

THE VEIL OF ENTANGLEMENT

CALM ABIDING AND INSIGHT PRACTICE –
AN ACCOUNT OF A JOURNEY

T. J. NICHOLSON



The Veil of Entanglement:
Calm Abiding and Insight Practice – An Account of a Journey
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Everything I have learned about calm-abiding concentration and insight practice came my way through the unreserved generosity of my teacher, Daniel P. Brown. An eminent clinician, researcher, and scholar, he is as at home translating ancient Tibetan texts as he is advancing the frontiers of contemplative neuroscience. He is a vigilant guardian of precious human traditions of contemplative practice he has dedicated his life to cherishing, practising, and propagating. As a teacher, he has been simultaneously demanding and deeply caring. His patience with me—expressed often enough as impatience—was stoical. He always taught me where I was, even as I wandered, delayed, and resisted. Not a word of this book would have been set down but for him. His own book, *Pointing Out the Great Way*, served as a guiding reference for me in the writing of this one. All the practices I describe in this book I learned from Dan, and I use much of the same vocabulary in describing them here as he used in teaching them to me. Even as this is an otherwise original work of my own, there will be echoes in it of the hours he spent teaching me. The presentation, commentary, interpretation, and errors are all my own.

Susan Mickel, an accomplished teacher in her own right, combines professional credentials in neurology and psychology with a practice steeped in the traditions of both the East and the West. She has been and continues to be gracious enough to take my calls and wise enough to attend to very little of what I have to say, but always the right very little. With her exacting eye and the breadth of her knowledge, she challenged me to clarify both my thinking and my writing. Susan teaches directly from experience, and she inspires by embodying the practice.

George Protos, closely taught and trained by Dan Brown, and himself an exemplar of light-hearted and intelligent practice, has accompanied me from the first retreat I witlessly wandered into. A gifted and dedicated teacher, he is responsible for a turn of phrase that broke the first and most imposing logjam I faced in my practice. He continues to land perfectly placed coinages when I turn to him for his counsel.

None of these teachers stands on ceremony, and all have had the good humour and forbearance to entertain my improvisations as I recast the traditions in terms that were both accurate redactions and meaningful to me. They unhesitatingly teach me both from where I am coming from, and from where I am going to.

I am gigantically grateful to my fellow students who spoke openly of their frustrations and joys—expressed often enough as frustrations—with calm-abiding concentration and insight practice, thereby sharing with me not just the intimacies of their journeys but also the inspiration of their dogged perseverance.

T. J. Nicholson
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Schrödinger coined a term—“entanglement”—for the way ... the wave functions of any two interacting objects, including observer and observed, get wove [*sic*] into one.... Entanglement could be responsible for keeping objective reality behind a veil.

— BOB HENDERSON IN *THE NEW YORK
TIMES*

PREFACE

About the book

In the midst of a challenging, absorbing, stressful, and chronically overtime career in technology in which I could not have been more happily engaged, I took myself off to a coastal retreat for a week of relaxation and rejuvenation. I expected that the attendant program, billed as an introduction to meditation, would not interfere with my planned indolence, and that the week would pass by serenely enough. I envisioned myself lying about on cushions, soaking in hot tubs, having my meals prepared for me, and falling asleep to the sound of the ocean.

On the opening evening, the teacher, Daniel P. Brown, described a set of ancient practices that, he said, would bring me face-to-face with the nature of my mind, the very mind in which I was so vitally enmeshed. At his words, an old longing stirred in me. In the depths, a compass needle silently wheeled round and settled, expectantly, upon the pull of something vast, trackless, and perfectly still.

Until then, it had not occurred to me that I might have been so suited up in my life that I had become estranged from the stark nakedness of my own nature. I sought none of these practices, but I could not walk away from the entrancing prospect they offered. So, foreign as they were to me, I set out on my journey with them.

IN WRITING about my experience as his student, I mean to honour Dan Brown and his way of teaching; in this book, when I say, “I was taught,” I mean, “As I was taught by Dan.” All the same, this book is an interpretive description, a personal one based on my experience of these teachings, and not a reference for them. Along the way, I made adaptations that enabled me to develop my practice in ways that were authentic for me. These recastings are central to the story I have to tell. Otherwise, I have done all I can to be as faithful to these teachings as my experience, my recall, and the sources available to me allow.

I offer this as an unsanctioned student essay on learning to practise, written by a student who is still learning to practise, so it is subjective and provisional. It eschews distorting descriptions of results, let alone benefits, and it requires attention and application on the part of the reader.

This book is also burdened by the knowledge that I would only ever write the one, so at the reader’s expense, I have stuffed everything into it. That’s an admission, not an apology: everything I’ve written about here has meant the world to me. It is an account of how I heard these teachings, how I organized and interpreted them to make them work for myself, and how I still tell them to myself as my practice unfolds in my life.

So it is written in an instructive form: this is the sound of my older self telling my younger self the story I wish I had heard much earlier in life than I did.

THIS BOOK was written for those least likely to come to these practices in their usual contexts. It was written for coders and mechanics, builders and engineers, scientists and tinkerers. It was written for makers and technicians of any description, in the belief that the characteristics of the type—appreciation for detail, intransigence with respect to evidence, promiscuity with respect to experience, ebullient curiosity—are fertile preconditions for a revitalized practice of introspection.

This is a handbook meant to inspire the reader to explore the practices described herein, and to guide the reader in learning to learn them. This doubling of the learning task is necessary for those of us who find the presumption and credulity of both contemporary and traditional teaching and writing on the topic of concentration and insight practice unwelcoming. The book provides an introduction to and an overview of the path of practice in terms as unencumbered as possible by overlays of culture, tradition, and belief so that the reader may come to appreciate in its essentials the startling proposition at stake. Even as the text is instructive, the primary intent is to survey the path of practice, providing the reader with a clear idea of its scope and progress.

I describe this as a handbook because as much as you may be able to learn from it, you will require a teacher adept in both practising and teaching these practices to bring them fully to life. Accordingly, along the way will be advice on what to expect of a teacher, as well as at what point in your practice and in what ways a teacher can be helpful. In time, interested readers may find it worthwhile to turn to more conventional teaching sources, on the lookout for what they will then be

able to recognize as the gems nestled amongst the glittering display. This is the spirit in which I was taught, and it is my fondest hope to pass this opportunity on to as many others as are inclined to listen.

THE TERRITORY I am treading here is vast and august. It is a monumental expression in the larger human endeavour—a living, continually elaborating universe of ideas and practices. It is, in one instance, the cherished cultural treasure of an entire nation harried into diaspora. It is a self-fulfilling phenomenon in the midst of which an untutored voice can seem an affront, especially when the field is littered with luminaries, emissaries, and incarnations, the genuine custodians of the letter and the lineage.

My intent in this book is in no way to attempt to improve upon teachings that have come down the ages and proven themselves over and over again. I have no qualifications other than that I spent a decade trying to learn to practise. My intent is to describe the practical experience that allowed me to make my way into and through a fraction of these teachings and practices, despite finding them—in my sceptical, secular context—in an idiom with which I have no rapport.

I can only write from my predicament—my lineage, if you like. As a Westerner, I live in the wake of convulsive reformations and revolutions, and the litany of atrocities that was the twentieth century. In the face of this inheritance, the only conscionable stance I can adopt is an ironic one. Too many lives have been ground up in violence and horror to abandon the principles for which they paid. Specifically, direct experience is primary, and every text is an interpretation; none is revealed, none is privileged. Upon these principles, power is to be held to account.

What created an opening for me with these practices is that there is a similarly radical stance at the heart of the traditions themselves. It's just not put about too widely, as it's inimical to institutionalism.

I CAME HERE by accident and have been made nothing but welcome. What has been put in my hands has made for the most extraordinary adventure of my life. Everything I have to say here I offer with profound gratitude to my teachers and to the lineage of which they are the embodiment. The only way I can give back is to bring practice into my life in a way that is faithful both to them and to myself.

My own journey was much more of a muddle than the trajectory I've laid out here, but as it progressed, it did clarify and organize itself to align with the teachings, my temperament, and what have turned out to be my abilities. I offer this account in the hope that, for the sake of practice, it might inspire other hearts and minds like mine to find their own way to these teachings.

About the author

I wrote this book at a time in my life when I had become keenly aware of the world of care, kindness, generosity, and love my parents bestowed upon me. In honour of them and all the gifts they gave me, not least my life, I've chosen a pen name that combines the initials of my father's first names with my mother's family name.

INTRODUCTION

The intent of the practices described in this book is nothing less than to liberate you by revealing to you, in your own direct experience, the nature of your mind.

If you think you already know your own mind, you might want to examine both those verbs. We maintain a privileged stance of knowing based upon a flow of experience that comes to us exclusively through the fisheye lens of the thinking mind, without realizing that this lens, for all its dazzling acuity, is also a distorting filter. The cinematic splendour of thought and emotion, of memory and of dream, is not the whole picture; from where are those projections beaming?

This question of the nature of mind has been at the centre of human inquiry from time immemorial. It has been driven as much by restless curiosity as by a sense of something ineffable beckoning from just beyond the fringes of human experience, a sense that being has a ground. It has swirled about with varying degrees of disruption under the auspices of philosophy and religion in their crude and refined forms, ever vexing, never resolving.

Traditions of contemplative practice—the contemplation of the mind by the mind—meant to investigate this question have descended from both domains across cultures and across the centuries. Amongst them, the Buddhist traditions have evolved contemplative practices of uncommon detail and precision, including an enduring pedagogy that lays out a complete path of practice leading the practitioner to a direct, experiential encounter with the nature of mind.

However, for those of us of a sceptical, secular disposition, these practices are not easy to appreciate, encased as they are within the orthodoxies and cultural encrustations of the Buddhist traditions flourishing in the world today. The intent in this book is to distill a description of these practices out of their traditional settings, to make them available for both inspection and practice in a secular context. Since this distillation is across a number of Buddhist traditions, I'll refer to them hereafter simply as “the traditions,” to minimize both appropriation and affiliation.

What I have written here neither requires nor assumes any prior experience with contemplative practice. It sets aside enthusiasm in favour of a detailed, structured, practical approach—first, to uncovering the concentration abilities native to mind, and second, to establishing them in an enduring and serviceable way in the hands of the practitioner. Whereupon the insight practices are presented not as exotic experiences in some transcendent domain but as encounters with natural mind, available to direct, awake experience.

The arrangement of the concentration practices as a prerequisite to insight practice is traditional, but don't let anything about the syllabus dictate how your path unfolds. I know of gifted practitioners who listened attentively but with a touch of bemusement to the concentration practices, arrived at the insight practices without a lot of commotion, and realized them almost casually, as though they were second nature.

I, on the other hand, had to make my way painstakingly, step by step, and it's that incremental journey I've recounted here.

For the contemporary sceptic, these foundational practices can stand on their own, independent of the traditions in which they are embedded. Undertaking them requires no dispensation from authority, no subscription to particular beliefs. You may also be relieved to know that they depend in no way upon seclusion, a vegetarian diet, or celibacy.

The traditions propose that the nature of mind is not something unknown to discover. Rather, it's something we live in the midst of to uncover, something we already know but from which we have become estranged. So the journey through these practices is framed as a journey of liberation: calm-abiding concentration practice is intended to gain freedom *for* yourself, insight practice to gain freedom *from* yourself. It's a journey of liberation from the veil of entanglement, that knotted fist of unmediated reactivity organized around the self, the self in which we are ensnared and which so separates us from the ground of being.

WE'LL START WITH an intuitive notion of reactivity: those positive and negative emotional responses of attraction or aversion we experience as arising pretty much on their own, rooted in our hopes and desires, and in our anxieties and fears, the two not always easy to differentiate from one another. Mostly unnoticed, but just as consequential, are the less prominent neutral emotional responses such as thoughtless indifference or mindless obliviousness. Consider that, at some level, we notice everything in experience, but these neutral responses dismiss much before it even has time to rise into awareness. Reactivity is at work in what we discard from our experience early on.

All these emotional responses, however, are at the tail end of an intricate and subtle chain of reactions that precede them. The blank slate of direct experience—experience before anything has been made of it—passes through a cascade of reactive filters as we become aware of it, a cascade that makes nonsense of the conceit of objectivity. The senses impose their specific modes on it. The cultures and histories we live in narrate it to us. Our characters and the phases and conditions of our lives cast it all in an individual context.

Above all, the experience of life and death will come to you in the unique incarnation of the life and death of the mortal body you were born into, determined by its constitution, its capacities and frailties, its clamorous sensuality. Even the way we communicate experience, to ourselves and to one another, is a reaction, a coercion of experience into linguistic structures that not only edit experience into their own fictions but also construct distinct human worlds and world views that encode contrasting, and usually conflicting, assumptions and expectations.

While you can start with your own intuitive notion of what is meant by reactivity, as you read this book and practise, be prepared for the scope of the word to widen as your own direct experience reveals to you, in ever greater detail and subtlety, the breadth and power of reactivity as it moves to shape all of experience. The good news is that every such movement is an opportunity for liberation.

I AM USING the words “liberation” and “freedom” interchangeably in this text, and by them, I mean release from entanglement. While freedom is the outcome of both concentration and insight practice, it’s a very different freedom in each case.

The freedom sought in concentration practice, freedom for yourself, is the freedom from the grasping bonds of your reactivity. It is only circumstantial freedom, enduring—when it does—only on the cushion. It is ephemeral respite, creating the conditions of mind in which you can productively engage in insight practice.

The freedom sought in insight practice, freedom from yourself, is the more profound freedom from the suffocating grip of the self. The goal is a sustained and ambient liberty throughout your life, a transformation of how you are in the world. In both cases, I use the word “liberation” to mean the process of becoming free, all the freeing up you do until your freedom is self-sustaining.

The nature of knowledge

In addition to open-minded curiosity, an expansive attitude toward knowledge is required to undertake and understand these practices.

The much-maligned tradition of secular scepticism in the West—all of its collateral damage notwithstanding—has brought unprecedented rights and freedoms, in particular the right to self-determination and freedom of expression, to anyone lucky enough to be born into its world and temperamentally adapted to living with the chaos and doubt this world entails. Embedded in the foundation of the accompanying empiricism is the great prejudice that subjective investigation yields results that are not externally verifiable and are therefore suspect. Implicit in this ban on the subjective is an assumption not just that everything knowable is externally verifiable, but also that it can be articulated in language, and that this articulation is the transformation of knowledge into an objective form. Equations are the holy of holies in this regard.

But more fundamental to knowing than verification is recognition. Recognition is the ground of knowing, that silent, internal blip on the radar screen of the mind that incites attention, that offers up to the roving mind a flicker of speculation, that coheres a specific possibility out of the infinities in response to the mind's yearning. If knowing is the light of the mind, recognition is the spark of the mind. Recognition is the reason there's something rather than nothing. Verification is what we apply after the fact to confirm what we have first discerned through recognition. What we call knowledge has as both its roots and its durability subjective recognition, that intimate moment when knowing comes to light.

You already know this experience. You already know it as something that occurs, rather than as something you do. You are already familiar with the moment of integration it entails. All of concentration and insight practice turns on this one gesture of the mind. Recognition is the sole guide to practice.

I AM USING the word "recognition" in this text in two ways. The first use I make of the word is the conventional one, as "recognition of" something, where recognition elaborates up out of direct experience into conceptual knowledge. But in the context of direct experience—once again, experience before anything has been made of it—I am using recognition as the name of an exclusively non-conceptual capacity of mind, the gesture out of which knowledge arises, both conceptual and non-conceptual. In everyday experience, we do not usually distinguish this unmediated moment in the mind from everything it gives rise to. This non-conceptual capacity of mind is unelaborated recognition, just an elemental movement of mind, and this use of the word "recognition" is uncommon outside of practice.

It is essential to distinguish between these two uses in practice. In the context of concentration practice, recognition typically elaborates into conceptual knowledge. For instance, you will come to recognize the capacities of your mind, making it possible for you to identify and deploy them.

In the context of insight practice, however, recognition does not elaborate. It stays at calm, non-conceptual knowing. Insight.

Unfortunately, the language of description in both cases is the same; we always speak of recognizing “something.” In the case of concentration practice, description of what is recognized is meant to be corroborating, but in the case of insight practice, description is only ever evocative, never accurate, often misleading—yet it’s the best we can do from within language. It is up to readers to discern which use of “recognition” is intended, from a combination of the context and their own experience.

In both cases, knowledge originates in recognition, not in thinking.

BUT LET’S BE CAREFUL. Verification makes knowledge dependable enough to be both generalizable and applicable. Verification is the great destroyer of the tyranny of scholasticism, the tyranny of superstition, the tyranny of revelation. We risk much to profess as knowledge anything that cannot be confirmed outside of individual experience.

So is there such a thing as unprofessable knowledge—knowledge that is neither generalizable, in the sense that it cannot be articulated in language, nor applicable, in the sense that it is unsusceptible to deployment? Is there knowledge that hangs solely upon recognition and cannot be extended from there to persecute our fellow beings in word or in deed?

Is there knowledge that just is, that eludes any attempt to give voice to it or to wield it? If so, what kind of knowledge would this be, and what would its outcome be?

See for yourself. Concentration and insight practice challenge you to ask these questions of yourself, and to rely upon the gift of recognition in the incontestable field of your own direct experience to respond to them. This is an empirical endeavour, taking the evidence of the mind rather than the evidence of the evident. Whether you learn anything depends intimately on your own authentic experience to corroborate what I have written here. In any case, there is nothing you can do with what you come to know. Which is not to say it won't have its consequences.

A map of the book

Part I introduces the two fundamentals of practice upon which everything to follow is built: why you have come here, and what you can do about it.

Chapter 1 is a tart statement of the motivation that originally drew me to these practices and keeps me coming back to them. If it unfolds for you as it did for me, your motivation will broaden and deepen as this book progresses, and as you and your practice are drawn more intimately into the world. You have quite the journey ahead of you, and without motivation that's woven right into you, the voyage will end up being not much more than an unsurvivable endurance test. As I was taught, if your motivation is sound, everything else will follow. Everything.

Chapter 2 takes you on a meticulous tour of your body to acquaint you with the fine instrument of practice it is. This is the first of many experiential descriptions of practice in the book, and it will introduce you at the outset to the kind of close engagement these practices require.

We are embodied beings, and if your practice becomes detached from this raw fact, you can end up wandering aimlessly. The body is, viscerally, the root of practice.

Part II presents detailed and practical descriptions of six calm-abiding concentration practices that will take you through all the traditional “stages of concentration.”

Chapter 3 orients you to the traditional pedagogy on which I have based this presentation of the calm-abiding concentration practices, and it gives you an idea of how practice comes alive in life.

Chapters 4 through 6 take you on the journey through the concentration practices themselves, each one incrementally reinforcing the others, all of them worth practising again and again. There are exercises and refinements to explore, and there are practical hints for growing and protecting your practice. Chapter 6 closes with the first in a beautiful sequence of shifts in contemplative perspective that will enable the full potential of practice to flourish. At this point in your journey, you are encouraged to loop back to the beginning of the practices to see how the easefulness of this new perspective refreshes the skills themselves.

Chapter 7 describes a second and pivotal shift in contemplative perspective, the shift to “knowingness,” to what’s known as the knowing aspect of awareness, from which the insight practices will yield up all they hold. The chapter includes a fairly thorny section on a linguistic framework that will serve us throughout the exploration of the insight practices, but which we will dispense with when the time comes. Once again, you are encouraged to loop back to the beginning of the practices to see how your experience and proficiency with these skills from this new perspective reduce your dependence upon them.

And this is key: at the outset, concentration practice is effortful and disciplined, as you become more and more accustomed to taking responsibility for the state of your mind; but ultimately, the goal is to discover the poise and calm your mind is naturally capable of, eventually leaving explicit concentration practice behind. With practice, calm abiding ends up being a place you just go to with not much more than intention. It takes a bit of work, though, to cultivate this potential.

Chapter 8 returns to the theme of how practice now comes alive in life. While the concentration practices are presented as exercises on the cushion, they have a way also of becoming constructively disruptive of the entangling patterns of your daily life. The chapter closes with an encouragement to deepen your motivation for your practice to come to have real meaning in your life.

The first three chapters of Part III—Chapters 9, 10, and 11—are the most personal and ruminative. They are a prelude to the insight practices, and they recount the accommodations I made with the traditions to be able to undertake these practices with respect and integrity.

Chapter 9 describes a way of reading traditional texts that enabled me to appreciate their wisdom. What were once esoteric and inscrutable books that seemed to come from another age altogether have turned out to comprise a literature in its own right, subtle and elusive to be sure, but enthralling in its own way. To continue the journey with practice beyond the scope of this book, the secular sceptic will need to turn to traditional sources for their original instruction, and with an ear attuned to their idiom.

Chapter 10 outlines the entire path of practice, as the traditions render it, to locate the insight practices within that path and to enable you to recognize its “stages” where they echo

throughout the traditional literature upon which you will come to depend.

Chapter 11 expands on the insight practices from the “stages of meditation” section of the path described in Chapter 10 and details the “two truths” framework that gives conceptual life to the whole endeavour. But most importantly, it introduces the notion of a “view” and the way of knowing upon which insight depends. It’s here in this chapter that the notion of knowledge that “just is” is brought into the foreground to challenge the dominance of conceptual mind. Your journey with insight practice will turn out to be as much an exploration of “knowing” as it is of “being.”

This question of the nature of knowledge then returns in the insight practices themselves, described in Chapters 12, 13, and 14, and each chapter elaborates upon variations of the theme. While the format in these chapters is still instructive, I present these practices here only as descriptions, as signposts to the reader, serving only to show you how to learn to learn. As each chapter progresses, the descriptions get less and less practical and more and more evocative. They are, at best, postcards from a distant shore you may one day travel to and be able to recognize once you set foot.

Chapter 15 is valedictory and gets a little carried away but comes back home in the end to the heart of practice: compassion and conduct.

