

## **My journey and how I understand the fetters**

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Fall 1993. My thoughts were driving me crazy and I knew it. That seems strange to me – I think normally I would have thought life's situations were driving me crazy – but I knew it was my thoughts. I decided that I had to know who I was – free of the thoughts - connect with the one who is thinking. I made tremendous effort to see between – behind – underneath thoughts any way I could. I was intensely driven. I knew my sanity depended on me finding a stable self free of crazy thoughts - and I had every reason to believe there was one. After an intense two hours or so I broke through and found myself separated from my thoughts – but there was just an empty void – there was nothing there – no me. I was devastated because I knew that without a 'me' that I was forever lost to what ever thoughts came up. There was no solid ground. I remember I cried for hours after that. Something that strikes me now, as I write this, is the obvious fact that there was still an awareness of this void - I mean, who was crying? who was knowing the void?

Early the next year I started taking a Chi Gong class with a teacher from China. I didn't know anything about Chi Gong. I had seen an article about him and I ended up taking the class thinking it would be a way to meet interesting women.

I did the Chi Gong practice religiously (so to speak) – practicing every day for an hour or two at least. The purpose of this training was to open what is called the micro-cosmic orbit. At first I felt nothing at all. In fact, I thought the guy must be making up all these crazy exercises but I was cheap and decided that as I had paid my money I was going to give it all I could. After a few weeks, I could feel energy moving up the spine. Different pieces of these channels were connecting – like connecting the dots. Very strange but it felt great. I was also learning to sense energy in trees and rocks and develop very relaxing meditative states.

### **First Big Experience**

Then one day – it was March 6, 1994. I was sitting on the couch in my living room doing my practice. I became aware of what felt like pea size bubbles percolating up my spine from the tail bone. They would slowly flow up and into my head where they would pop and there would be a rush of very pleasant sensation. I stopped the practice and just gave all my attention to these little bubbles – just enjoyed them. As I did this, I went deeper and deeper into the sense of well being and pleasure that filled my body. It was like sinking into a very warm, comfortable bath. Eventually, I just completely got lost in it – no longer even aware of anything – but not lost in thought or day dreaming either – just gone, disappeared. I only became aware again as a rushing/roaring sensation came over me – it felt as though my consciousness was being sucked up through the neck of a bottle. Only lasted a second or so and then consciousness just exploded into an infinite awareness outside of time and space. There was no me – no other – no thoughts – no world – just an infinite awareness – not something I was aware of – but rather what I was – an infinite awareness knowing itself infinitely. I could see clearly how life was like a prison. The walls were all the thoughts, beliefs, possessions – all the clutter that we use to define ourselves. I was outside that prison looking back at it with x-ray vision. I remember cradling the universe in my 'lap' (if I had had one) – a ball of fuzzy light. It was not conventional knowing - this was all just grocked and in order to describe it, I have to put it in everyday language. I knew I had identified with a body down inside it and wanted to get back. Fear came up – it arose with a sense of 'I' and I thought maybe I can't get back to my body. Then there was a shift and I was back in the body. I was hardly breathing and my heart rate was very slow. I was on the floor and just kept saying to myself “What the hell was that” over and over.

[ **Fetters** - I refer to this stage as stream entry and here is how I understand the first three fetters - self identity views, doubt regarding the Buddhas teaching, knowing that rituals ain't gonna cut it: The experience of the first path breaks the first three fetters when our awareness stands completely free of the aggregates (the deathless).

1) You know you are not this body, thoughts, feelings, etc.

2) You know the Buddha was on to something - if you were familiar with what he taught of course. If not, you know that you are now on to something.

3) You absolutely know that this experience did not come about as the result of any kind of ritual or wishing or praying etc.

This experience changed me. I knew – beyond any doubt – that I was not this body and that the world in which I seemed to exist was not what it seemed to be. Everything I had been taught about reality was wrong ]

That event left some kind of seed in my awareness. A sense of stillness – barely detectable – at the back of my awareness. This subtle stillness – something like standing with your back toward a still lake (sensed but not seen) became a kind of compass for me. The memory of this event was burned into me. Life went back to the way it was but always I remembered what was seen – what was known. I knew I was in prison and yet didn't know how to get out.

After that day, things started getting much stranger. A few days later, sitting in my Chi Gong class, I had the sense of a large fist at the back of my head. It would contract over and over again like a muscle and every time it tightened my consciousness was thrown out into that same vastness as before.

Freaked me out and I fought to stay conscious and in my body. Went on maybe 6 times and then stopped.

## **Second Big Experience**

About 6 weeks later, I was sitting on my couch again this time practicing a Mantak Chia technique called Smiling into the Spine. I had worked the smiling energy about half way down my spine when I grew bored and stopped - just letting the energy go - and it went up the spine, through my head, and took up residence about 6 inches above my head - taking my seat of consciousness with it – that was the sensation - that my seat of consciousness that would normally be behind my eyes was now above my body. There was this infinite awareness as before but this time this awareness sort of interpenetrated all phenomena. Everything I looked at or thought about was seen to be a complete perfection radiating or reflected throughout all time and space. Even the most horrible things I could think of. Everything had to be the way it was for the universe to be complete - nothing could be left out. Throughout the experience there was a huge uncontrollable grin on my face - it was actually painful it was so big. I tried to follow what I was experiencing – it was overwhelming. It was like trying to pipe data from a fiber optic line into a phone line. I was able to walk around, bring up memories, etc. I – as Chuck – was completely present. The experience lasted 20 minutes or so and I intentionally brought it to an end - it was just too much. Years later, when I came upon a description of Indra's Net – I thought it must be from that kind of experience.

I should probably say something about my couch technique – it was the only reasonable thing to sit on that I had, so I stacked up cushions and sat forward on it such that my knees were bent at right angles and my back was straight.

[ **Fetters** – I refer to this as second path which results in the attenuation of sensual desire and ill will. Here is why: An awareness that takes in or sees into all phenomena upon which it lands. It is a vast awareness as at first path but this time everything (that was gone in the first

experience) is now within it/known to it in a sense. And there is an overwhelming sense of perfection and great bliss that accompanies this experience. After this experience I could no longer look at people and experiences in the same way as before. The experience is not permanent but it leaves that knowledge burned into you. In the same sense that first path left me knowing on reflection that I am not this body - so second path left me knowing on reflection that you and I are not separate (nor one). And that this totality - this pure awareness is one of bliss and perfection. It takes away the power that these feelings (sensual desire and ill will) had over me. The attenuation comes simply as a result of seeing things in a new way. It is worth pointing out here that sensual desire in Buddhism is often thought of as any kind of desire for pleasure. It actually refers more to strong desire that is capable of causing you to act in harmful ways in order satisfy it.

Reflecting back on this period, one thing that stands out for me is how I now had an ability to be in conflict ridden environments and remain largely unaffected - to work in a job with lots of conflict for example and never get involved in it (actually helping to calm things down) and it did not require a great deal of effort. I attribute this to the impact of this experience. ]

I had visions several times. I would be seeing through the eyes of someone else. Just ordinary experiences. One time though it was very strange – I was sitting in bed one weekend morning – just looking out at the garden and all of a sudden everything disappeared and what I saw very vividly instead was a huge bird with a blood red snake in it's beak – writhing. The bird perched in a large tree. There was a wind blowing the branches of the tree and the bird would fan out its wings to steady itself. This lasted a few seconds and then switched back to normal.

I was deep in debt and a job kind of appeared out of nowhere – making more money than I had ever made before. The interview for this job was one of the strangest experiences I have had. The night before the interview I was quite nervous about it and so was doing some chi gong practice - just to calm down. I was sort of swept up in a vast consciousness/energy that just took over. Didn't sleep the rest of the night and when I went into the interview I was completely calm - I felt vast and in complete control. There were about a dozen people at this interview comprising people from two software teams that really disliked each other along with a couple of project managers. Throughout the entire experience this other consciousness was in complete control - it was directing everything and everyone - like directing an orchestra. I just watched from the stillness of my mind as the whole thing unfolded. I never encountered this kind of thing again and it still amazes me when I think about it. The job lasted about 18 months. When it was over, I entered into a wandering phase. My Chi Gong teacher had moved away and I was on my own to make sense out of what had happened. My world - the world that I had known and taken for granted - I could no longer believe in. I spent several years just bouncing around. I would house sit for people when they were on vacation – usually to take care of their pets. I read books – so many I can't remember. Looking for some tip – some clue – as to what had happened to me. I came across a book by Sat Prem on the life of Sri Aurobindo where he described a very similar experience and said it was the experience of the Buddha's Nibbana. I didn't know anything about Buddha but figured I needed to track down the Buddhists as surely they had experienced what I had. So around 1997 I wandered into the world of Buddhism and unbeknownst to me dry-vipassana.

For me, Vipassana was not much fun - it had a way of shattering experience but not replacing it with anything. Chi Gong was like a flowing river – Vipassana like a grinding wheel. Please don't be offended if you are a vipassana fan – to each their own. Still, I had no idea what had happened to me but the Buddhist teachers were saying this was the way. Though oddly none of them seemed to speak of the experience that I had had – in fact – all they seemed to do was quote one dead Asian guy after

another and say how hard it was to become awakened .

Around the end of 1999 I did a ten day Goenka retreat. I remember how one of my roommates completely lost it - like a mental breakdown and left mid-retreat. It was a difficult and painful but good experience for me. A couple weeks out of that retreat I found myself in the middle of the Battle of Seattle - getting tear gassed by police. Interesting shift in experience.

I began reading suttas and noticing things there that fit with my experience. I started suspecting that I had probably gone through stream-entry back then in '94.

### **First 'Permanent' Shift**

In the fall of 2002, I came out of a theater one afternoon after watching a movie about a schizophrenic and my ego collapsed like a house of cards while getting into my car. Quite frightening really. Like falling off a cliff but never hitting bottom. I was falling without any ground to stand on save the little sense of ego I manufactured – like a cartoon character that has fallen off a cliff and then dreams up an imaginary tree to hold on to. Things settled down after a few hours and after a couple of months I started reflecting on how nice this experience was - and I mean really, really nice. It seemed I was free from so many emotions that had plagued me all my life. So many emotions and feelings no longer came up - depression, anger, jealousy, lust - this stuff was just gone. There was still a sense of 'I am' in my experience but it was more like a kind of bright center untouched by the affairs of the world. The world and its problems were almost TV like - I was sitting in my comfortable radiant chair watching the TV world. Unlike the earlier temporary experiences this was a permanent shift though it deepened considerably over time.

[ **Fetters** - Third Path: In fetters terms - the form fetters are cut - which just means that the sense of self breaks away from the sense of being a body in this world (feels like falling off a cliff - like the ground underneath you just disappears. The ground is the sense of 'I am this'- that falls apart. It is not that my emotions are constrained or eliminated - it is simply that the nature of perceived phenomena which includes both self and other dramatically changes and quite simply - nothing bothered me anymore. I was this radiant center and nothing else much mattered. This shift is permanent (until it isn't). Life is suddenly immensely easier. Lust, depression, hatred - just gone. There is no longer the underlying experience to support these kinds of feelings. It is the shift from 'I am this' to 'I am', from form to formless ]

I also started feeling really enlightened. I had this radiant awareness that nothing could touch. I had started working with a teacher by this time and it helped me to have someone say “no, that’s not it”. This phase was the easiest stage of all. It is what enlightenment seems like it should be like from a self-centered view. All the egoic worries of the world are gone yet there is this radiant self left as a center point.

Around 2006 another type of experience started happening. It was like a fading away of self (now that radiant center) - an odd experience that at first was very unnerving (frightening actually) because I had no idea if it was permanent or not. It is like all sense of self just dissolves - like you are disappearing into nothingness - such that there is just left awareness - with no center or relation to body, thoughts, etc. It would just happen occasionally and last for 5 to 20 minutes before subsiding. Happened while I was driving one time - there was just this awareness aware of the body moving through the motions of driving but not participating in any way. After a while I got more used to it.

### **Second 'Permanent' Shift**

In March of 2008 I was sitting in meditation one evening. It wasn't particularly deep but there arose a sense of a portal or doorway within consciousness. I had the sense that in order to pass through it I had to be willing to give up everything that I thought I was. I was willing and in that moment I was through the door and the door, the I that went through it, and the world in which I had lived disappeared – never to return. This sounds like a decision I made but experientially it all happened in a fraction of a second. If I had not been ready, it would not have happened.

It was an odd experience. I still had my eyes closed. I figured that I had entered into some strange meditation state and decided to just be with it for a while before ending my sit. Finally, I decided to get up and when I opened my eyes I realized that whatever had happened to me was still going on. I looked around the room and what stood out most was that phenomena had lost something I came to call 'thingness'. Interestingly, the body now no longer had any thingness either - it was just a field of energy. Went to bed that night expecting the world to return the next morning but it didn't. There is a kind of finality to this experience. It is quite obvious there is no way back. And the experience was something completely unexpected.

[ **Fetters** - The collapse of the formless fetters. The radiant center (which was the last vestiges of self) collapses - and this is what the 5 formless fetters are pointing to. It feels that the world simply disappears. Phenomena remain but the thingness or solidity that they had previously is no longer present. The mind can no longer grasp things - like water trying to grab water. The ability of phenomena to pull me one way or the other is because of the mind's projections that in a sense attach themselves to phenomena. This abruptly ceases. In the previous stage there was a sense of identity – the I Am that stood apart and above the world. Now this collapses – along with the world – leaving neither oneness nor separateness. ]

The first few weeks after this event were totally amazing. I wandered about in a serene world of incredible beauty - a dream like experience - thought it would continue forever. But then I started noticing something - just once in a while at first but as the next couple of months went by it became more and more in my face - it was like every time I rejected something as 'not me' - it came right back at me and hit me - it was like spitting into the wind. It became so intense that it was like being in a closed room with a bunch of biting flies.

What's a person to do? Why a 10 day retreat of course! Hardest retreat I have ever done - at one point I thought for sure I was going to die - but in the end I learned what I needed to learn and the flies bit no more.

Then the vibrations started up. Intense vibrations/energetic phenomena that take place in the body. There were times they were so intense that I would be just begging for them to end. They would go in cycles - usually running a week or so and then ending for a day and then back in for another round. They went on for about 2.5 years or so before breaking up on their own and slowly fading away. Not very fun but I never had the sense that I wanted to go back to the way things were before.

From that point on, though there has not been any further big changes, there has been a gradual change in my experience. Actually, each sudden change has been followed by a gradual change and then another sudden change. With each sudden change being a collapse of some level of self-centered experience and always in some totally unexpected way. But back to the current changes, the kind of mental commentarial chatter that I used to have – internal dialog – has faded away and disappeared. Mind is very sky like and imperturbable. I'll try to describe more about my current experience in a separate article.