

Restraints & Observances

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Vedanta Center of Atlanta

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GOOD MORNING... ANNOUNCEMENTS Coronavirus

CHANT • SONG • WELCOME • TOPIC

This month we depart from our usual routine of taking up one of the four yogas for detailed study. Instead, we are introducing a parallel tradition of spiritual unfoldment, as taught by don Juan Matus. A Yaqui Indian, don Juan was a *brujo* of the Toltec lineage. Our second talk in this 4-part series is:

Restraints and Observances of a don Juan Apprentice

A *brujo* or *bruja* is a person who is in command of power. An accomplished raja yogi could be called a *brujo* — yet, as we'll see, the comparison is approximate. Don Juan Matus was a great *brujo* and had many apprentices. One of them was Carlos Castaneda, who wrote several books about his time with don Juan. For these talks, we'll draw from Castaneda's *Journey to Ixtlan*.

Castaneda says a (brujo's) basic premise is that the world of everyday life is not real, or out there,

as we believe it is. For a brujo, reality (the world we all know) is only a description — our day-to-day life consists of an endless flow of perceptual interpretations which we have learned to make in common.

Don Juan taught his apprentices how to overcome the limitations of that description; he called this achievement “stopping the world.”

This idea is not new to us. In the Mandukya Upanishad it is spoken of as the “cessation of all phenomena” (Mantra VIII). And in Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* the goal is *kaivalya* — independence, through detachment from all thought forms.

Patanjali starts a yogi’s journey to *kaivalya* with *yamas* and *niyamas* (restraints and observances); they are the first two of his eight “limbs” of yoga. Don Juan’s apprentices also practiced a system of restraints and observances as they learned to “stop the world.” This morning we’ll explore the physical and spiritual disciplines that began Castaneda’s journey to Ixtlan.

Each apprentice trained differently, etc.

Principles and practices in common, those that the teacher applies to him or herself:

Swahananda — “The only true measure of spiritual progress is change in behavior!”

Here’s don Juan talking to Castaneda about the first practice taught to him:

Erasing Personal History

“It is best to erase all personal history,” don Juan said slowly, as if giving me time to write it down . . . , “because that would make us free from the encumbering thoughts of other people.” I could not believe that he was actually saying that. I had a very confusing moment. He must have read in my face my inner turmoil and used it immediately. “Take yourself, for instance,” he went on saying. “Right now you don’t know whether you are coming or going. And that is so, because I have erased my personal history. I have, little by little, created a fog around me and my life. And now nobody knows for sure who I am or what I do.” “But, you yourself know who you are, don’t you?” I interjected. “You bet I . . . don’t,” he exclaimed and rolled on the floor, laughing at my surprised look.”

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“That is the little secret I am going to give you today,” he said in a low voice. “Nobody knows my personal history. Nobody knows who I am or what I do. Not even I.”

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“How can I know who I am, when I am all this?” he said, sweeping the surroundings with a gesture of his head.”

Losing Self-Importance

A physical practice:

“We walked for hours (in the desert). He did not collect or show me any plants. He did, however, teach me an “appropriate form of walking.” He said that I had to curl my fingers gently as I walked so I would keep my attention on the trail and the surroundings. He claimed that my ordinary way of walking was debilitating and that one should never carry anything anything in the hands. If things had to be carried one should use a knapsack or any sort of carrying net or shoulder bag. His idea was that by forcing the hands into a specific position one was capable of greater stamina and greater awareness.”

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“Don Juan recapitulated, as if to refresh my memory, all he had said before on the topic of “learning about plants.” He stressed emphatically that if I wanted to learn, I had to remodel most of my behavior. My sense of annoyance grew, until I had to make a supreme effort to even take notes. “You take yourself too seriously,” he said slowly. “You are too damn important in your own mind. That must be changed! You are so goddamn important that you feel justified to be annoyed with everything. You’re so damn important that you can afford to leave if things don’t go your way. I suppose you think that shows you have character. That’s nonsense! You’re weak, and conceited!” I tried to stage a protest but he did not budge. He pointed out that in the course of my life I had not ever finished anything because of that sense of disproportionate importance that I attached to myself. I was flabbergasted at the certainty with which he made his statements. They were true, of course, and that made me feel not only angry but also threatened.

“Self-importance is another thing that must be dropped, just like personal history,” he said in a dramatic tone.”

Death as An Adviser

“We walked into the desert chaparral in a southerly direction. He mentioned repeatedly as we walked that I had to be aware of the uselessness of my self-importance and of my personal history.

“Your friends,” he said, turning to me abruptly. “Those who have known you for a long time, you must leave them quickly.” I thought he was crazy and his insistence was idiotic, but I did not say anything. He peered at me and began to laugh.”

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“Your death gave you a little warning,” he said with a mysterious tone. “It always comes as a chill.” “What are you talking about?” I said nervously. He really made me nervous with his spooky talk. “You know a lot about birds,” he said. “You’ve killed too many of them. You know how to wait. You have waited patiently for hours. I know that. I am seeing it.”

His words caused a great turmoil in me. I thought that what annoyed me the most about him was his certainty. I could not stand his dogmatic

assuredness about the issues in my own life that I was not sure of myself.

I became engulfed in my feelings of dejection and I did not see him leaning over me until he actually had whispered something in my ear. I did not understand at first and he repeated it.

He told me to turn around casually and look at a boulder to my left. He said that my death was there staring at me and if I turned when he signaled me I might be capable of seeing it. He signaled me with his eyes.

I turned and I thought I saw a flickering movement over the boulder. A chill ran through my body, the muscles of my abdomen contracted involuntarily and I experienced a jolt, a spasm.

After a moment I regained my composure and I explained away the sensation of seeing the flickering shadow as an optical illusion caused by turning my head so abruptly.

“Death is our eternal companion,” don Juan said with a most serious air. “It is always to our left, at an arm’s length. It was watching you when you were watching the white falcon; it whispered in your ear and you felt its chill, as you felt it today.

It has always been watching you. It always will until the day it taps you.” He extended his arm and touched me lightly on the shoulder and at the same time he made a deep clicking sound with his tongue. The effect was devastating; I almost got sick to my stomach.

“You’re the boy who stalked game and waited patiently, as death waits; you know very well that death is to our left, the same way you were to the left of the white falcon.”

His words had the strange power to plunge me into an unwarranted terror; my only defense was my compulsion to commit to writing everything he said. “How can anyone feel so important when we know that death is stalking us?” he asked.

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“Death is the only wise adviser that we have. Whenever you feel, as you always do, that everything is going wrong and you’re about to be annihilated, turn to your death and ask if that is so. Your death will tell you that you’re wrong; that nothing really matters outside its touch. Your death will tell you, ‘I haven’t touched you yet.’ “

Assuming Responsibility

“Think of your death now,” don Juan said suddenly. “It is at arm’s length. It may tap you any moment, so really you have no time for crappy thoughts and moods. None of us have time for that.

*“Do you want to know what I did to you the first day we met? I **saw** you, and I **saw** that you thought you were lying to me. But you weren’t, not really.”*

I told him that his explanation confused me even more. He replied that that was the reason he did not want to explain his acts, and that explanations were not necessary. He said that the only thing that counted was action, acting instead of talking.

...He then he told me that there was another thing I had to perform if I really wanted to learn about plants. “What was wrong with you when I saw you, and what is wrong with you now, is that you don’t like to take responsibility for what you do,” he said slowly, as if to give me time to understand what he was saying.

“When you were telling me all those things in the bus depot you were aware that they were lies. Why were you lying?”

I explained that my objective had been to find a “key informant” for my work. Don Juan smiled and began humming a Mexican tune. “When a man decides to do something he must go all the way,” he said, “but he must take responsibility for what he does. No matter what he does, he must know first why he is doing it, and then he must proceed with his actions without having doubts or remorse about them.”

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“That’s an impossibility!” I said. He asked me why, and I said that perhaps ideally that was what everybody thought they should do. In practice, however, there was no way to avoid doubts and remorse.

“Of course there is a way,” he replied with conviction. “Look at me,” he said. “I have no doubts or remorse. Everything I do is my decision and my responsibility. The simplest thing I do, to take you for a walk in the desert, for instance, may very well mean my death. Death is stalking me. Therefore, I have no room for doubts or remorse. If I have to die as a result of taking you for a walk, then I must die.”

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“Don Juan asked, are we equals?”

“Of course we’re equals,” I said. I was, naturally, being condescending. I felt very warm towards him even though at times I did not know what to do with him; yet I still held in the back of my mind, although I would never voice it, the belief that I, being a university student, a man of the sophisticated Western world, was superior to an Indian.

“No,” he said calmly, “we are not.”

“Why, certainly we are,” I protested.

“No,” he said in a soft voice. “We are not equals. I am a hunter and a warrior, and you are a pimp.” My mouth fell open. I could not believe that don Juan had actually said that. I dropped my notebook and stared at him dumbfoundedly and then, of course, I became furious.

He looked at me with calm and collected eyes. I avoided his gaze. And then he began to talk. He enunciated his words clearly. They poured out smoothly and deadly. He said that I was pimping for someone else. That I was not fighting my own battles but the battles of some unknown people. That I did not want to learn about plants or about hunting or about anything. And that his world of

precise acts and feelings and decisions was infinitely more effective than the blundering idiocy I called “my life.”

After he finished talking I was numb. He had spoken without belligerence or conceit but with such power, and yet such calmness, that I was not even angry any more. We remained silent. I felt embarrassed and could not think of anything appropriate to say. I waited for him to break the silence.

Hours went by. Don Juan became motionless by degrees, until his body had acquired a strange, almost frightening rigidity; his silhouette became difficult to make out as it got dark, and finally when it was pitch black around us he seemed to have merged into the blackness of the stones. His state of motionlessness was so total that it was as if he did not exist any longer.

It was midnight when I finally realized that he could and would stay motionless there in that wilderness, in those rocks, perhaps forever if he had to. His world of precise acts and feelings and decisions was indeed superior.

I quietly touched his arm and tears flooded me.

Next Sunday morning —

BECOMING A HUNTER
BEING INACCESSIBLE
DISRUPTING THE ROUTINES OF LIFE
BECOMING ACCESSIBLE TO POWER
THE MOOD OF A WARRIOR

DISCUSSION AND COMMENTS

Regular Closing prayer