an Angel visited twice a week, but always for the very first time. Unfamiliarity and confusion paved the road to paranoia, a lonely, slow-motion cyclone of insecurity and doubt.

Life seemed indeterminate and interminable. After hospital I convalesced in the soulless solitude of anonymous hotel rooms under the dark prognosis of a future I had no wish to be a part of. Days became weeks, weeks became months, indistinguishable and undistinguished, an alcoholic fog through which the silent ship of the Angel rose occasionally before vanishing once more into the mist. Treatments faltered under the weight of ever accruing problems and somewhere inside I simply ceased to care. I had squandered the sacred

opportunities of my youth and all that remained was an unceremonious exit, graceless and unremarkable.

Even as I stumbled out of my alcoholic stupor, I did so with no vision of an alternate outcome, motivated only by the inability to tolerate the discomforts of my chosen lifestyle. The cold harsh daylight of sobriety brought no reprieve from the darkness that preceded it. There was to be no quantum of solace. Or so it appeared.

II - Sukha

It is almost impossible to discern the exact instant of the turning of the tide, when ebb turns to flow, yet it is as certain as it is elusive. With wisdom of hindsight, it may be possible to perceive that which was hidden at the time, but it often requires a moment of realization to disinter it from the surrounding morass. Such an insight might well have remained invisible without the light of subsequent events to illuminate it.

So it was with ‘Click’, a sound poem I wrote at the depths of my despair. Although vaguely aware that something of significance had happened, it was some time before I understood just how transformational that moment had been. A spiritual renaissance that happened during the process of its writing, independent of the merits of the final product.

At the time, I had been required to write and present a number of small soliloquies, a task I performed largely with disinterested but perfunctory skill. But ‘Click’ was different, surprising me quite out of the blue, with the long-forgotten experience of creative connection. Part of me stood to one side, as the piece flowed through me like water in a conduit, emerging on paper in a finished form that further editing could only diminish. Little did I know it at the time, but an awakening had occurred within me and there were fresh green shoots of personal growth sprouting from a long barren soul.

From that point forward there was a shift, almost imperceptible at first, towards the beginnings of a new life. Occasioned not by circumstance, which remained largely unchanged, but by a change in my perception of that circumstance. Where once there had been loneliness, now there was opportunity for reflection. Where once there had been resentment, now there was acceptance. Where once there had been worries for the future, now there was fulfillment in the present. Liberated by the realization of impermanence, I was suddenly free to change. For the first time in my life I finally knew how it felt to have a small measure of peace.

The process of writing, long a mechanical yet unexploited skill, formed the basis of my self-cognizance and helped crystallize my understandings in coherent language. My autobiography lent perspective to the experiences of my life and exposed the patterns of my responses, to dismiss or retain as appropriate. Where the limitations of my own writings inhibited me, I sought the articulation of my understandings in the works of others. Returning to the Buddhist texts of my youth I found not only the literary expression of my insights, but also the path to cultivate and mature them.

Exploring my relationship with the universe, I found it to be increasingly benign, providing me with continuous opportunities for learning as I became open to accepting them. Soulless solitude became serene reflection and as the once turbulent waters of my mind began to calm, I saw more clearly into its depths.

Life became my teacher and I became my master. Accordingly, I learned more about ‘presence’ and ‘connection’ from being with my dog than I could have from reading a thousand books. Twice a day, I was privileged to enter her world and share in the excitement, spontaneity and unencumbered joy that arises from living totally in the moment.

That said, the idea of a philosophy that encouraged one to question everything, including Buddhism itself, always appealed to the

contrarian in me. Yet in the past I had struggled to find anything but abstract concepts between the words of the bodhisattvas. These days I see reflections of my experiences in many of the teachings, yet little or nothing in others. This is no accident, when the time is right I will revisit those passages and recognize their meaning. Such is the way of the accidental Buddhist.

Along came Polly

Sitting down to watch the betrayal of trust implicit in the opening scenes of *Along came Polly*, I was once again confronted by the incessant parrot of traumatic childhood abandonment. Despite having explored the issue extensively in talk therapy, understanding both cause and manifestation, the deep-seated feelings engendered by the experience still remain. The parrot in my head cannot be silenced. Once triggered its relentless screeching ricochets disturbingly through the tunnels of my mind.

Movies featuring marital infidelity, vicariously trigger the profound sorrow and loss I associate with my childhood. Unjust shaming triggers anxiety. The defense argues its case, over and over, in the courtroom of my mind, but always in vain.

I once watched a secretly filmed video of a woman abandoning her aging Labrador in a parking lot at the local park. The hapless dog bounded enthusiastically from the car obviously thinking ‘time for walkies’. She slipped his collar and he scurried off excitedly, sniffing here and there, his tail wagging vigorously from side to side. When his mistress reentered her vehicle and sped-away he chased after her, part of him still wanting to believe it was all part of some game.

As realization slowly dawned, he stopped in the middle of the road, bewildered and dejected, his tail tucked despondently between his legs. The expression on the poor dog’s face is indelibly etched upon my heart. I could almost read his thoughts: ‘I don’t understand. Why is she leaving me? Haven’t I been a good boy? Doesn’t she love me anymore? I still love her’.

Every fiber of my being cried out to the wretched animal in deeply empathetic sympathy. I knew profoundly every part of his pain, for it had also been my own.

REVIEWS

‘Couldn’t put it down - the cover is really sticky’

The Adhesives Almanac

‘Once in a lifetime a book comes along with such depth of insight and profound wisdom that it changes everything.
This is not that book’

The Theological Times

‘Better than nothing’

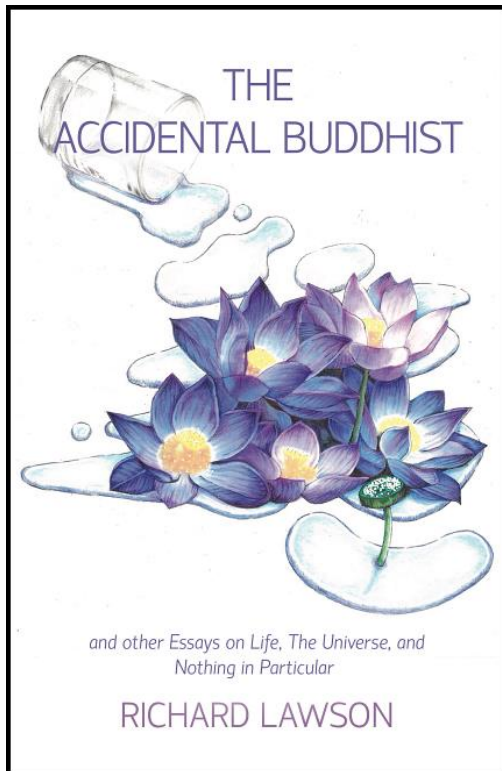
Buddhism Weekly

‘Had me on the edge of my seat’

Incontinent’s Digest

‘Far too many words. It took a long time to read.’

The Succinct Society



Within these pages lie brief snapshots of my life and understandings. On subjects of abandonment, mindfulness, the environment, creativity, connection, addiction and our often flawed approach to its treatment.

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