

The Personal Retreat:

Venue: Mount Madonna Commune, 356 mountain top acres between Watsonville and Gilroy in CA. <http://www.mountmadonna.org>

Two hot, one cold vegetarian meals per day.

I rented a tent-site for the week, with meals \$205.

Took about an hour to get there, an hour and 40 to find and set up the 6 person tent I own (yes, I found two ways that one person can erect a 6 person tent)

Met a woman on the run from a meth-amphetamine mob in Oregon also camping there. That was a great lesson on how we take our fears with us, and they create our experiences. She had allowed her fear to run her life... was quite paranoid, eventually thought I was stalking her, I moved my tent as a result to the other side of the mountain, all good exercise for me and a great signpost on where I should be looking to fix my issues, not on where I should be going or what I should be doing to fix my problems.

This woman took me to a Hanuman Fellowship barbeque (veggie burgers and soy dogs of course). \$5 donation and \$10 for raffle tickets. Got a hot meal, which I had been told was not going to be available, because the kitchen closes on Sunday, and won: 3 bars of hand made soap, 1 lb of organic Starbucks coffee, an hour and ½ hot oil massage, steam bath and barley exfoliate (worth \$110) and a free weekend workshop including lodging and food (\$200 value). This was a sweet start to the week, essentially it made the trip free, or rather 2 for one, plus saved me the cost of the massage I was planning on paying for.

Had a great dream, but discovered the redwoods are very noisy at night, between the wind, things falling on the tent, jet noise from the planes taking off at San Jose (they must fly over Mount Madonna as a locator)... glad I had my ear plugs.

Next day, Pranayama (breath/energy exercise class), Meditation, and Beginning Asanas starting at 6am. Breakfast by 9. (Did this Mon, Wed, Fri; each essentially a private lesson with a different teacher) and then a group lesson on Sat. at 7:30. I found I got into the breathing easily, the meditations were familiar, I've lost some of the discipline I've had in the past, but overall they were very good, the Asanas seem to have immediately helped my body feel better... I have to keep this up. So, these were my formal classes and introduction to Ashtanga Yoga. The 8 limbed path. So I took some time to study the basics and reflect on how my life relates. This is what I discovered.

The 8 limbs or practices are (in English): Restraints, Observances, Physical Exercise, Energy Exercise, Silencing the Senses, Concentration, Contemplation, Direct Knowing.

The five restrains are all motivated by self empowerment. It's ironic, as the backbone of the community is to develop selfless behavior/actions. The irony lies in the situation where the restrains are practiced to satisfy and empower self, not selflessness. This is my

observation, not one that is called forward in the teachings. These restraints also become part of one's life almost reflexively as they are truly self-empowering. So one who is committed to self-development will implement them. They are: non-violence (Professed to be the only real power over violence. My friend Shirley showed me how this works. Her anger towards someone provoked a response that caused her harm. Clearly non-violence does eliminate defensive violent actions/responses.) Including thoughts, actions... and lust (Lust at first surprised me, but I now see that unsolicited energetic sexual advances, what happens when some people lust for others, are in fact an intrusive act to some. I myself have experienced this.); truthfulness (if you always speak and think the truth, then everything you say becomes true); non-stealing & non-possessiveness (I lump these together, they give you the same benefit. Both of these will take from you your identity to the extent that you identify with objects, praise, rewards or other people's judgments. Another way to say this, which may seem totally different, is to say that we are living, changing beings; fixing our identity on anything compromises and weakens our position & potential.); and finally continence (no sex on any level, this provides a great resource of energy to you for other applications, I must say I've read this a lot... but still don't realize the benefit, perhaps time will tell. Reflecting again, this may not be entirely true. As a teen, I was able to bench press 300 lbs. in gym class. This earned me an A as even the coach could not, nor can I at this point in my life. Being celibate may have been responsible.)

One final note, all the restraints will present a challenge for you with others in our society. They are isolating behaviors usually relegated to the un-empowered such as children or prisoners (except the non-violence, of course) or clergy (well sometimes).

The observances I find to be a more outward look, rather the light side of the force... to mix fantasy metaphors, how to best deal with the environment including culture: Cleanliness/purity in body, environment, thought: be positive ( a clean mind is a positive attitude/outlook, a clean body (and here I think they go over the top with salt water rinsing every orifice and cotton swabbing the nose, throat and stomach) a clean home); Contentment: be happy from pleasure or pain (this is a specific aspect of cleanliness meshed with self-referencing/non-identity with external sensations of pleasure or pain enhanced with a touch of presence); Austerity: discipline, penance, purification (This is a challenge for me; having had what I would consider an austere childhood, I find self discipline very difficult these days; I am thinking when you are harder on yourself than your environment requires, you set the bar of life to a level that becomes easy. It is to some extent a faint or diversion whose benefit is realized when you stop. I would like to think this is completely unnecessary, and life would be so much more available if you could simply apply yourself to the level that life requires, when it requires it. Grudgingly I honestly must admit that it provides training for when life requires in measure and frequency of various levels. Or better said: a fit body requires regular work, it simply won't be fit with our lifestyles' limited demands. But must be fit to enjoy the full spectrum of reality.); Spiritual Study of scriptures, saints and self (essentially study models and mentors, do your own self study/healing work.); Surrender to the Oneness (I find this will overtake you, if you practice openness. I also think it has some risks as opening indiscriminately is how people get trapped into cults.).

Physical Exercise: primarily the Asanas although they also promote heavier stuff and hold an annual Olympic event of their own at MM. It might be noted that the meditation and energy exercises depend on the Asanas for success and effectiveness, but they are done first during the day followed by the Asanas to maximize the effectiveness of the practice. Oh, also, better to do it daily than to skip days.

Energy Exercise: Here I find their practice retarded. They do only Pranayama (breath control exercise, and some meditations on the flow of energy). Chinese and Japanese Chi/Ki exercises are far more advanced and have farther reaching applications. This is not to discount the breath work, it has dual benefits in furthering austerity as well as energy control, but there is so much more about work with the subtle body that can be done... and honestly, I believe the work should move towards directly working with the causal body. Something that is only mentioned, but not a part of their practice. Oh, this has to do with perceptions of reality. There is the physical body, believed to be a projection of the subtle body: Aura/chakras/nadis or meridians. I find the subtle body to be very plastic or malleable with intent and concentration. The subtle body is seen as a projection of the causal body. I believe the subtle body is the “egg like structure” of our true essence written most extensively about by Carlos Castaneda.

For me, my healing work has been intimately affiliated with these concepts of energetic bodies. My studies have indicated that the subtle body will directly affect the perceptions of the physical body. Often the root cause of energy disturbances in the subtle body are not “fixed” by work on the subtle body. This is why aura cleansing and acupuncture is often not effective at curing... just symptomatic relief. Oddly, I am finding also that not everyone has the same type causal body.

Withdrawing the External Senses: This is considered the bridge between the top 4 and the next 3 limbs. I believe this to be based on the fact that we only have one body, but it can access two or possibly more realities. One reality is obviously physical. These same neurons have access to an “etheric” world if you will. The psychic realm, but one must learn to filter out the hard-edged physical inputs and discriminate the etheric inputs. This is developed by focusing on inputs normally ignored... like the sound of your brain cells firing... your heart beating from the inside, witnessing your flow of consciousness.. and sharing those observations with others: finding the commonalities and identifying the group thoughts vs. your own thoughts, practicing silence.

The last three are dowsing: Concentration, Contemplation & direct knowing. They have many levels... the top considered to be omniscience... the first would be somewhere around intuition. Practicing this is easy & fun but takes time. It becomes something that you can do while doing almost anything... which leads to some really trippy experiences when you choose to engage it... like mind reading and conversations with plants & animals... or if you choose to apply it... psychic phenomenon and healing. The sutras talk of super powers also following... such as flying, invisibility, bi-location, possession/inhabiting/becoming one with others or objects, knowing the future, your time of death... etc. (I can't say I've had most of these, only small tastes so far.)

So that part of the retreat was pretty cool. I appreciate putting things into perspective. I see the power of their cultural organization lending the opportunity to instill some balance to my life. It has been pretty out of balance... my physical issues and financial problems reflecting this condition. I see my next step as strengthening my commitment to austerity. Writing this email has helped move that forward. (Thanks for asking.) I will continue today to put together a new mission, goal sheet and daily plan. (This commitment has lead to my continued work on will.)

I did volunteer to work on Monday. I got in 2.5 hours with the cleaning crew, dusting, sweeping, mopping, changing beds in the cabins for a group that came in to deal with eating/weight issues. After that I spent time cleaning my tent (it was a mess from Black Rock in the desert). Then it rained... actually it began with a fog in the redwoods... they turned that into rain... rain on my tent, dry outside the woods. My tent, I never set it up and did the seam sealer thing... leaked. It rained all night... my tent collected water. The good news, my bags were all waterproof and I was up on an air mattress and it didn't drip on me too much. My sleeping bag was very cool... it never felt wet on the inside, although it looked wet on the outside. More good news, I could shave in the tent. I didn't have to go out for water, since my night was restless, water on the tent is really noisy, I slept in a little bit before yoga... nice.

Later spent more time cleaning the tent, bailing the water... The following day I moved and cleaned the tent again, this time inside and out. I moved to an oak grove. Not as noisy as the redwoods.. .but did have biting ants constantly falling on the tent (only got one bite as I was packing) they did not find their way into the tent. But still, trees are very noisy in the wind. Higher up on the mountain, no fog there. But at 5:15am as I was taking a shower with a low flow water sprayer that shot water in a crescent flow pattern with a spurious stream that kept aiming for my eyes... in that out-door shower with no roof, concrete slab floor, leaves everywhere, chilly morning air; I decided that my life did not have to be quite that austere. And chose to pack up on Saturday rather than Sunday. Camping is fun for the diversion and appreciation of those full service spas...

I did do some personal work too. Journalled and worked to identify my fears, as inspired by that poor woman so lost in hers.

I applied my own healing methods to myself that I have developed for my clients. This had a most remarkable outcome. Often my clients ask if anything has changed because they don't feel different. I report what I "see", which is the change. This happened to me. I could see the change in my energy, but felt and "knew" no difference. I heard myself asking me: "Are you sure anything has changed?" Definitely!