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Responsibility & Evaluation: Toward a New Awareness & an Affirmation

*When one is unenlightened,
the snows of Mt. Fuji are the snows
of Mt. Fuji, and the water
of Tassajara is the water
of Tassajara.*

*When one seeks enlightenment,
the snows of Mt. Fuji are not the snows
of Mt. Fuji, and the water
of Tassajara is not the water
of Tassajara:*

DEVELOPING A NEW AWARENESS (AWARENESS BEFORE BEHAVIOR)

The Problem: Things Are as They Seem

The poem beginning this chapter provides us with a landmark, a guidepost on our path.¹ If we look at the first stanza, we note that all appears normal, yet we are considered “unenlightened.” This is because, as we pointed out in Chapter 3, the way we initially “see” is the result of our conditioning. As long as we unquestioningly maintain the daily routines into which we have been socialized, we are responding primarily as conditioned human beings, and our mode of seeing is blinded by our preconceptions about reality.

Writers on the psychology of consciousness, such as Charles Tart,² note that our ordinary awareness of the world, though it feels natural, is merely a projection of a reality that is conditioned by the culture. Each of us sees the world through tinted glasses, with the result that we have preconceptions that can act like blinders. The way of the East suggests that techniques like meditation are necessary in order to develop an awareness of our preconceptions, and eventually as a way to remove them entirely. As Naranjo and Ornstein put it: “Meditation is a persistent effort to detect and become free from all conditioning, compulsive functioning of mind and body, habitual emotional responses. . . .”³

Social learning theorists also note how fickle our senses are, and how easy it is for us to make mistakes when we observe our own behavior. Further, they stress how difficult it is for us to develop "outsight," which involves perceiving the relationship between our behavior and the way it affects and is affected by the environment.⁴ This is why they suggest the need for *controlled self-observation*.

Through the practice of meditation, as described in Chapter 1, and through systematic self-observation, as described in Chapter 2, we may become more sensitive to and more aware of our conditioning. This awareness helps us realize how many "reflex choices" we make each day.

This sensitivity to and awareness of all our actions is one of the main goals in Zen, as illustrated by the following story entitled "Every-Minute Zen":

Nan-in was visited by Tenno, who, having passed his apprenticeship, had become a teacher. The day happened to be rainy, so Tenno wore wooden clogs and carried an umbrella. After greeting him, Nan-in remarked, "I suppose you left your wooden clogs in the vestibule. I want to know if your umbrella is on the left or the right side of the clogs."

Tenno, confused, had no instant answer. He realized that he was unable to carry his Zen every minute. He became Nan-in's pupil, and he studied six more years to accomplish his every-minute-Zen.⁵

It is quite difficult, however, to remain aware of each moment. This was pointed out by Dostoevsky through his character the General in *The Idiot*. The general tells Myshkin of the time ten years before when he had stood in front of a firing squad. Knowing he had only five minutes to live, he decided to make the best use of his time, so he spent two minutes thinking of his friends and relatives and two minutes reviewing the past highlights of his life. In the last minute he thought of all the wasted moments and decided that if only he could have a reprieve, he would be aware of every second of his life, never missing a second.

When Myshkin asked him if he had been able to follow through on this vow, the General replied, "No, it is not possible."⁶

Unless we make a strong commitment to develop a new

awareness and sensitivity, it will be easy for us to fall back into old ways, and to once again feel that our old ways are "natural." The development of this new awareness has several advantages, for it allows us to learn to see more choice points, both large and small. We will learn to perceive these choice points when we are deciding on a career, or a spouse, or times when we respond reflexively, or when we get angry over trivia, as well as times when we get caught in double-bind situations. Let me give a few illustrations of different types of choice points.

Interpersonal and Professional Choices

There are many different types of choice points. Some of them may involve quite large decisions—e.g., regarding a career, a spouse, whether or not to have children, and other such broad value and life style decisions. Important choices have to be made on matters such as these, and it is instructive for us to quickly think back over our lives and honestly assess how many of our choices were made carefully, how many were made *for* us, and how many "just occurred."

Emotional Choice Points: Freedom to Choose Our Reactions

Choice points are not always apparent. We may find ourselves confronted by a situation in which there seem to be no alternatives. An example, on a far more horrendous scale than most of us will ever have to face, is given by Victor Frankl, who was held prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp.⁷ He had no choice about being imprisoned. However, he did have a choice in terms of his attitude toward that imprisonment. Confronted by an ugly and degrading environment, some people gave up and died; some, like Frankl, made a conscious choice not to be overwhelmed by the environment and found a new will to survive.

It is important for us to realize that even if we have no alternatives in the external environment, we do have alternatives in the internal environment: they involve the way we respond to the situation. For example, let me ask you to look at the two monkeys in the illustration. What do you think is off to the right of the picture? What are they looking at?



We don't really know what is out there, but we do know that both monkeys are having a reaction to it. The monkey in the foreground is upset and hysterical. At first glance, it may look as though the monkey in the background is indifferent; however, if we look at this monkey more closely, we see that the left hand is making a strong gesture, suggesting a centeredness and a preparedness.

I use this picture to suggest that there will almost always be, in varying degrees, something "out there in the world" that will be

upsetting and stressful. There will always be troubles and imperfections in the world. The picture illustrates that, even though upsetting external events exist, *we have some degree of control in terms of choosing how we respond to the stress.*

Double-bind Situations

Double-bind situations are those in which a person receives two simultaneous, contradictory messages of equal importance. Double-bind situations seem particularly controlling because they appear to allow the individual no course of action. No matter what you do, you are wrong. Therefore, seemingly you have been deprived of your freedom to act in a competent, effective manner.

The following anecdote illustrates a double-bind situation I experienced recently. I was carrying bricks from our driveway to an area thirty yards away where I intended to put in a brick patio. The bricks weighed about five pounds each, and at first I carried five or six per load. Soon, I tried to increase that amount, and finally, after much juggling, I managed to stick eight under one arm. I stood up and turned to walk to the patio. A car honked, and a young couple, who were househunting, asked me, "Do you know anything about the house for sale across the street?"

"Yes," I said, "they are asking for bids."

"Oh, do you know at what price the bids are starting?"

"No, I don't," I said, feeling a pain in my arm, and beginning to walk away.

"Have there been any other houses for sale in this area recently?"

"No," I said curtly, feeling more pain from the weight of the bricks.

"What is the closing date for the bids to be in?"

"Don't know," I growled.

"Do you know where the realty office is?"

"No," I said, turning and walking away.

"Thanks for your help. Oh, by the way. . . ."

I threw the bricks down, feeling a throbbing in my arm, and annoyed with myself for being unfriendly. Only in retrospect did I become aware that I had allowed myself to remain in the double-bind situation: holding heavy bricks which I wanted to take to the

patio while at the same time wanting to be friendly to some people asking for help. Rather than doing *neither* well, I could have (1) set the bricks down on the brick pile and talked to the couple; (2) told them to wait a minute, I'd like to talk, but first I wanted to carry the bricks into the yard; or (3) walked over and given them the bricks to hold while we talked. Thus, we see that there may be alternative ways of acting even in double-bind situations.

Before we can make a decision, we have to be finely tuned in to situations (such as the double-bind situation above) in which we have the opportunity to decide. The brick incident may be relatively small and unimportant; but it represents a crucial first stop in choosing how we want to act: *awareness that there is, at every moment, an opportunity for choice.*

DEVELOPING AN AFFIRMATION

The Problem: Things Are Not as They Seem

As we suggested in Chapter 3, it is only when we face a crisis and are jolted out of our ordinary conditioned habit patterns that we have the opportunity for personal freedom, the opportunity to stand back and question our lifestyle, values, and conditioning; the opportunity for a new way of "seeing."

But as the second stanza of the poem at the beginning of this chapter suggests, the crisis, the seeking of enlightenment, is not necessarily easy or pleasant. There is a confusion, a "danger"; things are not as they seem. For some, this period of confusion shakes their entire "ground of being." Camus, for example, describes his confrontation with the meaninglessness of the universe, and states that the only important philosophical question for a human being is that of suicide: "judging whether life is or is not worth living. . . ."⁸ Confronted with a confusing, meaningless

universe, Camus chooses and affirms life. He affirms the search for meaning, at the same time realizing that the search itself may be no more meaningful than Sisyphus pushing the rock up the hill, only to have it roll down again.

To some degree, when we are attempting to make changes in our lives — whether big or small — we are all faced with the same question: Is it worth it? What is the payoff, the reward, the reinforcement? In other words, what is our motivation?* During the time of crisis, it is necessary for us to make an affirmation that the search, or the change, *is* worth it. We need to commit ourselves to our choices, whether they involve the passionate choosing of life itself, as in the case of Camus, or other important choices of family and professional commitments, or lifestyle changes. To make an affirmation, to be willing to commit to and take responsibility for a new way of acting, is an extremely difficult task. In many ways, our old habit patterns are comfortable. We have spent many years developing them. When we initially try to act in new ways, we are like a young child taking tentative first steps. We feel awkward and self-conscious. We wonder if it's worth the extra effort. Why not continue to crawl? Why risk the chance of failure?

These are valid questions, and must be faced as part of our decision-making process, as part of our affirmation. A further difficult problem is the one of where to look for alternatives. We know the old ways. We don't know the new. What's on the other side of the confusion? Is there a third stanza to the poem?

Let us turn to an exploration of the decision-making process, including a discussion of the need for finding alternatives, the fear that is involved in choosing and taking responsibility for an alter-

*I would like to make a distinction, which is not often made in our everyday language, between motivation and willpower. I define motivation as the desire and the determination to do something, and willpower as the skills to carry through with the desire. Motivation involves the important first step of deciding that something is worth doing, that a contract is worth fulfilling, that the reward for certain actions are worth the effort involved. Before we make any kind of contract with ourselves or with others, we have to have made a decision that we are willing to risk having the contract work. Then, once we are willing to undertake a self-change project, we need the skills to carry through with the project, the willpower. Certainly, there is an interrelationship between motivation and willpower. For example, once you begin a project, if you break the project down into small units (successive approximation) and reward yourself liberally for each section completed, you will begin to feel more desire and determination to succeed.⁹

native, the importance of affirming and getting behind our decision 100 percent.

The Decision-making Process

Search for New Alternatives

Once we learn that our vision of freedom, or free will, has heretofore been illusory, we are in a position to begin to search for alternatives, to stand back and make a decision—to make freedom a reality. In choosing a vision, we may look for alternatives to our modes of ordinary awareness, alternatives to our career choices, alternatives to our habitual emotional responses, and/or alternatives to our current values, lifestyle, and ethics. Looking at certain alternatives may involve a fundamental questioning of ourselves. It may cause us to assess the ways in which we have been influenced by social variables (e.g., reinforcement, money, prestige). We see and understand the ways in which our vision of the world has heretofore been conditioned by patterns of ordinary awareness. We also come to realize the way in which all these variables have thus far fit into our decision-making process.

Initially, we may decide that everything we've always stood for is wrong, and find ourselves merely reacting against the society's socialization process in the proverbial adolescent rebellion. Rather than choosing new alternatives and modes of acting, we may simply fall into a pattern of choosing only to rebel against that which is. As Nietzsche noted, "Youth's soul turns on itself, tears itself to pieces, takes revenge for its long self-delusion. Ten years later, one comprehends that this, too, was still youth."¹⁰

We may realize that some of the old ways, though only part of the truth, did have some merit to them after all. Yet, when there are two or more alternatives, how do we know if we are making the right decision? How do we know what is the right way to re-create ourselves, so we don't make the same mistakes? What are the criteria that can be used in making a choice?

Fear and Trembling¹¹

It is not easy to make a decision. The existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre has stressed that we are literally condemned to freedom,

and that if we haven't felt the anguish over decision making, then we have never truly made a choice. We need to realize that ultimately, in an existential sense, there are no right or wrong answers; there are no criteria other than those of our own choosing; there are no ultimate guidelines by which to live our life, except those which we choose to make ultimate. As Dostoevsky believed, if God doesn't exist, everything is permitted. There is nothing to cling to, no values, no commands. We are alone without excuses.¹² And, we must take responsibility for our choices.

Evaluating Alternatives and Making a Choice

Amidst the uncertainty, we are still faced with the need to make choices. There are certain skills involved in the decision-making process. These skills may not lessen the fear and trembling about actually making a decision, but they do provide guidelines for helping us feel we've done as thorough a job as possible, and they may, in certain types of decisions, help optimize the possibility for a successful outcome.

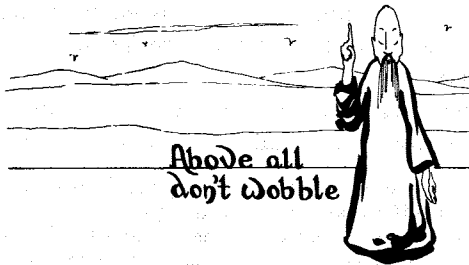
The first step in decision making, as we have seen, involves *seeking information about different alternatives*. Once such information has been gathered, there is a need for *careful evaluation* in which the consequences of the different alternatives are considered. Here we are faced with the question of how much evaluation is beneficial. We would agree that there is a danger of too much evaluation and too little action. Hamlet is a classic example of the difficulty of decision making—he was constantly evaluating whether or not to act, how to act, and thereby lived in a cerebral world without ever moving forward on any of his plans.

There are two old proverbs: "Look before you leap," in which an individual is advised to evaluate before he moves forward toward his goals, and "He who hesitates is lost," in which evaluation and thinking preclude effective action. Let me suggest that we look for a delicate balance between these two proverbs. In our decision-making efforts, having gathered relevant information about the alternatives, having evaluated as much as possible the consequences of alternatives, we must then realize that we cannot ever operate with complete security about a decision; we must *risk a choice*.

Getting Behind Ourselves 100 Percent

Once we have made a choice, we need to *affirm it, and to get behind it 100 percent*. This isn't as easy as it sounds. Very few decisions between two alternatives are clear-cut. Usually there are pros and cons to any choice. Evaluating positive and negative consequences is necessary while we are deciding. Let's take a trivial example. Your spouse has asked you to go to a movie tonight. You want to please your spouse and go (alternative 1), and yet you're really tired and would like to stay home this evening (alternative 2). You weigh the consequences: e.g., if you go, you may feel tired and not enjoy the movie as much; if you stay home, you'll be disappointing your spouse. There is no clear "right" answer.

However, once you've evaluated and made a choice, you need to take responsibility for the choice and get behind that choice 100 percent. If you go, go and have fun, with no complaints, without saying, "But I didn't really want to." If you stay home, stay home 100 percent, and don't lose sleep feeling guilty. As the Master said:



We now see that in re-creating ourselves, we need to involve ourselves in a conscious decision-making process in which we existentially choose to affirm and take responsibility for our commitment to whatever decision we make, whether it is large or small. If we accept the existential view that we are always "choosing," then we would assume that our choices would always be in our own best interest (that is, have positive consequences for us). If we choose something that is not in our best interest, there would have to be a reason, such as (a) we don't have the skills to choose otherwise; (b) we are not aware of alternatives; or (c) we are getting something positive, in some way, out of the choice (even if there are simultaneously undesirable consequences).

It seems that we only choose to change when we believe that the positive consequences for change (e.g., *negative reinforcement*—the removal of an aversive stimulus—or *positive reinforcement*) outweigh the fear of risk, the extra effort, and whatever advantages we already get from the old way of acting. At every moment, we have the opportunity to decide whether or not our choices are really in our own best interest.

To help us in the affirmation and commitment to choices in our own best interest, we may *seek models of excellence* (whether living or dead) whom we admire, who affirmed life, and who led lives we would like to emulate. We can *stress to ourselves the positive aspects of our affirmation*—that is, call up images and statements of support and encouragement, knowing in advance there will be difficult times. We may *look to a future image* of ourselves acting in new ways, and pay attention to the advantages of our "new way of acting," our "new self." We may also use specific methods such as *thought-stopping techniques* to counter negative, unproductive, "sabotaging" thoughts. ("The Development of Thought-Stopping Techniques" is discussed in detail in Chapter 6, under "Combining Eastern and Western Techniques: Case Examples," in "Case One.")

At this point, it may be worthwhile to take a moment to write about your own personal motivation,* and to note what's

*As a way of pinpointing aspects of your "ideal self" that you may wish to commit yourself to working toward, you can look back to your list of "Realistic Goals" in the section "The Element of Choice in Personal Freedom: Choosing Our Vision" in Chapter 2. You may also wish to look at "What is Freedom?" in Chapter 3 to help in determining times you have and times you haven't felt free.

in it for you to affirm and commit to creating yourself. Ask yourself:

What is the present condition? What happens if no change is made?

What positive benefits and advantages can be gained by changing? What are the incentives to succeed?

What are the difficult times that you see ahead if you do decide to change? What excuses might you make to sabotage your own efforts? (e.g., it doesn't feel natural to change. I can't change. It's too hard. I have no willpower, etc.)

Regardless of what we choose, it seems that the most important thing is not so much the content of the choice, but the affirmation involved in the act of choosing. As the existentialists have stressed, *an individual, by choosing, creates him/herself.*

Thus, after all the analysis and evaluation of our alternatives, we also need to learn to let go of analysis, and risk the choice. We need to switch from the mode of ordinary awareness to the mode

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of the altered state. In so doing, we may let go of our evaluations, obtain a new perspective, and watch ourselves play our "as if" roles as "mere mortals on the stage of life." As we work to make changes in our life, to create our new "self," we become actors in personal dramas unencumbered by theories of personality, able to see our lives with a sense of humor, to laugh at ourselves, because we can see both our reason *and* our unreason with detachment. However, at the same time we sense the humor, we also attempt to live our lives as openly, authentically, and fully as is humanly possible. We choose existentially to be the kind of actor we want to play, based on our visions of people and models, living or dead, real or fictional, that we believe led lives we would like to emulate.

So now, having assumed responsibility, having affirmed our commitment to create ourselves, and having embarked on a serious quest with a twinkle in our eye, let's turn to one possible model of an integrated vision: a path of heart.

SUMMARY

In this chapter we discussed ways in which a new awareness could be developed by using both meditative and behavioral self-observation strategies. It was emphasized that in order to make conscious choices, we have to become aware of the myriad of choice points that we potentially face each day. Some examples, such as interpersonal and professional choice points, emotional choice points, and double-bind situations were given. This chapter also emphasized the importance of making an affirmation and commitment to choosing a new vision. Finally, the decision-making process was explored, including the search for new alternatives, fear and trembling, evaluating alternatives, and getting behind ourselves 100 percent.