

Appreciatively Critical Reflections on a Retreat with Adyashanti

Grady McGonagill

With an Introduction by **Bill Torbert**

and with

Another Step in the Walk of a Thousand Hills, I and II

by **Andrew Campbell**

Editors' note: This reflective essay by Grady McGonagill is introduced below by inclusion of the cover note Bill Torbert used to circulate the original version of the essay among colleagues he thought would be interested. Both Bill and Grady have agreed to this combined publication. Grady also welcomed the inclusion of IR Arts and Creativity Editor Andrew Campbell's art, inspired by this essay. For readers' information, Grady also shared a version of his essay with Adyashanti, inviting his reflections or reactions that could be included with the essay's publication. Although to date, Grady has received no such response, he, and we, believe it is important for readers to know that opportunity was extended.



January 2008

Dear Friend,

I am sending around, to good friends with a spiritual orientation, this essay on a contemporary young guru's conference, written by my friend and fellow inquirer, Grady McGonagill.

I am forwarding this short essay because it seems to me exemplary in terms of the sort of appreciation/critique that a dedicated action researcher can offer. It is attentive to the single-, double-, and triple-loop feedback generated by his own perceptions and actions, and attentive as well to the mutuality (or lack thereof) evolving in a given situation. Therefore, it seems to me, the essay has potential value for the person writing, for other participants in the event itself, as well as for others engaged in spiritual inquiry.

In a more general way, this vulnerable, self-disclosing case study seems to me to highlight the inevitable paradoxes and outright incongruities that occur whenever someone takes/accepts a guru-esque role and claims to profess "the true way" to others who are but seekers. At the same time, the essay illustrates how any such sense of critique must lead to creative action on one's own part if it is not, itself, to fall into hypo-critical self-contradiction.



I suggest that more participants in activities intended to be spiritually, politically, or scientifically transformative share self-observing tales like this with the initiators and other participants of the event, as well as other interested parties.

With best wishes for the New Year,
Bill Torbert



April 6, 2008

Given that for several years I had been seeking an opportunity to participate in an extended retreat with the meditation teacher who calls himself Adyashanti, it came as a surprise that when a chance finally came—at the Asilomar conference center near Monterey California, in December 2007—I decided to leave early. Like other participants, I had made a commitment to attend the full 5-day retreat. However, I left on the morning of the 4th day. One way to explain this is I was disappointed with my experience. Another, equally true, would be to say that I got what I came for and awarded myself an early graduation certificate. Still another would be to say that I got more than I came for, namely insight into my motivations for attending such a retreat and some of the underlying patterns of which that was an expression. These notes offer reflections on that experience and a preliminary report on what appears to be a resulting substantial impact on my life.

There's much that I find admirable and attractive about Adyashanti. I was initially drawn to him by his approach to meditation, which is very non-directive. He writes, "True meditation has no direction, goals, or method. All methods aim at achieving a certain state of mind. All states are limited, impermanent and conditioned. Fascination with states leads only to bondage and dependency." As someone who had always had great difficulty with efforts to achieve something in particular in meditation, such as maintain attention on the breath or strive for awareness free of thoughts, I found this perspective liberating.

Despite the pretensions of his name, (Sanskrit for "primordial peace") Adyashanti encourages people to call him "Adja." He reports with amusement that his audience tripled when he switched from his given name (Stephen Gray). He trained for many years as a Zen Buddhist with Arvis Joen Justi, a (female) student of Taizan Maezumi Roshi of the Zen Center of Los Angeles. But he left this tradition and has gone out on his own. His retreats are now in such demand that access is by lottery. There were 350 people at this retreat.

Part of his appeal results, I think, from his presenting himself as a kind of "regular guy," one who enjoys playing cards, riding his motorcycle, and watching sports on TV. He sits in a comfortable chair rather than on a traditional meditation cushion. And he says he does not like burning incense or doing other conventionally "spiritual" things—all in all, a very "non-spiritual" spiritual teacher, in his own words. Consistent with this image, he disdains many of the formalities and rigors of Zen practice, such as maintaining a rigid posture even to the point of intense pain (he reports that such practice led him to do serious damage to himself by tearing a ligament). And he has little patience with the hair-splitting ideological wars within different schools of Buddhism or among other religions. For example, early in the retreat he made fun of

the mindset that led one school of Buddhist thought to refer to itself as Mahayana (“greater way”) and the preceding tradition as Hinayana (“lesser way”). Similarly he mocked the tensions between the “gradual awakening” and “sudden awakening” schools of Zen which was very amusing. And he couldn’t resist making a joke of more innocuous traditions, such as the practice at many meditation retreats of “eating abnormally slowly.”

The teaching style on retreats, if this one was typical, consists of meditation (he distributed a handout entitled “True Meditation” but didn’t talk about it much) and “satsangs”—one in the morning and one in the evening—two hours each, of which part is lecture and part is taking questions from participants who come forward and stand at a microphone. I found more than a few nuggets of wisdom in the presentations. For example, I found him particularly compelling on the meaning of “non-dual,” which he portrays as a full embrace of two worlds, one relative, one absolute, not just an ascendance into the absolute. He drew on unusual sources on this point, quoting the bible (“the fox has his hole, the bird its nest, but the son of God has no place to rest his head”). He often brought in good quotes: e.g., “When I look inside and see that I’m nothing, that’s wisdom. When I look outside and see that I’m everything, that’s love. And between these two, my life turns” (which I’ve since tracked down: it comes from Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj.) And he told good stories. One contrasted two different Buddhist teachers in the way they responded to women who had just lost their husbands. One (unnamed, presumably contemporary) teacher responded by telling the woman that what she experienced as pain was all just a “story” that she needed to let go of. The other (named something like Papaji) walked over to the woman, put his arms around her, and held her as she cried. Presumably there would be time for a conversation about the “story” later. Adyashanti’s preference for the latter response reflected an intuitive practical wisdom about how to apply Buddhist teachings that was often evident. In this case he mused, “I wish I had been in the room with the first teacher, with a large object in my hand, which I would have loved to have thrown it at him, and then asked, ‘Who’s feeling that pain, Mr. Nobody?’”

On occasion he also responded to questions in a way that I found compelling. For example, one woman reported with dismay that she had cut herself off from events in the world because she found all the rapes and violence too painful to let in. She felt herself to be both sensitive and cowardly. He suggested that she had in fact already let the world in, and was deceiving herself that she had not. She agreed. He asserted there was a true self in which there was room for all the pain in the world. He could see in himself, for example, all that which appeared as evil in the outer world; he invited her to imagine that so could she. She was able to make sense of this in terms of Jungian psychology, with which she was familiar, along with the notion of projecting outward repressed thoughts and feelings. And it seemed to be helpful to her to realize that in fact she had not shut things out as fully as she imagined. She seemed to go away satisfied. At other times he played the role of cognitive therapist in the style of Byron Katie, with a dash of humor. To one person he said, after listening for a few minutes, “OK, This is the part where you tell me your story and I ask you, ‘Is it true?’ I’m giving you the McDonald’s drive-through version of spiritual growth.”

Although this way of thinking was not new to me, one valuable part of the retreat was that I was able to take advantage of the uninterrupted time to apply some Buddhist-influenced cognitive therapy to myself, clarifying particular stories I was telling myself and asking if they

were true. For example, I discovered on arrival at the retreat that I was experiencing a relapse of a fatigue syndrome that had immobilized me 25 years ago but which I had managed to keep in check during most of the intervening time. However, this was the 3rd relapse within 6 weeks and I found myself quite depressed about it. I decided to deconstruct the thinking process leading to the depression. Here is the chain of thinking I identified:

- “I will never get better.”
- “If I never get better I will not be able to make the contribution to which I aspire or fully realize my values.”
- “If I don’t do that, then my life will not have been worthwhile.”

Looking at this story with the intensity and detachment possible in a retreat, it seemed less than fully true. I began to sense the value of accepting the possibility that I might not get better. This led me to decide to conduct an experiment, to declare that my life was “over” (much in the way that a financial institution might write off sub-prime loans). I even mentally rehearsed my own epitaph, and decided that I could “live” with my life being effectively over as concerns anything productive. From this perspective, any additional day was grace. I could make of it what I wished, without feeling burdened to achieve anything. Somehow this felt very liberating. So although I never approached the microphone myself to seek direct counsel from Adyashanti, I was able to use the experience of the retreat to work through issues like this in ways that were inspired and supported by the retreat, which I presume was the aim of the “satsangs.”

But although there were a number of exchanges that seemed productive and some that I found personally helpful, at many other times I felt troubled by the interaction between Adyashanti and the people who came forward. Many described their problem in such abstract terms that it was hard for me to understand what they were asking, and equally hard for me to imagine that he understood them either. Sometimes the description didn’t go beyond metaphors, e.g., “I’m like a dog that won’t let go of a bone, and the bone that I’m chewing on is my own leg.” In this instance Adyashanti deftly invited the speaker to consult his own inner wisdom, which seemed to work very well, and didn’t require that the teacher understand the literal content of the metaphor. However, in most cases he began offering commentary, often without asking questions, or very many questions. Rarely did he ask for concrete examples. Instead he tended to move quickly to dispensing advice, sometimes even before a question had been posed. I often found the advice to be quite abstract and as unclear as the questions. People usually reached a point where they seemed satisfied, but I wondered whether they felt too embarrassed to say that they, like me, didn’t get it. (I recognize that these critical observations would carry more weight if they were supported by concrete examples, but I failed to note any at the time and couldn’t recollect any later. I recognize that others might have interpreted the interactions differently).

I also found myself troubled by Adyashanti’s use of concepts to explain his approach. Although I liked his approach to meditation, I was less fond of his name for it: “true” meditation. Doesn’t this name imply that other approaches are not true, or less true? And if so, isn’t Adyashanti doing precisely what he criticized others of doing when they declare their approach to be “better”? To his credit, he more than once said, following the Buddha, “Don’t take my word for anything. Try it out in your own experience.” But some of his teachings are so abstract that I find it hard to imagine how I, or anyone, would test them out. E.g., his definition of “true

meditation” contains a number of sentences like the following: “Silence is the non-state from which all states arise and subside.” I have no idea how I would find out through my own experience whether silence is a “non-state.” How indeed could I determine whether/how a non-state is different from a state? Most troubling of all, one person asked him whether his approach depended on beliefs. Among the things he said in response was: “beliefs are about things that you aren’t certain are true. If you know they are true (for which he gave the example, ‘that I am speaking into this microphone’) then they aren’t beliefs, rather they are ‘truths’.” I found this a deeply disturbing assertion. Apparently he would have us see his approach to spirituality as consisting of “truths” rather than “beliefs.” This suggests that he regards his own approach as self-evidently true and beyond dispute, presumably in contrast to other systems, which are based on “beliefs” that can be challenged. If I heard him correctly, he would seem to be taking a self-righteous stance not unlike that for which he had mocked other traditions.

On the second and third days of the retreat I spent a surprising amount of time and energy preoccupied with criticisms of this kind. I wondered whether to take them seriously, or simply as an expression of an overly-developed skeptical part of myself that often emerges during retreats and workshops (not to mention elsewhere in my life), which I am working to manage in a way that is less reflexive and more intentional. At one point I sat for three hours without interruption, and realized that I had spent over half of the time mentally rehearsing different ways of framing a challenging question to Adyashanti in front of the group, trying to strike the right balance among humility, curiosity and challenge. What an astonishing expenditure of energy! It became clear to me that by focusing on these criticisms I was directing my attention away from many other things that could be a source of learning, such as my fear about letting go of narrow constructions of my identity in order to engage the mystery of being and have the faith to tolerate the awful and magnificent uncertainty of a vast, unbounded and not fully knowable universe.

I was moving toward just letting these thoughts go and trying to redirect my attention away from comfortable criticisms of Adyashanti and toward less comfortable but potentially more generative self-inquiry, when on the night after the third day I had a transformative dream. In the dream I was making my way up a steep incline, pulling myself through underbrush, when I passed by an old rusting automobile. On the left fender I saw, to my delight, a pair of glasses that I had lost in my home a couple of months ago. I took the glasses and proceeded up the hill with a palpable sense of well being. As I recorded this dream in my journal, I recalled that earlier in the night, before going to sleep, a line from a Bobby “Blue” Bland song drifted through my mind: “There’s no one blinder than he who won’t see.” Putting these two things together, I had an epiphany: “I can see! All I have to do is put on my glasses! I don’t need to be huffing and puffing up the hill, struggling through the underbrush (i.e., my struggle with a tendency to be critical of the retreat). I already know enough to be able to do what I need to do on my own.” I felt exhilarated by this insight, and went back to sleep happier than I had felt in some time. Early the next morning, walking along the Monterey Beach, I mulled over what to do with my insight. Should I make it public in one of the day’s satsangs? Or perhaps pose a question about my criticisms, balanced by my insight? It occurred to me that my conclusion was very consistent with Adyashanti’s teachings: “You are already awake. You just need to realize it. You don’t need to do anything. You don’t even need a teacher.” As I mused on the possibilities, and enjoyed the sound of the surf, the thought hit me: “I don’t need to sit through any more of this! I could be home this evening! I don’t need anyone else’s knowledge or approval or permission. I

got what I needed and I'm out of here." Within little more than an hour—but, I confess, more than a little perseverance—I made the necessary arrangements and was on my way to the San Jose airport.

As I travelled, I added another layer of interpretation, building on some other “chance” experiences. I had found a pocket knife in front of the bungalow where I was staying. And by “coincidence,” behind him on the stage, Adyashanti had a statue of a Tibetan deity—Manjusri, the bodhisattva of wisdom and awareness—wielding a sword, a symbol of “cutting through bullshit” he said. Linking the found knife with the sword, I saw myself as cutting through the illusion that I needed something outside myself to be complete, to gain insight. And this lesson did not apply just to Adyashanti. I saw my whole orientation toward spiritual seeking as being driven by an underlying assumption that I was inherently deficient, incomplete, and needed to fill myself up with something from the outside. I had been aware of this pattern for some time, but unable to put it in perspective and let go of it. At last, I had an emotional footing—a message from my unconscious in the form of a dream, reinforced by the synchronistic metaphor of a sword—from which to cut through and let go of that limiting belief.

And then a deeper level of insight emerged. Although it was only during the retreat that I became critical of Adyashanti's teachings, I realized that I had more than enough evidence beforehand to have aroused my suspicions. I had known that he called his approach “true meditation,” for example. And I recall reading the definition with the abstract language a few weeks earlier, and thinking, “Hmmm, don't know about that.” Why had I ignored those clues? I decided that I had fallen victim to my yearning for a teacher who would point the way to enlightenment, teach me about how to attain it. Although I am sufficiently skeptical that I don't easily allow myself to indulge these yearnings, or attach them to anyone, Adyashanti had gotten through my first level of defense with his non-directive approach, reinforced by strong endorsements from several people I know and respect. I had then become all too willing to give him benefit of the doubt. I was guilty of overlooking disconfirming evidence to serve what I wished to see—something that drives me crazy when I see other people do it! Very humbling. Very eye-opening. Another step in the walk of a thousand hills, the never-ending trek toward self knowledge. All in all, well worth the price of admission to the retreat. The irony being that although I learned that I didn't “need” to go to the retreat, in fact I had to go to learn that, and something about Adyashanti's way of being/teaching may in fact have made this insight possible.

Epilog

In contemplating these reflections as I wrote them, I found myself wondering whether the insights would have a lasting impact (evidence of playing a “larger part”), or merely be a set of intriguing but ephemeral epiphanies (for which I had ample precedent in my life). The evidence so far—two and a half months later—is mixed but encouraging. On the disappointing side, I find that little remains of the perspective in which I had made my peace with thoughts that I had to do still more for my life to have been worthwhile. It surprises me to note this, as I had returned from the retreat quite excited about this perspective, and talked it up to friends. But a deeply ingrained achievement-oriented mindset has settled back in. To be sure, when I now notice self-critical thoughts about my declining abilities, I recall the exhilaration of being able to step out of that

mindset at the retreat. But it now seems a dim and distant perspective, not one that I have internalized. There is probably some value to that memory as a benchmark of an alternative perspective, but I suspect it would take far more work of that kind, or reinforcing work of a different kind, to fully integrate new thinking into my consciousness.

Far more encouraging are several indicators of an increased inclination to act. I acted in three ways in the aftermath of the retreat that I believe were influenced by the retreat and my reflections on it, although they were probably also an expression of shifts that had been percolating for some time. First, within a few days of my return, I signed up for some volunteer activity. I had sensed for some time that I would do well to put more energy into “giving” in addition to “searching,” but had dismissed the impulse on the logical grounds that my professional work was about giving and that in any case I tend to make substantial financial charitable contributions. But now I made a specific commitment to do something humble and concrete—spend a Saturday putting together Braille books for blind children. Moreover, I’ve noticed since then an increased tendency to act on feelings of compassion for others. Second, it became clear to me that I needed to “wield the sword” within my family, to cut off my youngest brother from his continuing financial exploitation of my 86-year old mother. Within a few days of the retreat—and in collaboration with my sister—I found a way to do this.

Finally, and most significantly, after three weeks I decided to initiate the deepest cut of all: separation from a marital partnership that had been stuck for many years. This was the hardest decision I’ve ever made; indeed, I unmade and remade it a dozen times over a period of several weeks. Taking this step—like leaving the retreat early—could lead to breaking a vow (“until death do us part”). But in deciding to cut through my long-standing indecision in this area I was inspired by that moment of knowing on the Monterey Beach when it became clear to me that it made no sense to feel bound by an agreement that no longer served a meaningful purpose.



Grady McGonagill: *Since 1982 Grady has been sole proprietor of McGonagill Associates, a consulting practice specializing in learning for individual development and organizational change. From 2004-2006 he was Director of Learning at Generon Consulting. Grady has distinctive expertise in leadership development (www.yourleadershipstyle.com), reflection on practice (www.reflectivepractitioner.com), and coaching.*

Grady’s workshops on leadership, coaching, interpersonal skills, conflict management and team building have been offered through a number of executive programs, including Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government, M.I.T.’s Sloan School of Management, Babson College’s Center for Executive Education, Brandeis University’s Heller School of Management, and the Center for Management Research.

Grady holds an Ed.D. from Harvard University, an M.A. from Stanford University, and a B.A. from the University of Texas. He is a contributor to the Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, edited by Peter Senge et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1994) and the author of “The Coach as Reflective Practitioner,” a chapter in Executive Coaching, edited by C. Fitzgerald and J. Berger (San Francisco: Davies Black Publishing, 2002).

Another step in the walk of a thousand hills



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11. am 17th April 2008

Andrew J. Campbell

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Another step in the walk of a thousand hills



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19.29 pm 17th April 2008
Andrew J. Campbell

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-- a line from a Bobby “Blue” Bland song drifted through my mind: “There’s no one blinder than he who won’t see.” Putting these two things together, I had an epiphany: “I can see! All I have to do is put on my glasses! I don’t need to be huffing and puffing up the hill, struggling through the underbrush (i.e., my struggle with a tendency to be critical of the retreat). I already know enough to be able to do what I need to do on my own.”