

“Stopping the World” and the Journey to Ixtlan

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Vedanta Center of Atlanta

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GOOD MORNING ... ANNOUNCEMENTS

Coronavirus: Center is closed except for evening Arati and private practice of meditation. Classes and talks are live-streamed using the Zoom app.

See the Center’s website, or our e-newsletter of Facebook page; you will find instructions on how to download this free app to your phone, tablet or computer.

It’s easy to use. For example, our new online Saturday class has been well attended. We’re studying a collection of talks by Swami Prabhavananda, titled *Realizing God*.

As you know, it’s likely we’ll be encouraged to “shelter in place” for some weeks to come. During that time we will be inviting monks and nuns from other centers to offer us talks and retreats, using the Zoom app.

We'll keep you updated through the website, our Facebook page, and our e-newsletter.

Next week — April 12 is Easter — I'll speak on "Resurrection."

On the 19th, Dr. Bhagirath Majmudar will talk with us, via Zoom online, about what it's like in the ambulances, Emergency Rooms, I.C.U.s, and hospital wards where medical professionals are risking their lives for us everyday. They are doing everything they can to control this coronavirus crisis, often working without sufficient equipment, supplies or support.

CHANT • SONG • WELCOME • TOPIC

April is a month for study of Bhakti Yoga. A bhakti yogi (bhakta) establishes a devotional relationship with God through study, prayer, ritual, and worship. As a bhakta, you practice giving every action,

thought, emotion, perception and tendency “a Godward turn.”

All your energies and attributes, both positive and negative, are offered to the Divine Presence. Your prayer is for the blissful self-surrender of a child in its Mother or Father’s arms, and then, ultimately, union with your Belovèd.

In March, we departed from our usual routine of taking up one of the four yogas for detailed study. Instead, over four weeks we introduced a parallel tradition of spiritual discernment and realization, as taught by a *brujo* of the Toltec lineage — don Juan Matus. The final talk in this series is:

“Stopping the World” and the Journey to Ixtlan

The Upanishads, Patanjali’s Yoga Sutra, and the lives of avatars and saints let us know there is a level of awareness far

beyond our experiences of everyday life. It is called by various names: Samadhi, Turiya, ecstasy; Swami Vivekananda spoke of it as superconsciousness.

Let's start this morning something familiar — we study it at least once a year — Vivekananda's explanation of yoga and the attainment of superconsciousness. This is from the Swami's book, *Raja-Yoga*:

“Yoga is restraining the mind - stuff (Chitta) from taking various forms (Vrittis).

A good deal of explanation is necessary here. We have to understand what Chitta is, and what the Vrittis are ...

The [sense] organs (Indriyas), together with the mind (Manas), the determinative faculty (Buddhi), and egoism (Ahamkara), form the group called the Antahkarana (the internal instrument). They are but

various processes in the mind - stuff, called Chitta. The waves of thought in the Chitta are called Vrittis (literally, "whirlpool").

*What is thought? Thought is a force, as is gravitation or repulsion. From the **infinite storehouse of force in nature**, the instrument called Chitta takes hold of some, absorbs it and sends it out as thought ... You are the only sentient being; mind is only the instrument through which you **catch** the external world.*

*Take this book; as a book it does not exist outside, what exists outside is unknown and unknowable. The unknowable furnishes the suggestion that gives a blow to the mind, **and the mind gives out the reaction in the form of a book ...***

The real universe is the occasion of the reaction of the mind. A book form, or an elephant form, or a man form, is not outside ...

Now we understand what is meant by these Vrittis. The real man is behind the mind; the mind is the instrument in his hands; it is his intelligence that is percolating through the mind ...

*Thus you understand what is meant by Chitta. It is the mind - stuff, and Vrittis are the waves and ripples rising in it when external causes impinge on it. **These Vrittis are our universe.**” (EOQ)*

And so these Vrittis are everything that you experience. This is the “world” that don Juan taught his apprentices to “stop.”

When you learn to **still** these Vrittis — this is the goal of **Raja Yoga’s** practices —

your universe disappears. What replaces it, according to the Yogis, is not darkness and emptiness, but a Great Silence: Radiant, unbounded, blissful superconsciousness. And because it is unlimited, it cannot be described by the limited tool of language.

Don Juan called this feat “stopping the world.” He taught his apprentices techniques for accomplishing it, and helped them prepare for the awesome *next* step. His apprentice Carlos Castaneda wrote of that complete life transformation as *The Journey to Ixtlan*.

This morning we will conclude our study of don Juan and his teachings with two narrations:

- Castaneda’s description of how he finally stopped the world, and

- Don Genarao's story of his completion of a brujo's journey to freedom.

First, a little review:

Don Juan and his fellow teacher don Genaro were *brujos*. A brujo or *bruja* is a person who is in command of power. Don Juan and don Genaro had many apprentices. One of them was Carlos Castaneda, who wrote the book we're drawing from: *Journey to Ixtlan*.

Castaneda tells us that a brujo's basic premise is that the world of everyday life is not real, or out there, as you believe it to be.

A brujo explains that reality (the world as you know it) is only a description that was relentlessly taught to you in childhood, until the moment when you were capable of perceiving the world as it was described to you.

At that moment on you became “a *member*.” From then on, your day-to-day life was experienced as an endless flow of perceptual interpretations that, as a member, you knew how to make in common and in cooperation with the rest of us.

This point of view is familiar: In Sanskrit, the term for these perceptual interpretations is Upadhi, which means “imposition” or “limitation.”

Don Juan and don Genaro taught their apprentices how to overcome the limitations of their inherited, imposed description; he called this achievement “stopping the world.

This too is not a new idea for us: the Mandukya Upanishad speak of it as the “cessation of all phenomena” (Mantra VIII). Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* says the goal is to be independent of limitation, through

detachment from all thought forms — the Sanskrit is *kaivalya*.

Here is Carlos Castaneda's experience of stopping the world, his first awesome step toward that state of being:

(Don Juan said,) “This is my gesture for you,” he said, holding the grip he had on my hand for an instant. “Now you must go by yourself into those friendly mountains.” He pointed with his chin to the distant range of mountains towards the southeast.

He said that I had to remain there until my body told me to quit and then return to his house. He let me know that he did not want me to say anything or to wait any longer by shoving me gently in the direction of my car.

“What am I supposed to do there?” I asked.

He did not answer but looked at me, shaking his head. “No more of that,” he finally said.

I drove south and then east, following the roads I had always taken when driving with don Juan. I parked my car around the place where the dirt road ended and then I hiked on a familiar trail until I reached a high plateau. I had no idea what to do there. I began to meander, looking for a resting place. ...

I stayed motionless for perhaps an hour. My thoughts began to diminish by degrees until I was no longer talking to myself. ...

I meandered in the high plateau and the surrounding mountains all day without knowing what to do or what to expect. I came back to the flat rock (resting place) at dusk. I knew that if I spent the night there I would be safe.

The next day I ventured farther east into the high mountains. By late afternoon I came to another even higher plateau. I thought I had been there before. ... After carefully selecting a suitable place I sat down to rest at the edge of a barren rocky area. I felt very warm and peaceful there. ... I lay down on my stomach and rested my head on my arm. ...

The sun was already low. My eyes were tired. ... Only the wind hissed between the branches and leaves of the chaparral. I looked up, turned to my left in a quick and involuntary fashion, and caught a glimpse of a faint shadow or a flicker on a rock a few feet away. At first I paid no attention to it but then I realized that that flicker had been to my left.

I turned again suddenly and was able to clearly perceive a shadow on the rock. I had the weird sensation that the shadow

instantly slid down to the ground and the soil absorbed it as a blotter dries an ink blotch.

A chill ran down my back. The thought crossed my mind that death was watching me ... I had an extraordinary moment of elation. ... My elation and joy were so overwhelming that I began to weep. Don Juan was right. He had always been right. I was living in a most mysterious world and, like everyone else, I was a most mysterious being, and yet I was no more important than a (dung) beetle.

I wiped my eyes and as I rubbed them with the back of my hand I saw a man, or something which had the shape of a man. It was to my right about fifty yards away. I sat up straight and strained to see. The sun was almost on the horizon and its yellowish glow prevented me from getting

a clear view. ... I again strained to see if I could distinguish the person that seemed to be hiding from me, but I could only detect a dark shape against the bushes. I shielded my eyes by placing my hands above them. The brilliancy of the sunlight changed at that moment and then I realized that what I was seeing was only an optical illusion, a play of shadows and foliage.

I moved my eyes away and I saw a coyote calmly trotting across the field. The coyote was around the spot where I thought I had seen the man. It moved about fifty yards in a southerly direction and then it stopped, turned, and began walking towards me.

I yelled a couple of times to scare it away, but it kept on coming. I had a moment of apprehension. I thought that it might be rabid and I even considered gathering

some rocks to defend myself in case of an attack.

When the animal was ten to fifteen feet away I noticed that it was not agitated in any way; on the contrary, it seemed calm and unafraid. It slowed down its gait, coming to a halt barely four or five feet from me.

We looked at each other, and then the coyote came even closer. Its brown eyes were friendly and clear. I sat down on the rocks and the coyote stood almost touching me. I was dumbfounded. I had never seen a wild coyote that close, and the only thing that occurred to me at that moment was to talk to it.

I began as one would talk to a friendly dog. And then I thought that the coyote "talked" back to me. I had the absolute certainty that it had said something. I felt confused but I did not have time to

ponder upon my feelings, because the coyote "talked" again. It was not that the animal was voicing words the way I am accustomed to hearing words being voiced by human beings, it was rather a "feeling" that it was talking.

But it was not like a feeling that one has when a pet seems to communicate with its master either. The coyote actually said something; it relayed a thought and that communication came out in something quite similar to a sentence.

I had said, "How are you, little coyote?" and I thought I had heard the animal respond, "I'm all right, and you?" Then the coyote repeated the sentence and I jumped to my feet. The animal did not make a single movement. It was not even startled by my sudden jump. Its eyes were still friendly and clear. It lay down on its stomach and tilted its head and asked,

"Why are you afraid?" I sat down facing it and I carried on the weirdest conversation I had ever had. Finally it asked me what I was doing there and I said I had come there to "stop the world." The coyote said, "Que bueno!" ...

Then the full weight of the impossibility of what was happening struck me and my mind wobbled. The coyote stood up and our eyes met. I stared fixedly into them. I felt they were pulling me and suddenly the animal became iridescent; it began to glow. The coyote was a fluid, liquid, luminous being. Its luminosity was dazzling.

I wanted to cover my eyes with my hands to protect them, but I could not move. The luminous being touched me in some undefined part of myself and my body experienced such an exquisite indescribable warmth and well-being that

it was as if the touch had made me explode.

I became transfixed. I could not feel my feet, or my legs, or any part of my body, yet something was sustaining me erect. I have no idea how long I stayed in that position. In the meantime, the luminous coyote and the hilltop where I stood melted away. I had no thoughts or feelings. Everything had been turned off and I was floating freely.

...

I stayed on the hilltop in a state of ecstasy for what appeared to be an endless time, yet the whole event may have lasted only a few minutes, perhaps only as long as the sun shone before it reached the horizon, but to me it seemed an endless time.

I felt something warm and soothing oozing out of the world and out of my own body. I knew I had discovered a secret. It was so simple. I experienced an unknown flood of feelings. Never in my life had I had such a divine euphoria, such peace, such an encompassing grasp, and yet I could not put the discovered secret into words, or even into thoughts, but my body knew it.

Then I either fell asleep or I fainted. When I again became aware of myself I was lying on the rocks. I stood up. The world was as I had always seen it. It was getting dark and I automatically started on my way back to my car.

Don Juan was alone in the house when I arrived the next morning. ... I immediately began to narrate to him the extraordinary experiences I had had.

He listened with obvious interest. "You have simply stopped the world," he commented after I had finished my account. We remained silent for a moment and then don Juan said that I had to thank don Genaro for helping me. He seemed to be unusually pleased with me. He patted my back repeatedly and chuckled.

Don Genaro's story

"What happened when you grabbed your ally, don Genaro?" I asked. "It was a powerful jolt," don Genaro said after a moment's hesitation. ...

"Never would I have imagined it was going to be like that," he went on. "It was something, something, something . . . like nothing I can tell. After I grabbed it we began to spin. The ally made me twirl, but I didn't let go. We spun through the air

with such speed and force that I couldn't see any more. Everything was foggy. The spinning went on, and on, and on.

Suddenly I felt that I was standing on the ground again. I looked at myself. The ally had not killed me. I was in one piece. I was myself! I knew then that I had succeeded. At long last I had an ally. I jumped up and down with delight. What a feeling! What a feeling it was!

“Then I looked around to find out where I was. The surroundings were unknown to me. I thought that the ally must have taken me through the air and dumped me somewhere very far from the place where we started to spin. I oriented myself. I thought that my home must be towards the east, so I began to walk in that direction.

It was still early. The encounter with the ally had not taken too long. Very soon I

found a trail and then I saw a bunch of men and women coming towards me. They were Indians. I thought they were Mazatec Indians. They surrounded me and asked me where I was going.

‘I’m going home to Ixtlan,’ I said to them. ‘Are you lost?’ someone asked. ‘I am,’ I said. ‘Why?’ ‘Because Ixtlan is not that way. Ixtlan is in the opposite direction.

We ourselves are going there,’ someone else said. ‘Join us!’ they all said. ‘We have food!’” Don Genaro stopped talking and looked at me as if he were waiting for me to ask a question.

“Well, what happened?” I asked. “Did you join them?”

“No. I didn’t,” he said. “Because they were not real. I knew it right away, the minute they came to me. There was something in their voices, in their

friendliness that gave them away, especially when they asked me to join them. So I ran away.

They called me and begged me to come back. Their pleas became haunting, but I kept on running away from them.”

“Who were they?” I asked.

“People,” don Genaro replied cuttingly.

“Except that they were not real.”

“They were like apparitions,” don Juan explained. “Like phantoms.”

...

“Suddenly I realized that I had an ally and that there was nothing that the phantoms could do to me. ... Other phantoms lurched out swiftly and tried to make me trip over the precipices, but my will was stronger than they were.

They must have sensed that, because they stopped pestering me. After a while

they simply stood by my path; from time to time some of them would leap towards me but I stopped them with my will. And then they quit bothering me altogether.”

“What happened after that, don Genaro?” I asked. “I kept on walking,” he said factually. It seemed that he had finished his tale and there was nothing he wanted to add.

I asked him why was the fact that they offered him food a clue to their being phantoms. ... He said that the tone of their voices, their eagerness to lure him out, and the manner in which the phantoms talked about food were the clues—and that he knew that because his ally was helping him. He asserted that by himself alone he would have never noticed those peculiarities.

“Were those phantoms allies, don Genaro?” I asked.

“No. They were people.”

“People? But you said they were phantoms.”

“I said that they were no longer real. After my encounter with the ally nothing was real any more.” We were quiet for a long time.

“What was the final outcome of that experience, don Genaro?” I asked.

“Final outcome?” “I mean, when and how did you finally reach Ixtlan?” Both of them broke into laughter at once.

“So that’s the final outcome for you,” don Juan remarked. “Let’s put it this way then. There was no final outcome to Genaro’s journey. There will never be any final outcome. Genaro is still on his way to Ixtlan!”

Don Genaro glanced at me with piercing eyes and then turned his head to look into the distance, towards the south.

“I will never reach Ixtlan,” he said. His voice was firm but soft, almost a murmur.

“Yet in my feelings . . . in my feelings sometimes I think I’m just one step from reaching it. Yet I never will. In my journey I don’t even find the familiar landmarks I used to know. Nothing is any longer the same.”

Don Juan and don Genaro looked at each other. There was something so sad about their look.

“In my journey to Ixtlan I find only phantom travelers,” he said softly.

I looked at don Juan. I had not understood what don Genaro had meant.

“Everyone Genaro finds on his way to Ixtlan is only an ephemeral being,” don

Juan explained. “Take you, for instance. You are a phantom. Your feelings and your eagerness are those of people. That’s why he says that he encounters only phantom travelers on his journey to Ixtlan.”

I suddenly realized that don Genaro’s journey was a metaphor. “Your journey to Ixtlan is not real then,” I said.

“It is real!” don Genaro interjected. “The travelers are not real.” He pointed to don Juan with a nod of his head and said emphatically, “This is the only one who is real. The world is real only when I am with this one.”

Don Juan smiled. “Genaro was telling his story to you,” don Juan said, “because yesterday you stopped the world, and he thinks that you also saw, but you are such a fool that you don’t know it yourself.

I keep on telling him that you are weird, and that sooner or later you will see. At any rate, in your next meeting with the ally, ... you (will) survive the shock ... since you're strong and have been living like a warrior, you will find yourself alive in an unknown land. Then, as is natural to all of us, the first thing you will want to do is to start on your way back to Los Angeles. But there is no way to go back to Los Angeles. What you left there is lost forever.

By then, of course, you will be a brujo, but that's no help; at a time like that what's important to all of us is the fact that everything we love or hate or wish for has been left behind. Yet the feelings in a man do not die or change, and the brujo starts on his way back home knowing that he will never reach it, knowing that no power on earth, not even his death,

will deliver him to the place, the things, the people he loved. That's what Genaro told you."

I looked at don Juan. He was gazing at me. "Only as a warrior can one survive the path of knowledge," he said.

"Because the art of a warrior is to balance the terror of being a man with the wonder of being a man." I gazed at the two of them, each in turn.

Their eyes were clear and peaceful. They had summoned a wave of overwhelming nostalgia, and when they seemed to be on the verge of exploding into passionate tears, they held back the tidal wave.

For an instant I think I saw. I saw the loneliness of man as a gigantic wave which had been frozen in front of me, held back by the invisible wall of a metaphor.

My sadness was so overwhelming that I felt euphoric. I embraced them.

Don Genaro smiled and stood up. Don Juan also stood up and gently put his hand on my shoulder. “We are going to leave you here,” he said. “Do what you think is proper. The ally will be waiting for you at the edge of that plain.”