

DEE JOY COULTER, EdD

ORIGINAL MIND

UNCOVERING YOUR
NATURAL BRILLIANCE



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RECLAIMING OUR EARLIEST MIND

If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything,
it is open to everything.

In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities,
but in the expert's mind there are few.

SHUNRYU SUZUKI
Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind

OUR JOURNEY BEGINS with a great challenge. We must set aside all we know in order to experience the world with the freshness a baby does. When we look at the world, we tend to see what we expect to see. It is as if we are taking inventory, recognizing the elements in our surroundings, and silently naming them to ourselves. Our minds thrive on order, and this naming process gives us a measure of comfort. Highly creative thinkers have reclaimed the ability to see what they can't name, to notice with a freshness that takes in confusing elements, and to savor the puzzlement that arises. Out of that uncertainty, new ideas are easily born. They have discovered how to see as a baby does.

We can learn to do this too. It is an unlearning process, where we drop the naming of objects in order to perceive them without our inner chatter. Then we must drop the associations that trigger those

perceptions in order to reawaken the pure sensations that precede any kind of knowing at all.

These pure sensations can only arise in moments when we have a truly fresh encounter with the world.

We begin this chapter with just such an encounter by a practicing monk. Then we will see what we can learn from babies and from individuals who are seeing for the first time after eye surgery. We will close with ideas, stories, and practices that can strengthen our own ability to see in this incredibly valuable, fresh way.

ZHANGI ZHINGI

By 1993, I'd been teaching at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, for ten years. Naropa is a Buddhist-inspired university that was founded by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a Tibetan monk credited with a major role in bringing Buddhism to the West. Interest in the link between Buddhist thought and neurology was beginning to grow. The Mind and Life Dialogues between scientists, monks, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama were in their sixth year, and a young Tibetan monk had come to Boulder for a brief visit. He had a question about the mind, and since I had the strongest neurological background on the faculty at the time, I was summoned.

After very brief greetings through his translator, I was invited to sit next to him to hear his question. He spoke in Tibetan, turning his head to look across the empty room at some imaginary object. "I look," he paused and then went on, "I see a flower. First time. What's happening?" I started to explain how the eyes carry information back to the visual cortex, but as the translation began, it was clear this was *not* what he wanted.

He interrupted, shaking his head, and tried again. "I look. [pause] I see a flower. First time," he said, using the same head motion, but this time he went on, turning his head as before and again said, "I look. [pause] I see a flower. First time. What's happening?" I was stunned! (We will have to examine several pieces to unpack the pattern that fell into place in my mind at that moment, but for now I'll continue sharing what happened.)

He was telling me that when he looks at a flower, at first he doesn't see it, and then the flower takes form. He seemed to be aware of his mind organizing a signal out of the light waves coming from the flower. Scientists call that *feature binding*, and we all do it, but it happens so quickly that, unlike him, we are usually completely unaware of the process. I thought he might want to know how this organizing process worked, so I explained how signals in the brain organize against the backdrop of lots of noise, a kind of neurological static. The cells chatter randomly, and when a cluster of them organizes in response to a stimulus, it sends a signal through the noise. That signal carries information that is coherent, meaning that it holds together as a wave pattern, setting it apart from all the chatter. That chatter or noise creates a chaotic background against which even the faintest of coherent signals will stand out extremely well.

It was obvious right away that he was pleased with this explanation, and he looked intently at me as the translator worked his way through my words. Unfortunately, however, the translator was at a loss to explain the word *chaos*. There didn't seem to be a Tibetan correlate for it. The monk knew that word held the key and finally spoke. "Ah, zhanghi zhanghi, zhanghi zhanghi," he said with delight.

"Yes," I replied, certain that those z's had to be describing chaos in some way. That was the end of the interview. I was thanked and dismissed.

Four years later, at a Naropa faculty retreat, I was sitting next to Sarah Harding, an outstanding Tibetan language scholar, and recalled the story for her. "So what's zhanghi zhanghi, then?" I asked her.

"Well, it means 'tangled hair'," she replied.

What a satisfying image of chaos that was. And what a wonderful question he had asked. It shed light on a core difference between his mind, refined by years of meditative practices, and the strange limitations he must have been discovering in the Western mind. Typically, the Western-educated mind refuses to let images dissolve. It works hard to construct its understanding of the world and becomes quite attached to its accumulated knowledge and expertise. Images remain fixed, and a second glance at a flower registers automatically as the same flower.

This story raises two important questions. If at first the monk saw no flower, what was he seeing before the image of the flower emerged?

Secondly, how could he erase the image of the flower once he saw it so that the second time was a “first time” all over again? Hold these questions as you continue reading. They are part of the pattern that fell into place in my mind when I heard the monk’s question.

While this story is describing a very advanced mind skill, here is a beginning exercise you can practice. Once or twice a day, interrupt your habitual activities and shift your focus. See if you can pay attention simply to the light, color, and motion around you for just a moment before the voice in your head starts naming what you are seeing. You may think you need to be taking a walk in nature to let this happen, but it should be just as easy in the grocery store, in an office, or at home. These isolated sensations are actually everywhere! The following sections will guide you in reclaiming this skill again.

TO SEE AS A BABY DOES

Look at things as a baby does, without foreknowledge . . . let it come in and experience it fully and totally, without understanding it.

MURSHID FAZAL INAYAT-KHAN

leading Sufi teacher, former head of Sufi Movement International

Babies aren’t looking at objects as we know them but rather at the movement traces they leave. They are especially fascinated with biological motion paths. How do we know they are doing this? Some very clever researchers came up with this ingenious experiment: They dressed a person totally in black, blackened the face and hands, and then attached tiny LED lights to key joints—elbows, wrists, shoulders, hips, and so on. Then they filmed the person walking in a darkened room, against a black backdrop. The resulting film only registered a moving trace of all the joint movements. Babies *loved* looking at that film and fixed their gaze on it for a long time. But then the researchers altered the film slightly, changing only the motion path of the elbow light, so it would indicate a “freak” elbow that was jutting forward and returning back to center rather than the natural movement of backward and returning. The babies were visibly upset by this and quickly averted their gaze. The altered film

violated the natural flow of human motion paths, and the babies could sense that, even though there was no image of a person on the film. This response of staring at or turning away from a film or object is the main way researchers can tell what a very young baby likes.

A young baby's reaction to beauty may not involve actual images either. Researchers asked college students to sort through one hundred pictures of college-age males and one hundred of college-age females, picking out the ten most attractive and ten least attractive faces in each stack. They then flashed slides of these faces onto a screen. They showed each of these slides to a large number of six-week-old babies, one baby at a time. Once again, each baby would fix his or her gaze on the faces college students identified as most attractive and would be distressed and avert his or her gaze when shown the ones deemed least attractive. Portrait artists maintain that the distinction between beauty and ugliness is largely a matter of proportion. Alter one feature slightly, and a face can suddenly lose its beauty. Somehow this small alteration violates the mathematical formula or template for facial beauty. So what were the babies seeing? Babies can learn to recognize the face of their mother, but it will take months before they can generalize to the point that other faces come into focus easily enough to be recognized. These babies were too young for that, so it means they weren't actually seeing faces in this experiment. They seemed to be responding to the harmony or dissonance embedded in the proportions of each face.

It is very hard for us to observe these motion paths with our conscious minds. And here is why: As an infant, you were dazzled by the motion paths that surrounded you and devoted all of your waking life to engaging your senses in varied combinations. Gradually, you learned to recognize the objects behind all those motion paths. You learned to identify their sounds, their touch, their look, and sometimes even their smell and taste. Your brain was generating a neural program to translate motion paths and waves into objects. By the time you entered school, you were converting these waves into objects so quickly that you no longer realized the world was actually coming to you as waves. This leaves us with a puzzling problem. How can we possibly know what our eyes would be seeing if our brains hadn't developed this translation program?

Perhaps the experiences of a unique population of newly sighted adolescents and adults who were just beginning to develop a visual translation program can teach us. Many of them have described what their eyes saw as they experienced sight for the first time and began their struggle to make visual sense of the world. And what they saw was fascinating.

When the bandages came off, there was no face greeting them—only a blur when they looked in the direction of a familiar voice. For weeks, color was the most captivating sensory stimulus, since touch and hearing couldn't prepare them for that phenomenon. The visual stimulation around them seemed overwhelming at times, a dazzling mixture of light, color, and movement. Learning to convert from touch to sight posed an unusual challenge. Feeling a statue of an elephant, for example, could not prepare them for the look of the whole statue. Their minds were organized to study an object part by part in a kind of time sequence. Sight should enable them to see these parts all at once, assembled in space, but it wasn't that easy. With great effort, they might learn to recognize the elephant statue by sight, but if the statue were turned, it would again be unrecognizable at this new angle. Their brains had not yet developed a visual program to rotate objects spontaneously.

Furthermore, if an object didn't move, they couldn't register depth perception. Distance then had to be analyzed by the size of an object. Stairs appeared as a single flat surface with parallel stripes. One subject described navigating through his home by constructing lines or paths in his mind that connected all the rooms and key furniture and then following these mental paths as he walked. If he veered off from one of his paths, he would easily get lost. Overall, the wave features of color, light, and motion paths dominated their visual world. Only with much practice would some newly sighted individuals learn to bind these features together and see objects easily. As you work with the practices suggested in the first two chapters, your ability to sense waves and motion paths may return. For your first practice, try turning your attention toward observing very young infants more carefully. Notice how often lights, tones, movements, and breezes seem more interesting to them than the objects around them.

You will find practices such as this throughout the book, some clearly stated at the close of a section and others embedded within the text. Some sections, like the ones in chapter 6, are absolutely filled with possible practices for you to consider.

LEARNING TO MATCH

There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became,
And that object became part of him for the
day or a certain part of the day,
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.

WALT WHITMAN

Leaves of Grass

As you practice observing the world with fresh eyes, you may discover that you are becoming one with what you are observing at times. This is terrific! We can call that *matching* for now. Later, we will look at some exciting research on mirror neurons and take this skill even further.

Matching is an ability you were born with and relied on heavily in your first few years of life. Gradually, other cognitive abilities took over, and your ability to match grew weaker. Some remnants of matching remain, however. As spectators when we watch athletic events or dance programs, we naturally imitate their leaps, spins, tosses, and other actions inwardly. We can actually feel ourselves getting quite a workout as we do this physical matching. It is part of the satisfaction that draws us back to the next performance. This matching phenomenon can also occur on the emotional level. When we extend our sympathy or share in a joyful celebration with friends and family, our feelings can rise to the level of true matching. Then we can honestly say we feel their pain and joy along with them.

With practice it will even be possible to match with the *mind* of another at times, although this is more challenging. Ironically, even *this* understanding cannot be achieved with intellect and requires an inner, felt sensing by our body, much like when we matched with feelings

and movements. The intellect can analyze, categorize, and spot weaknesses in a mind, but you need to awaken the ability to match before you can embrace the mind of another. Perhaps some stories about how others work with matching will help clarify this idea so you can begin to develop your own practice.

The idea of matching is not new. Buddhists have often called it *exchanging self for other*. Paracelsus, the sixteenth-century medical therapist and mystical philosopher, spoke eloquently about it five centuries ago.

Understanding arises not from intellection, but from sympathetic rapport. It is our duty in our quest for wisdom to know things according to their own natures or essences, and not their appearances.

Paracelsus is suggesting that to really understand another, the observer must connect so deeply with a person or object that the true nature of that person or object is revealed. Eastern traditions often speak of “masters” and “apprentices” rather than “teachers” and “students.” The apprentice receives transmissions rather than lessons and must match with or be on the same wavelength as the teacher in order to receive the teaching. Jane Faigao, a beloved tai chi chuan teacher at Naropa University, used to tell her students, “Just steal it off my body,” as they struggled to learn the form. The essence of tai chi could not be known by merely imitating the outer postures.

I once interviewed a nearly olympic-caliber young equestrian who demonstrated the power of this sympathetic rapport very well. She so loved the dressage performance routines that she would doodle them in her school notebooks, she would dream about them, she would envision doing them forward and backward, she would do them in slow motion in her mind and on the horse. She even resorted to getting down on all fours and running through the routine to find out how the horse felt doing it.

There are still a few professions that rely heavily on transmitting skills by matching. When I asked a gifted master gardener how he went about arranging flowers in landscape gardens, he confessed to holding

the bulbs or plants in his hand until he could sense where they longed to be planted.

In sports, this capacity to match with an opponent can bring about a higher level of engagement. In *Zen and Japanese Culture*, D. T. Suzuki quoted a Japanese swordsman who described this exchange as follows:

When the identity is realized, I as swordsman see no opponent confronting me and threatening to strike me. I seem to transform myself into the opponent, and every movement he makes as well as every thought he conceives are felt as if they were all my own and I intuitively . . . know when and how to strike him.

This idea of trying to get inside the person or object you are observing may still seem rather strange and limited in its usefulness, but its importance is growing. Leading scientists, for example, have found it to be extremely valuable in advanced scientific research.

Consider the examples of the two Nobel laureates Joshua Lederberg and Barbara McClintock. Joshua Lederberg, whose discoveries established the genetics of microorganisms, described his approach to observation this way:

One needs . . . the ability to imagine oneself *inside* a biological situation. I literally had to be able to think, for example, *What would it be like if I were one of the chemical pieces in a bacterial chromosome?*

Barbara McClintock's discovery of genetic transposition in corn, which became known in popular terms as *jumping genes*, revolutionized the field of molecular biology. She spoke of her approach in very similar terms:

I found that the more I worked with them the bigger [the chromosomes] got, and when I was really working with them I wasn't outside, I was down there. I was part of the system. . . . I even was able to see the internal parts of the

chromosomes. . . . It surprised me because I actually felt as if I were right down there and these were my friends. . . . As you look at these things, they become part of you. And you forget yourself. The main thing about it is you forget yourself.

While you may have no need for such refined matching skills as these, I encourage you to practice matching with the simple elements of your daily life. Let nature, cherished objects, and the endearing qualities of the people in your life capture your attention. Savor them, however briefly, and your skill in matching will begin to grow.

The art of matching with the minds of others is an especially valuable skill. In the stories that follow, if you read about a mind skill you would like to have, do not hesitate to take Jane Faigao's advice and "steal it" from the story. Try it out. With practice, your natural brilliance can expand enormously!

OUTVISIBLE AND INVISIBLE

My first teacher about the "invisible world of children" was my own son. Scottie was four when I wanted to introduce him to gardening. Unfortunately, I was a terrible gardener. I began to muse about Findhorn, an extremely successful gardening project in Scotland that insisted they were following the guidance of elemental beings and plant spirits in their work. I longed for help like that, so one day, as we were preparing the soil, I asked Scottie if he saw any creatures. "No-o-o," he said, bewildered at the question.

I persisted out of desperation, "Don't you, don't you see *any* critters?" "Critters! Oh, I see lots of critters," he said, delighted that I was finally making some sense.

"Well, do you see any now?"

"Yeah," he said, beginning to squint a bit as he looked around the yard. He said some were doing tricks on the roof, others were hunkered down by the tree roots, and still others were hovering around the flowers. I confessed that I really couldn't see them, and he just looked at me as