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The Attentive Heart:

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Breathing in, breathing out. Slow deep inhale, slow deep exhale.

Quieting the body, quieting the mind I woke up this morning under the graceful, arching branches of bay laurels and Douglas firs. All night the trees have been conversing under the full moon, weaving me into their stories, capturing my dreams with their leaning limbs and generous trunks. Breathing together as I slept, as they rested, we danced quietly in the summer night. Their great confidence framed a circle for my waking; their sturdy presence offered an invitation to be still.

I arrived last night to join others on retreat in a small community in Anderson Valley near Mendocino. On this flat, gentle river bottomland the trees have grown up with easy conviviality, nurtured by floodplain water and the protection of the valley. Below the knoll the creek winds its way through a lazy channel, limpid with the slow movement of late summer. The central grassy area is open and spacious, framed by the comfort and stability of trees. Tall, straight redwoods and firs emerge above the rounded coast live oaks, bays, and madrones, filling the sky with quiet companions.

Inside this large ring of trees lies an island of stillness, a protected area in a war zone. These several hundred acres have been designated for slowing down, for listening to the calls of the heart. Their purchase was an act of intention on behalf of trees and people, that they might find a more peaceful way together. Up and down the valley, stands of redwoods are being turned into lumber and cash at an alarming rate. The tension over trees in this county is palpable. The high price for rare clear-grained heart-wood is a driving force behind more and more logging. The economic machine justifies and perpetuates the killing in this war. For some the price is too high, since logging also causes fragmentation of wildlife habitat, severe soil erosion, and widespread loss of salmon runs. The battle involves private-property rights and the defense of ecological integrity. Tree lovers prefer the trees alive; the timber companies want them dead. The two desires are completely incompatible.

The meditation retreat, however, is not about trees; it is about the attentive heart, the heart that feels the presence of others and the call to respond, the heart that lives in relationship with other beings. The attentive heart is not a purchaseable item; its value cannot be measured in economic terms. The capacity for compassion and response grows slowly from cultivation and practice.

In this retreat we are practicing the traditional Buddhist methods of mindfulness and intention. Breathing in, breathing out, with awareness, over and over again, we are trying to pay attention to what we are actually doing moment to moment. The instructions are simple, but the practice is very difficult. The mind is so naturally slippery, so deftly agile, so quick and ready to dart off in any new direction. To notice even ten breaths in a row seems an impossible task. Like practicing scales on an instrument, watching the breath can be tedious, even boring; and in this lies the great challenge to keep coming back, to keep trying to settle the scattered mind.

Though there is no escaping the local tree war, I find it stabilizing to focus on one activity, one motion at the center. Breathing slowly, the monkey mind finds a place to rest, to empty out, to pry loose from the paralyzing traps of self-absorption. After an hour of sitting silently, we step outside for a period of walking meditation. Each time the mindfulness bell rings, we pause and breathe deeply three times, noticing the detail of where we are. We walk so slowly, it actually makes me laugh. The retreatants look odd drifting across the lawn like misplaced jellyfish or banana slugs. One step, breathing in, one step, breathing out. Paying attention to the feet, paying attention to the breath, noticing the body moving through the landscape.

I walk with bare feet, soaking up the sunlight in the grass, crinkling the green leaves with my toes. In the center of the soft lawn I bump into the roots of an old Douglas fir stump. A tiny oak seedling has taken shelter in a crack of the stump, drawing on the tree's remaining nourishment. The tree roots protrude a few inches above the ground, marking the space of its former water territory. Worn and smooth, they are like firm hands touching my feet. My feet, the tree's feet – we meet each other in the deep breathing that connects body to ground. I touch the tree's presence by walking the length of its roots. Next to the ephemeral exuberance of the grass, the roots provide depth and grounding, a testimony to the history of the tree.

In the slow time of meditation I practice observing each sound with attention. A bumblebee on the lawn works the tiny plantain blossoms, methodically gathering the morning pollen with self-absorbed buzzing. A large blue dragonfly whirs through the open air. Up in the trees scrub jays squabble with squirrels over territorial rights. Acorn woodpeckers call back and forth, scolding intruders. Each sound is surrounded by a generous spaciousness. Each sound is connected to a specific individual and event. In the silence of walking I hear each relation.

Cultivating this practice of mindfulness is painstaking and demanding. In each moment of observing a leaf, a squawk, a firm touch, there is the temptation to make it something more than it is – an object of fascination, a delirium of nature bonding, a symphony of deliberate orchestration. There is also the danger of thinking it something less than it is, missing the context and history of the tiny event striking the senses. Either way one falls off the impossibly thin razor's edge of bare attention. Fall and return, err and correct. Like riding a bicycle,

the mind aims for balance, seeking to stabilize the wobble between the pulls toward falling.

Each step, listen, breathe. Each step, note what is actually happening. It is difficult to hold the tension of these instructions in my body. I want to run away from them, hurl myself horizon-tally through space rather than drop vertically through time. Slow people moving like molasses on the lawn – we are all so serious about this! Couldn't I go up and tickle someone? Wouldn't it be fun to break their attention with peels of laughter? I feel impatient and mischievous with the slowness of this practice. Breathe, relax, observe the mind of resistance. Slowing down again, I walk with grass, roots, sky, clouds, watching the emotional waves rise and fall, surge and pass away. Emptying out of self-referential ideas, emptying out of the tendency for distraction, I am trying to maximize the possibility of being completely here. But every second there is a tug in the web that pulls on my attention.

Loud, heavy, gear-grinding, gas-guzzling noises invade the island of stillness. My body tenses. I recognize the sound of a logging truck on the local transport route between forests and cities. I know more than I want to about the sound of this logging truck. The roaring engine sets off an internal alarm tied to fear,

protectiveness, uncertainty, helplessness. The forests! the forests! the voice of concern calls out. Breathe, walk, listen, observe. The tension sinks into my stomach and tightening hands. I try to stay present to the whole causal net, to the desire to escape it, to the tension of the conflict. Like a mouse crouching from a hawk, I feel a threat to my survival. I know the trucks are carrying trees stripped naked into logs, their arms hacked off and left to rot or burn. I know that a logging operation can quickly turn a living forest community into an unofficial burial ground. I imagine the trucks as hearses in a long and very drawn-out funeral procession. A wave of great grieving washes over me. I struggle with this slow walking, torn between acting and not acting. It seems like an indulgence to take the time to cultivate mindfulness when so much is being lost.

But this is the tension – to find a considered way of acting not based on reaction. Building a different kind of sanity requires a stable base for careful action. It means being willing to know all the dimensions of the reality of destruction, being willing to breathe with the tension of emotional response, being willing to cultivate tolerance for unresolved conflict. This nonverbal form of ethical deliberation depends on the careful work of paying attention to the whole thing. Meditating, walking slowly, calming the mind by centering on the breath – these painstaking, deliberate practices increase the odds for acting intelligently in the midst of crisis.

The bell sounds to close the period of walking meditation and to begin the break. I am longing to shake off the tension of the logging dilemma. Between the orchard and the kitchen, a small path drops over the hill and winds through

a sloping oak woodland. I follow it intuitively toward the low places, hoping to find water and the company of alders. To my delight my first encounter on the floodplain is an exquisite and abundant community garden, source of our soups and salads. Six-foot tomato plants droop with the weight of juicy red fruit, a fencerow of peas hang ripe for the picking. The quiet eye leaps for joy at the brilliant orange and yellow chrysanthemums, coreopsis, and poppies. After a morning of silence and restraint, my senses feast on the stimulating sight.

Past the lettuce, past the eggplant, past the zucchini, I aim for the faint sound of water over rocks. My feet want to stand in cool water, my hands yearn to splash wetness on my face. Stepping over the cowpies and fallen oak twigs, I leave the path and wander down to a shallow stream. Warm and almost stagnant, the water is barely moving. Near an overhanging alder the creek is a foot deep; I slip out of my meditation clothes and into my fish body. Wriggling, squirming, splashing, cleansing – for a few moments the existence of suffering is a distant thought. The tension of human confusion slides away; I bask in the apparent simplicity of animal life.

Stretching out in the midday sun, I let go of the strain of knowing so much and paying attention with such discipline. I catnap on the warm rocks, resting like a lizard. Wavering on the edge of consciousness, my mind drifts with the sounds of the stream and the warmth of the sun. Thoughts skim across the surface, finding no anchoring place in the pond of my imagination. The tension of acting/not acting is swallowed up in a cat's yawn as I turn on my back to face the full sun.

By late afternoon we have been sitting and walking silently for several hours. I fight it less, willing now to just do the practice, just put in the time. The logging trucks still roll by with disturbing regularity, but the day has ripened, slowing my reactivity and emotional responses. The accumulation of warmth and sunshine has softened the field of green bordering the trees. My companions walking slowly across the lawn seem more like trees than people; they are less awkward, more comfortable, less ruffled around the edges. We are absorbed in the practice of remembering where we are, remembering our relations, noting the suffering of ethical tension. It takes time to see the deeply encoded patterns of destruction and transgression against trees and other nonhuman beings. It takes time to cultivate a relational sensitivity that is compassionate and not pathological. It takes time to embrace wholeheartedly the complexity of living with trees.

I find some comfort in our communal clumsiness. We each stumble along the uncharted path. Practicing with others is a useful antidote to the isolation of insight. We walk together sharing the silence, giving each other support as we investigate our lives. We forget and remember, moment after moment, each of us making an effort to deepen our capacities for observation of self and other. By learning in community, we practice breathing in a circle of friends and companions. Against the backdrop of ecological uncertainty, this retreat

seems like a very small contribution of attention. Though I cannot know how it will affect the large-scale patterns of social relationships with trees, I make an effort anyway. The choice to practice awareness, over and over in each moment, is the cultivation of intention, a quiet, fierce kind of passion that supports the capacity to act with restraint.

Old tree stump, young oak sprouting, jay, and woodpecker – with your company I am just breathing, just walking, trying not to stumble on the irregular terrain. In this steady silence I ask for help to walk more gracefully, for patience to cultivate an attentive heart.

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