

Dear Friends,

It's an hour or so after Wednesday afternoon's practice block. The one with the Q&A. The one that (our evening umdze) closed by reminding us these somatic practices are not going anywhere. I should really be prepping for the teaching that awaits tomorrow. But then again, maybe I shouldn't.

I started working with Reggie Ray twenty years ago. In December 1999, my wife and I travelled to Shambhala Mountain Center for the first time. We were going to take part in what had been dubbed the 'Y2K Dathun'. We were going to meditate through the possible end of the world!

I was near the end of my rope at that point. For months my practice had consisted of nothing but discursiveness. Endless cycles of thinking that I had been unable to tame, unable to perforate, unable to do anything with other than sit on my cushion and wait for each practice session to conclude.

What Reggie offered this dynamic I do not recall. We were not yet doing bodywork, so it had nothing to do with laying down and breathing into the lower belly. I know he offered something, however, because my practice stabilized during that month. I was able to drop out of my head and into my body, which was such a relief. I was able to leave that retreat committed to both my reinvigorated practice and my newfound teacher.

In the decades that followed both these commitments have waxed and waned, but they have essentially remained intact. I have practiced with Reggie through the immediate wake of a community called Dharma Village. I have practiced with him through two iterations of Dharma Sangha. I have practiced with him in the short-lived Dhyanasangha and the much longer-lasting community we all know as Dharma Ocean.

Across the last eighteen months, however, my presence within this last group - while it has continued - has come to feel increasingly fraught. While I could point to this event or

that dynamic in an effort to articulate the source of this ill-ease, again and again I have felt such gestures really miss the point. Every conjecture, every hypothesis, every suspicion I have tried to solidify as cause has failed to illuminate the true source of my suffering in this regard. 'Suffering' being a word I choose here with conscious deliberation.

Through these last ten days - through the days we've spent practicing with one another - much of this has shifted. Sitting with you, I've been reminded again and again of what it was like in those so-called 'early days'. Then, as now, we never really had a sense of what would happen next. Then, as now, we never really knew where our collective and individual paths might lead. Then, as now, there was a feeling of doing something that may or may not have any sort of future, but that nonetheless wanted and perhaps even needed to be done.

Though I didn't have the language then, there was an embodied sense of draw to this work that proved, for me anyway, quite irresistible. There was a sense of connection to and opening within this work that I could not say 'No' to. More to the point, there was a sense of connection to and opening within this work that my body cried 'Yes' to. And I somehow had the wherewithal to follow this.

In the course of following, however, something happened. Somehow I lost sight of the centrality of that embodied sense and started to believe all of this was about something else. It was about being a student of Reggie Ray. It was about being a good meditator. It was about being a supporting member of Dharma Ocean. It was about being a tantrika, a sadhaka, a teacher.

I now believe this distortion, this confusion has been the true source of my distress this past year and a half. Mesmerized by all those other things and more, I forgot - I became ignorant of - the essential, embodied ground of this work. I forgot that the body is the buddha nature; is the clarity, tenderness, and responsiveness I so often ache to bring into this world. I forgot that the body is the ground we begin from, the path we travel,

and the end of our journey, when that end eventually comes. I forgot that the body - that *this* body and all of its circumstances and all of its myriad revelations - is the core of what we are doing here. It is the only thing we are doing here. It is the only thing we are doing *here*.

This is what you have brought me back to.

From a conventional perspective, one could say there is no good reason to be here at Dharma Ocean's 2019-2020 Winter Meditation Intensive. It's costly. The travel is difficult. It's the holiday season. Then there are those claims that have been made. The fact that the organization hosting this event will, within a matter of months, be no more. Truth be told, from a conventional point of view there are a great many reasons not to be here.

And yet here we are, doing this work.

Doing this work not because it will take us deeper into a spiritual community - because soon, as we all know, there will be no spiritual community. Doing this work not because it will take us further along some specific path of development - because soon there will be no specific path. Doing this work not because it will increase our standing within, our status relative to a group of peers - because soon this group of peers will scatter and we do not know if it will ever configure again.

So why are we here? The best I can guess, given all the above, is that we are doing this work in this program in this space because - underneath whatever motivations, inspirations, and reasonings might remain - something has drawn us. Our bodies, I propose, have said 'Yes' and 'This'. And for some mysterious reason, we have - each of us has - followed.

I know many of us are grieving the imminent loss of Dharma Ocean right now. I do not want to diminish or dismiss this in any way. I believe grief is an essential and informative

and very often transformative human experience. It is also a wholly appropriate response to the context we now find ourselves in.

I do, however, want you to know that I do not feel a whole lot of grief this evening. Instead I feel joy and connection and confidence. I am animated with a sense that - no a *certainty* that - this work will continue. While I cannot imagine what shape or form this might take - what shapes or forms this might take - I am confident it will assume shape and form. I am certain this work will continue because the body - our lives - are always going to call us back. And some of us are always going to respond.

Toward the end of John Steinbeck's depression-era novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, one of the main characters - a young man named Tom Joad - readies to leave his family. Before doing so, he offers some words of reassurance to his mother. He reassures her that, though he will be gone in one sense, he won't really be gone in another. He can't ever really be gone in this other sense. This is, perhaps, my favourite passage of any of the books I have ever read:

"I'll be around in the dark," he tells her. "I'll be everywhere. Wherever you can look - wherever there's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever there's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad. I'll be in the ways kids laugh when they're hungry and they know supper's ready, and when people are eatin' the stuff they raise and livin' in the houses they build, I'll be there too."

Thanks to you, I've come to see it's the same with this work. It's the same with this lineage. Wherever there are bodies. Wherever there is space. Wherever there is awareness. Wherever there is a willingness and ability to follow where any and all of these lead - well I'll be there. And I bet (a lot of the people we see leading this Winter Meditation Intensive will be there as well).

And I'm certain, though some of us have only just met, that many of you will be there too. Practicing in shrine rooms and yoga studios, rec centers and church basements. Meditating in the corner of a too small apartment while your baby sleeps at one side or your cat purrs in the sun or your dinner simmers on the stove in another room.

Because it's never been about Reggie Ray or Dharma Ocean or Blazing Mountain. This is what you have reminded of and you are reminding me of every time we gather and sit. It's never been about attending a particular program or practicing at this or that level of 'accomplishment'. Not really. Not when you get right down to it.

Instead, it's always about the yearning to know and the passion to love and the need to live. And this is built into us as human beings. It's built into the very fibre of our bodies. It is the very fibre of our bodies. And this truth, one and all, is not going anywhere. This truth, my dear friends, is alive and well right here in this shrine room. This is truth is going to go on expressing itself in whatever ways it can.

With love and appreciations for the reminders and the liberation,

Neil W. McKinlay

Crestone, Colorado

Wednesday December 25th, 2019