

# LEARNING TO *news*

*Occasional Reflections on Living*

*Fall 2008*



Our daughter got home not long ago. When she strolled through the door, I stopped at the sight. She seemed to have grown. Her movements were different, her style of speaking new. “Hi ya, Pops!” she grinned. ‘You’ve changed,’ I thought.

This has happened many times. Samantha goes off with a grandparent or mornings at school, and returns altered. One could call this a constant in our lives right now. And I have little doubt it will continue being this for a while. It is possible, for example, that when she gets back from this afternoon’s play date, I will see more shifts. What I find curious about this is not that Samantha changes on such short order, but that I am shocked whenever it occurs.

“I know the secret of Buddhism,” a friend recently said. Initially surprised, I soon realized he was quoting one of the stories in my book, *Learning to Swim: Reflections on Living*. The piece cites a passage from *Crooked Cucumber*, a wonderful biography of Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki. In this, a bewildered student admits his inability to understand what Roshi has been saying. He asks his teacher to “reduce Buddhism to one phrase.” Suzuki says, “Everything changes.” Then he asks for another question.

Assuming the accuracy of this, I wonder why I’m stunned when my daughter’s facial features morph overnight? Perhaps an answer is provided by considering the issue from a slightly different perspective. If everything changes, why do I not notice this? Why do I treat Samantha’s alterations as an exception rather than a rule?

Samantha, my wife Caren, and I went to the beach last weekend. On an overcast Sunday morning, we spent some playful hours building sand castles. There weren’t many people around when we arrived. By the time we left, however, numbers had increased considerably. There were

families, teenagers, tourists, and suntanners spotting the sand as we headed home. Making a sidelong glance at one of this last group, Caren commented about no longer tanning herself. Memories arose. I thought, ‘Wow, you’ve changed.’

Caren *has* changed over the years; I just don’t notice this too readily. It is as if my mind paints her in monochromatic colors, paints her more as an idea - ‘Caren’ - than a living entity, that I then only see in relatively dull and stable ways. I fail to notice how her laugh has altered, how her hairstyle has shifted, her eyes darkened. The same can be said for the slice of sky I see from my desk. When I turn and lift my gaze, I only see ‘sky’. Omitted from this are the endless alterations that stretch undergoes through time.

In Buddhism, this phenomenon is called ‘ignorance’. It is our tendency to ignore that which does not conform to our ideas of ourselves and others. Caren is simply ‘Caren’. Sky is simply ‘sky’. Anything outside these conceptions, I don’t pay attention to. Thus, this is a kind of perceptual shorthand. It keeps things nicely pigeonholed, but it also blinds us to the varied truth of everything around us. Meditation is a means of undoing this shorthand, of helping us reconnect with the dynamism of the world. The shocking immediacy of life can sometimes do this for us too.

Samantha - like most young children - is this way. When she blasts home from the park, some part of her pierces me, defying easy categorization and insisting I notice. With this force at work day after day, I find myself seeing things a little more clearly than I might otherwise do. These are not always big things, more often small, but they represent cracks in my pattern of not-seeing. A cloud emerges in that patch of sky, for instance. Small and pale, it floats still against a sharp background for a few minutes. It twists as if tickled when a slice of sunlight sparkles it bleach white for the shortest of instants. Then the cloud blinks out like an extinguished candle; it quite suddenly vanishes.

## Continuing With Meditation

A lifelong journey opens up when we take our first meditation class. Because the depths of the practice only show themselves over time, an introductory event is really nothing more than a beginning. If we are lucky, this beginning will then become a gateway for us - an invitation into a long exploration of our person, life, and world.

When I initially started offering meditation events, I didn't understand how much support we all need in making this exploration. Most of my emphasis was on introducing the practice to others. Now, however, at least as much attention is given to helping us stay with this path.

*The Ocean View Meditation Group* is my fullest presentation of what we need in order to continue this journey. Alternating longer sitting sessions with periods of discussion, these monthly gatherings expose us to both the practice and view of meditation. This exposure is enriched by the inclusion of a guided mp3 and talk transcript.

A number of *Ongoing Weekly Classes* provide a much-appreciated opportunity for regular group meditation. Taking place at Monterey Centre (Mon aft & Wed nights; 370 7300) and Goward House (Mon nights; 475 7100), these events are concerned largely with the practice of meditation - though some time is given to discussion.

As a *Personal Meditation Coach*, I work with people in a one-on-one fashion to explore our experience and understanding of the meditative way. Taking place over the phone for maximal comfort and convenience, this service has proven an invaluable aid in deepening our engagement with this ancient tradition.

*The Monthly Meditation Updates* are a new offering. These allow subscribers access to ten guided meditation recordings each year. Taken from the monthly *Ocean View* events, these mp3s are typically 45-60 minutes in length, and cover both sitting practice and bodywork. They are intended as ongoing supports for continued practice.

And this is really the main thing: continued practice. As mentioned, the depths of meditation really only unfold over time. All of the above are intended to keep us at this long enough that we begin to glimpse these depths, long enough that our lives begin to transform.

## Fall Meditation Schedules

When visiting NeilMcKinlay.com, you will notice my meditation offerings have been divided into 'Introductory' and 'Continuing'. This reflects a recognition that these two groups of practitioners really have differing needs. One aspect of these needs concerns easy access to appropriate teaching schedules. Thus, please go to your intended page and check out a specific 'Coming Events'.

## Kick Start Your Meditation Practice

With September approaching, I invite you to kick-start your meditation practice with a special coaching offer. This combines a four-session coaching session with six months of *Meditation Updates* for \$230 plus GST. This package represents a savings of more than 10%.

## 5-Minute Refresh: Meditation In Our Busy Lives

*The Five-Minute Refresh* highlights the restorative power of the posture-work used in *Learning to Meditate*, making meditation something you can do in as little as five minutes. Check the 'Introductory Meditation' page of my site for more information, and be in touch if you are interested in bringing this event to your workplace.

Please also consider attending a rare public offering of this event. Victoria's Family Caregiver Network will be hosting a *Five-Minute Refresh* on the evening of Tues Oct 21 (7-9 pm). Contact 384 0408 to register.

## What Can I Do?

In 2007, the BC government paved the way for more urban sprawl by removing 3500 acres of Vancouver Island forest from development protection without public consultation. The Ministry of Transportation's Bob Wylie has until Spring '09 to approve the transformation of this Jordan River area. Email Bob.Wylie@gov.bc.ca to express your sense that such a move is against public interest.

- From Guy Dauncey's *EcoNews* ([www.earthfuture.com](http://www.earthfuture.com))

## Thanks

Bruce Cox, Gord Butterfield, Helen Peacock, Guy Dauncey, Helga Beer, Renee Olsen.