

## The Eye of the Needle: Letting Go and Letting Come

**I**n ancient Jerusalem, there was a gate called “the needle” which was so narrow that when a fully loaded camel approached it, the camel driver had to take off all the bundles before the camel could pass through. Referring obliquely to this well-known image of his day, Jesus said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”<sup>1</sup>

At the bottom of the U lies a sort of inner gate, which likewise requires us to drop the baggage we’ve acquired on our journey. As we move through it, we begin to see from within the source of what is emerging, letting it come into being through us. Some of our interviewees described this inner gate as a “membrane” or a “threshold.” Some even saw it as a type of death-and-rebirth cycle: letting go and surrendering belong to the death part of this cycle, while the coming

into presence of a different sense of self seems to belong to the early stages of a new birth. When this “threshold” is crossed collectively, people offer many different accounts of the experience. Some talk about extraordinary creativity, some about almost boundless energy, yet others about a dialogue where people forget who is saying what as the flow of discovery seems to gather everyone together. Many simply say that what happens cannot be understood rationally because something that appears impossible has occurred—like a camel passing through the eye of the needle.

### A Question from the Heart

In 1998, two of the largest companies in the world had just completed a massive merger of two key operating units. Now the new company, made up of two former competitors, had to compete against others, and there were many reasons to doubt its success. The seriousness of the challenges facing them led the CEO to appoint a team made up of managers from all the key business units, along with Joseph and Otto as external participants. Their task was to design a process that would develop leaders who could enable the existing businesses to compete effectively as well as create new businesses.

The team worked together for four months. Still, on the last day of the last scheduled meeting, the design for the leadership development process had yet to be completed. The chief learning officer and formal leader of the team was scheduled to present the design to the CEO the next day and request the necessary funding for implementation. The design had to be ready to go by the end of the day—which at that point was just three hours away. Despite the importance of the task, there was a total lack of creativity among the participants, even though everyone knew that creativity was exactly what was needed. If

the meeting ended with no compelling design, the whole project would be seen as a failure.

As the anxiety grew, the atmosphere became increasingly tense. Then a normally quiet and reserved deputy head of one of the major business units named Dave stood up and faced the group. The passion and vulnerability in his voice made it clear that what he had to say took courage. Looking at the charts on the wall that summarized the group's work, he said, "I'm really struggling here. I think I truly understand the pieces, but I just can't complete the whole picture." Turning to Otto, he asked, "Can you help me? Can you explain this to me? If we can just see that whole, we'll have the breakthrough we need."

Otto didn't respond, in part because he didn't have an immediate answer to Dave's question and in part because he did not want to disturb the deepening silence. For a moment everyone was still. No one in the group had ever asked for help quite like this before. Then Joseph looked at the people sitting around the room and said, "You know, I think what's been missing is our willingness to speak and listen from the heart." After a pause, another team member said, "I think we could create any change we wanted to if the sort of personal courage Dave just demonstrated guided our everyday actions." During the ensuing hour, "everyone in the room seemed to begin speaking from a deeper source," said Joseph. "The design for the entire program became clear, seemingly without effort. What had seemed impossible just before took shape as if in an instant."

Although many in the group didn't know what to make of what had happened, the experience was powerful. "It was as if the pattern underlying the design had been there all along but we were so caught up in the details we just couldn't see it," said one participant later. "It was one of the most productive hours of collaborative work I've ever experienced," said another. In the ensuing months, the new leadership

development process, dubbed “the Leadership Lab,” inspired a major change in two key business units that were starting to show promising results. Two years later, each of them went from “worst to first” in performance ratings. And just as important, Dave and several others had discovered, as he said, “the energy and excitement that came from being able to go to this different place in ourselves. It allowed us to know where we needed to go—and to get there.”

## Surrendering Control

Getting to the “different place” that allows presencing to occur begins as we develop a capacity to let go and surrender our perceived need to control. Varela identified letting go as the third “basic gesture,” after suspending and redirecting, in enhancing awareness: “Usually it’s life that makes you let go. Sickness, danger, the disappointment of love—something extreme forces you into that gesture of letting it go, letting it be.” But he also believed that letting go was a capacity that could be developed.

Suspension allows us to be more aware of what our habitual thoughts are, as we simply step back and notice them. Redirection opens up new levels of awareness by moving beyond the subject-object duality that normally separates us from our reality. But it is easy to become attached to that new awareness: perhaps because it is pleasant, perhaps because it’s unpleasant, perhaps because it’s novel, or simply because it feels “right.” Regardless of the causes, the attachment takes us out of the present moment. Continually letting go keeps bringing us back to the here and now.

Developing the capacity to let go allows us to be open to what is emerging and to practice what Buddhism and other meditative traditions call “nonattachment.” In Buddhist theory, two Sanskrit terms,

*vitarka* and *vicara*, are used to describe the subtle attachments of mind. *Vitarka* characterizes the state of “seeking,” when our attention is attached to what we’re trying to make happen. *Vicara* characterizes the state of “watching,” when, even though we’re not trying to force something to happen, we’re still attached to an outcome we are waiting for. With either, our mental attachment makes us blind or resistant to other aspects of what is happening right now. Overcoming the traps of *vitarka* and *vicara* requires continual letting go.

When Dave asked the simple, honest question—“Can you help me see the whole?”—he let go of his attachment to whatever expectations he had had of what their company’s leadership development program should look like. He also let go of any attachment he had to his image in the group as someone who didn’t need help. In a sense, he spoke for the larger group and enabled many others to let go of the preconceived notions they held. By letting go, they could allow something truly new to emerge.

## Primary Knowing

Letting go extends the dissolution of subject-object awareness that starts with redirecting, opening the way for a larger awareness, including, ultimately, a sense of what is emerging. Philosophers have explored letting go for thousands of years, but several among our interviewees brought modern scientific perspectives to bear in understanding this shift—people such as Francisco Varela and Eleanor Rosch, professor of cognitive psychology at the University of California at Berkeley.

Rosch is well-known for her work on color perception and categories, which demonstrates the limitation of traditional notions of formal, independent categories in a world where “nothing is inde-

pendent.” But in the midst of a very successful academic career, she began “unhappily poking around, asking myself, ‘Is there any other way to do psychology?’” Eventually this exploration led her to Buddhism, Taoism, meditation, and, some twenty years ago, to a feeling that she was pursuing something that could “remake psychology.”

In their interview, Otto asked her to elaborate on her comment that science needs to be performed with the “mind of wisdom.” Rosch responded that this need wasn’t limited to scientists. “What executives do is not that fundamentally different from what artists do. Great artists naturally operate from this other level and always have.” This “other level” entails a different sort of knowing, what is called in Tibetan Buddhism “wisdom awareness.” Such knowing, said Rosch, is based on the view that “mind and world are not separate.” Buddhism, she explained, “has no self built into it. You don’t have independently existing selves or objects. They’re codependent.”

But the Buddhist theory of the unity of mind and world is alien to Western thought, and developing the ability to talk about it took Rosch a long time. Eventually she concluded that saying “mind and world are not separate” was not enough. Today she starts by distinguishing two types of knowing: “analytic knowing” and “primary knowing.”

In the “analytic picture offered by the cognitive sciences, the world consists of separate objects and states of affairs, the human mind is a determinate machine which, in order to know, isolates and identifies those objects and events, finds the simplest possible predictive contingencies between them, stores the results through time in memory, relates the items in memory to each other such that they form a coherent but indirect representation of the world and oneself, and retrieves those representations in order to fulfill the only originating value, which is to survive and reproduce in an evolutionarily successful manner.”<sup>2</sup>

By contrast, “primary knowing” arises by means of “interconnected

wholes, rather than isolated contingent parts and by means of timeless, direct, presentation” rather than through stored “re-presentation.” “Such knowing is open rather than determinate, and a sense of unconditional value, rather than conditional usefulness, is an inherent part of the act of knowing itself,” said Rosch. Acting from such awareness is “spontaneous, rather than the result of decision making,” and it is “compassionate . . . since it is based on wholes larger than the self.”<sup>3</sup>

As Rosch told Otto, all these attributes—timeless, direct, spontaneous, open, unconditional value, and compassionate—go together as one thing. That one thing is what some in Tibetan Buddhism call “the natural state” and what Taoism calls “the Source.”<sup>4</sup>

“It’s what is ‘at the heart of the heart of the heart.’ When we’re connected to that source, things become more and more integrated as a path—with intention, body, and mind coming together rather than being all over the place,” she said.

According to Rosch’s theory, primary knowing is possible because mind and world are aspects of the same underlying field. When we begin to connect to the source, perception arises “from the whole field. The notion of ‘field’ was the closest thing I could come up with in our current sciences to describe this phenomenon.

“Think of everything happening as moment-by-moment presentations from this deep heart source that has a knowing dimension to it. Tibetan Buddhism talks about emptiness, luminosity, and the knowing capacity as inseparable. That knowing capacity actually is the field knowing itself, in a sense, or this larger context knowing itself.”

The problem is that most of us have spent our lives immersed in analytic knowing, with its dualistic separation of subject (“I”) and object (“it”). There’s nothing wrong with analytic knowing. It’s useful and appropriate for many activities—for example, for interacting with machines. But if it’s our only way of knowing, we’ll tend to apply it in all situations.

When we interact with a living system from the analytic stance,

problems inevitably arise because the living field “doesn’t know itself.” “A field that doesn’t know itself collapses into this little unidimensional subject-object consciousness, which is how we go galloping about the world.” The consequence is action uninformed by the whole. Rosch believes that lacking that connection to the source, “or being ignorant of it, we just make terrible messes, as individuals, and as nations and cultures.”

## The Alien Self

As a living field, in Rosch’s terms, comes to “know itself,” our identification with the “localized self” diminishes, and a broader and more generative sense of self begins to arise. It’s not that personal awareness ceases, nor does does this loss of identification with the localized self mean a loss of personal responsibility. But there is a shift in the locus of awareness. This is what Dave called “going to this different place in ourselves.”

Our interviewees had different ways of characterizing this expansion or “decentering” of the experience of self. Varela spoke of the “virtual” or “fragile self” as a way of helping us “get closer to understanding what it means to be a subject,” to experience our personal, subjective point of view. A subject “is not a stable, solid entity,” he said. In coping with continually changing circumstances, the self is constantly “updating itself or renewing itself. . . . So virtuality is not just an absence of a central self; it also has that kind of *fragile flotation* of coming and going.”

This process, explained Varela, is like a constant reframing of yourself into what seems to be more real in each emerging moment. “You know, the paradox of being more real means to be much more virtual and therefore less substantial and less determined.”



He added, “A life of wisdom consists of being constantly engaged in that letting go, and letting the virtuality or the fragility of the self manifest itself. When you are with somebody who really has that capacity to a full-blown level, it affects you. When you meet those kinds of people, you enter into a kind of resonance with them. You relax—there’s something very enjoyable about that way of being. There’s a joy in that kind of life.

“A fully developed human being is presencing constantly. . . . It’s to be there where things happen. But it’s something that clearly cannot be done if there’s a little me there that’s saying, ‘Oh, I’m manifesting presencing.’”

Ryosoke Ohashi, a scholar of Japan’s leading twentieth-century Zen philosopher, Kitaro Nishida,<sup>5</sup> used the word “alien self” to describe what arises when the localized sense of self fades: “Something which is quite alien to me enables my existence.” Eastern traditions often label this “nothingness”: “This nothingness enables my existence and also my relation with all.” But “in traditional Christian terminology, this absolute alienness could be said to be God. God is in me—although Nishida doesn’t directly say ‘God.’ But something that is quite alien to me is in my own self.”

Stanford’s Michael Ray considers the shift in sense of self central to creativity. He believes that the key to helping students access their deeper sources of creativity can be found in two questions: “Who is my Self?” and “What is my Work?” When we talk about “Self,” said Ray, “we’re talking about your higher self, your divinity, your highest future potential. And by asking ‘What is my Work?’, we’re asking what is the purpose of your existence or what are you meant to be.”

Varela added that the decentered self spontaneously transforms one’s relations with others. “The more the fragile self-subject deploys itself, the more compassion deploys itself. . . . there’s the opening of space to accommodate or to take care of the other.” In the decen-

teredness, “the other appears closer. Solidarity, compassion, care, love—all of the different modes of being together—appear when the self is decentered. Now that, to me, is a great gift of the universe. Since we’re not solid and private and centered, the more we’re who we are . . . [there are] both you and I. Not just me, but the ‘usness’ in us.”

The birth of the decentered self is not without its problems. Since the normal localized self is our vehicle for making sense of most of our experience, transcending this self can be profoundly disorienting, and when it happens, people often have great difficulty describing the experience. The localized self can find the decentered, fragile self impossible to grasp and will try to reduce it to its own terms. Even for those who try, describing this experience can be difficult. Talking to Joseph long after the original leadership development design workshop, Dave said, “I’ve talked to many people about what it feels like to be in this different state—the body feelings, where your ears are ringing, and you have a heightened sense of awareness, and everything around you seems to slow down. You’re literally reading people’s thoughts as they talk to you. It’s as if people are one as they’re talking.

“When I describe this to people, you can almost see a jolt in their body. Because they’re remembering, and they’re saying, ‘Yes! I’ve had that experience!’ So why did they turn it off? Because they don’t know how to express it. Or they’re afraid to express it because that’s ‘hocus-pocus stuff.’ But it’s so much a part of us. We’re just afraid to turn it on because of what people might say about it.”

## Surrendering into Commitment

As the localized self’s grip on our awareness releases, there’s a “change in the quality of attention,” in Varela’s words, “from ‘looking for’ to

‘letting come.’” Here, “surrendering control” evolves into what Joseph calls “surrendering into commitment,” the gateway to operating from one’s deepest purpose, in concert with a larger whole.

When Joseph and Otto interviewed entrepreneurs and asked them to describe the deeper aspects of their creation journeys and especially why, in spite of all the adversities, they kept going, they all answered that they felt compelled to continue, that they couldn’t “not do it.” This response points to a type of commitment that’s different from an act of willpower in the normal sense.

One way to understand this passage through the eye of the needle is as a continuation of the transformation of the relationship between self and world that begins with sensing. When we start down the left-hand side of the U, we experience the world as something given, something “out there.” Gradually, we shift our perception to seeing from inside the living process underlying reality. Then, as we move up the right-hand side of the U, we start to experience the world as unfolding through us. On the left-hand side of the U, the world is “as it is” and later “as it emerges”; on the right-hand side the world is “coming into being through us.” Starting down the left-hand side, the self is an observer of this exterior world, which is a creation of the past. Starting up the right-hand side, the self turns into a source through which the future begins to emerge.

The shift involved in moving from one state to another is the mystery that happens at the bottom of the U. This inversion of the relational web of self and world cannot be reduced to words, and people experience it in different ways. This was Otto’s shift in awareness at the fire, leading to feeling “released and free.” It is Peter’s experience that “I am the audience and they are me” and that “something precious is about to be given to us.” It is Betty Sue’s sense of the emergence of an “already existing yet still-to-be-created design that you are somehow part of.” And it is Joseph’s “profound opening of the heart.”

All these are examples of the third aspect of presencing—the sense of being present to, as Otto puts it, “what is seeking to emerge through me.” The intentionality of what is emerging implied in this statement mirrors another observation of Rosch’s. Speaking of her experiences as a longtime meditator and student of Buddhism and Taoism, Rosch observed, “If you follow your nature enough, if you follow your nature as it moves, if you follow so far that you really let go, then you find that you’re actually the original being, the original way of being. . . . The original being knows things and acts, does things in its own way. It actually has a great intention to be itself, and it will do so if you just let it.”

Referring to the Taoist notion of Source, Rosch said, “There’s this awareness, this little spark, which is completely independent of all the things that we think are so important—achievement or nonachievement, even being alive or dead, or awake or asleep. This supposed world actually radiates from that. This is the way things happen, and in the light of that, action becomes action that supports the whole, action that includes everything and does everything that’s needed.”

Action that originates from this connection with Source appears “without conscious control—even without the sense of ‘me’ doing it—a spontaneous product of the whole.” And such action, said Rosch, “can be shockingly effective.”<sup>6</sup>