

## Finding the Gold Within

In interviews from Siberia to Australia, traditional shamen describe deep reluctance to respond to the call of the spirit world. “For nine years I fought against the spirit, without telling anyone what had happened because I believed they might not believe me or make fun of me.”<sup>1</sup>

Solitary spirituality can be challenging, isolating, strange. Without the support of community, whether traditional or created through common interest, it can give rise to self doubt, confusion, and egoism. Yet, traveling outside of the body, communicating with plants, animals, ancestors, or spirits, healing spirit or physical body with energy, creating ritual to affect the world and effect change, and living by visions are all central to developing the skills, power, self-knowledge, and intent required of those who live by spirit.

Knowing this, how can one learn to work alone? How can one learn to trust the visions and avoid the self-importance? How can one develop spiritual impeccability?

Along with nine other women, I was making my first guided trance journey. After we were instructed to receive a gift, a young eagle perched on my shoulder. Right there in the journey I resisted, thinking it must be a hawk. Later I told the group, “I was given an eagle baby. But maybe it was a hawk, I couldn’t see clearly.” The others said, “If that’s what you got, an eagle, why question it? That’s your gift.” “Oh,” I thought.

Many years later, I know to trust that vision. Eagle has come to me and accompanied me on many journeys, growing over the years from baby to adult, and giving me courage and companionship in places I would not have dared to go alone. I am learning not to question gifts and visions. But it is slow. And I know now that I *had* to work alone, as well as in community,

before I could see what is special/unique about my gifts, learn what I can offer, discover how I can use spirit to heal the world.

Still, I hesitate to begin my solitary journeys. Even on rare days free of obligations, I pull weeds, or walk the dogs, or decide to pay bills rather than shifting my consciousness and creating the space to go deep.

Again, the question arises: how can one learn to work alone?

In my experience there are four crucial elements, or stages, to intentional working alone: removing distractions; calming the mind; shifting consciousness; and journeying to explore the mysterious world of the sacred.

### **Remove Distractions, Calm the Mind**

Removing distractions can be as simple as ignoring the dishes, as formal as leaving your normal life and going to a different place. The key is to change your habit patterns. For example, this morning I rose and went directly to my sanctuary, foregoing my usual coffee and newspaper. This lets me begin fresh from sleep, with a clear, unencumbered awareness.

Meditation is essential for calming the mind and slowing mental processes to pure observation. I use breath and light energy visualization to begin, but there are many meditation techniques that work. The key is to reach a point of stillness and awareness, where your breathing is slowed, your mind stops dancing and distracting with things to do or events not processed or random musings, and you observe each moment, each sensation, each breath.

Here's an example from my journal of the awareness and perception that opens with meditation:

*Big breath means swallowing the cosmos in order to find alignment with it. Big breath means opening heart wide to encompass time and space, just as time and space wait to encompass us. Big breath means letting mind hear the stars, open wide, let the debris settle into the earth as compost. Big breath means opening each cell wider and wider until the skin boundaries are fluid, floating, become like cloud forest*

*in respiration. Big breath means being: just body, just cells, just breath itself. The "I" dissolves, leaving skin, bone, blood working in concert, filling and emptying breath, filling and emptying, until there are no boundaries.*

### **Shift Consciousness**

The trick, in our all too busy lives, is to find tools, symbols, talismans, and reminders that help us shift consciousness quickly and seamlessly from the mundane to a wider vision. We can explore the layers of dimensional reality through chanting, percussion, dancing, ritual, writing practice, intense aerobic activity, rhythmic walking, art making, and meditation. Shamans use these tools, and others, to practice going back and forth between the worlds.

We can also use objects in the natural world to help us access other realities. Stones and trees will speak to us, dance with us, travel with us if we will listen (hold the stone; put your back against the tree). Native Californians used repetitive motions with such objects, grinding stone into granite boulders to produce trance during initiations, as did prehistoric peoples the world over.<sup>2</sup>

I have certain stones I use as talismans for shifting consciousness. They represent particular places, feelings, awareness; I hold them and feel them against my body to remind myself of their wisdom. If I am sad, for example, I use a heavy Urubamba River stone to pull dense energy from my body and send it back into the earth as compost. If I am too focused on money, I listen to my meteor stone, which talks to me of cellular memory, hurtling through space, star formation: the long view. If I am having trouble getting on track, I may take one of my jungle stones to remind myself of the essential unity I experienced in the Peruvian jungle. If I want to ground myself, I hold one of my mountain stones from around the Bay—serpentine from Mt Tamalpais, crystalline from San Bruno and Mt Diablo, a smooth hard variegated piece from Mt Hamilton—and use it to focus on the filaments of connection between us.

One of the extraordinary aspects of shifting consciousness, with the focus and intent of making space for spirit, is the power of being totally in the moment. The act itself widens our

vision, lets us take in tactile surroundings so deeply that we can later conjure, reexperience, bring them forth as vividly as when we first breathed them. Listening to my mountain stones, for example, I return to their source.

Walking in a quiet, empty-of-buildings place is another tool I use for shifting awareness from urban to natural, and to how things grow wild. Creatures that inhabit such places remind one of things beyond self. The night heron croaking his displeasure at being disturbed is living his life of fish watching oblivious to me. The fish breaking still water for a bug meal inhabits a different world. The more I observe these others in their habitat, the less I am stuck in my narrow human worldview, and the more connected I feel. Such a walk, especially in silence, is a way of going inner and outer at once, a precursor to doing other, deeper, work.

*Our bodies remember this, slow pace of ancestors and seasons, great emptiness of sky and wind, encircling arms of oak canopy.*

*We walk to re-member our feet, eyes, souls, breath.*

*Purple-tipped wild oats shimmer in sunlight and shadow.*

*What mundane world?*

*Branches look like a hundred dancers, curving and stretching into space and around each other.*

*Green and blue mountains stand sentinel in the distance, circling our Bay: San Bruno, Mt. Diablo, Mt. Hamilton, and Umunhum visible from this hill. Surrounding our world, they mark the geological history of great peaks eroding, river valleys filling with saltwater from rising ocean, humans and creatures sharing natural abundance.*

## **Explore the Beyond**

We humans hold in common a habit of seeking: beyond ourselves, outside ourselves, in the wilderness, into the cosmos. We seek truth; we seek transformation; we seek oneness.

Culture has traditionally determined much of the content and form of questing; esoteric and healing knowledge was passed through lineage, and communities expected and supported unique behavior on the part of healers, wise women, and shamen. Worldwide travel and information offer us broader access to pathways of transformation, yet the absence of elders

and lack of boundaries now may limit, or at least confuse, our possibilities more than we know. We have a multiplicity of spiritual choices, yet we have to interpret what comes to us without the help of communal bodies of knowledge and belief.

Seeking deep vision—in initiation, vision quest, sacrificial rituals like the Sioux Sun Dance, and solitary journeys—is the dessert of solitary spirituality: the mysterious world of the sacred and our place in it is revealed. Yet I find deep vision work hardest to accomplish alone. It requires time, courage, and preparation beforehand, as well as integration afterwards.

While we cannot recreate traditional cultures, we can, like indigenous peoples, call on plants, spirit beings, ancestors, mountains, and our allies; we can know our interconnections and experience biodiversity in our bones; we can maintain connection with the wider support that surrounds us.

### **Find the Gold**

When I began thinking about this topic of solitary spirituality, a male friend said to me, “In my experience you can’t do it alone. You have to work with community.” Of course we have to work in community, but I was mad at his arrogance, his assumption that solitary spirituality is not important or necessary. This forced me to figure out *why* one has to work alone.

Groups can build incredible energy for healing, renewal, connection, shared joy, support. But if you always work in a group, it is hard to tell what’s you (separate) and what’s group energy. Like teenagers and young adults finding out who they are apart from family, like shamen and healers the world over, one devoted to spirit in our culture has to separate.

Working on our own helps us to develop skills and confidence, to know what we can do as well as our limits. It makes us come to terms with our fear, our demons, and our egos; it helps us to find our essential strengths; it lets us explore our power and our gifts, our issues and personal style. It helps us build on what’s learned from and with others. It gives us the confidence to put our solo skills to work whenever we work in community. This is the gold within. Working solo has let me see it:

*My gold is inside. I let it fill the egg until the walls glow.  
I let it fill my body (that's harder), fill my aura, expand into the room.  
My attention moves back and forth between the gold outside and within, trying to  
learn how it feels, how to carry it. I don't want to pull it back into the egg; and I  
know the nugget remains there, always accessible.*

On the other hand, this gold is no big deal. What moves me and keeps me going on this path is returning to what holds us together—Indra's net, the jewel web of interbeing, the woven golden filaments that surround and connect us with star beings, stones, insects, bison, mountains, and cultures. In this context of seven generations I can breathe freely and deeply, feel connected and work alone, and be unconcerned with issues of separation and individuation.

Maybe we can create a new context for the millennium, where alone and together are Tao, interwoven and existing simultaneously, without competition. "All our relations" could expand beyond Buddhist "sentient beings" to include the energy that formed galaxies, planets, us, and the DNA that threads throughout the warp of our living weaving. Imagine what the world would be if we incorporated this non-dualistic vision into every interaction, every journey, every teaching.

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<sup>1</sup> Yakut shaman Uno Harva, quoted in Kalweit, Holger. *Dreamtime and Inner Space: The World of the Shaman*. Boston: Shambala, 1988, page 88. For related commentaries, see also Halifax, Joan, *The Fruitful Darkness: Reconnecting with the Body of the Earth*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1993, and *Shamanic Voices*, NY: E.P. Dutton, 1979.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, Lerch, and Garbani, *Indian Pit and Groove Petroglyphs Cupules of Western Riverside County*, San Jacinto Valley Museum Association and Inland Empire Museum Foundation, San Jacinto, 1990.