

Aura Glaser: A Moment of Beauty by Richard Whittaker

It was thanks to Pavi Mehta that the three of us got together for the conversation that follows. The morning of the interview, and before we began recording, somehow - I think Pavi prompted me - I found myself telling Aura a little about meeting Tibetan Buddhist and research psychologist Lobsang Rappagay. There was a story there that Aura might find interesting and could help frame how we began our own conversation. So I was telling Aura that I'd heard a talk by him almost thirty years earlier. He'd used the term "aesthetic thought." I didn't understand what he meant. But because of other things he'd said about it, I'd never forgotten it and finally, many years later, I'd contacted him asking if we could meet for a conversation. It's where we began...

[Photograph above by Stephen Y. Nose. All other photographs by Aura Glaser.]

RICHARD WHITTAKER: We talked about aesthetic thought and that was a term he used and he used it coming from Tibetan, coming from Vajrayana, and I wondered if that phrase meant anything to you, aesthetic thought?

AURA GLASER: It doesn't mean anything to me particularly. I'm imagining that it's a way of describing a more subtle state of mind that allows for the phenomenal world to be experienced in a different way, but I'm surmising.

RICHARD: Well, I think your surmising is right on.

PAVI MEHTA: Richard, am I correct in remembering that you tracked him down 20 years after you first heard him use that phrase?

RICHARD: Well, it was more than twenty and there were a few other things he said, too. I didn't understand what he meant by aesthetic thought, but he also said that in the West, we are too fatigued to engage in aesthetic thought.

AURA: Yes, too fatigued with concepts. I imagine that's what he was pointing to, but perhaps I'm adding my interpretation. I can understand how that would capture your imagination though, given your areas of interest.

RICHARD: And also, the person in Western psychology that is most interesting to Lobsang was Wilfred Bion. That's a name you'd recognize, I'm guessing.

AURA: Yes. He was a very well-regarded British psychoanalyst. One of the things that struck me most about him is his idea that each time you enter the consulting room to work with another person, you need to enter it without memory or desire. That's excellent advice for anyone doing therapeutic work of any type, to really have a mind and a presence that's fresh in that moment, and to let go of preconceptions and narratives.

I'm familiar with his work because my own background in psychology is twofold. I got my master's degree at The Center for Humanistic Studies (now the Michigan School of Psychology). In my master's training, the focus was primarily on humanistic psychology—so Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, Rollo May—and all those people. For my doctoral degree, I went to Pacifica Graduate Institute in Southern California. Students came from all over the country and met monthly for classes. The focus at Pacifica is on depth psychology. Included there were Bion, Freud, Jung, the post-Jungians, archetypal and analytic psychologists and so forth. I am, by no means, an expert on Bion, but I've studied him and have great appreciation for what he brought to the field.

RICHARD: Yes. What you say accords exactly with Lobsang's feeling about him. The problem of entering the consulting room free from desire - and what was the other one...?

AURA: Memory. Of course, memory has much value within psychotherapy, and in life, but in that context, it points to having beginner's mind, really allowing yourself to be surprised and drawn in by what's revealed in that moment, to be open and not have already come to conclusions ahead of time—even based on a prior session with a person. I think it's a great discipline for any analyst or therapist.

RICHARD: Not so easy.

AURA: It is not easy. We are naturally inclined towards collecting information and forming opinions. It's a very natural inclination, so it really is about cultivating a different capacity, or tapping into a capacity that's already there, but covered over by a lot of our other conditioning.

RICHARD: Indeed. Maybe we'll go back and forth, but we were thinking of talking about your photography here today. Of course I looked at your website and I like that little description you gave to yourself as a "dharma coyote."

AURA: It is a self-description.

RICHARD: So what is a dharma coyote?

AURA: Well, what did you think when you saw it?

RICHARD: I thought, "That's really cute." And then, depending on the lens you're looking through, the coyote is a trickster.

AURA: Yes.

RICHARD: And it's a wild, elusive animal—and clever.

AURA: Yeah, non-domesticated.

RICHARD: There you go—non-domesticated.

AURA: A little bit on the wild margins of things. For decades I was in the role of a dharma teacher and then I went through a transitional period of separating from the spiritual center that I'd co-founded. I continued teaching after the separation and then various events happened in my life impacting my health and I needed to pull back from a whole range of things—my therapy practice, teaching, and so forth.

When I was publishing a piece on Lion's Roar about five years ago, I had to think about

how to describe myself for the bio. I wasn't formally giving teachings in ways I'd done in the past, but the transmission of dharma continues in some form and fashion—in any form I take it is being communicated—because it's at the heart of whatever it is I'm doing. Somehow "dharma coyote" came to mind as a way of expressing that I was still offering whatever experience I could to others, and sharing in different ways. I have a real reverence for the coyote. She's a bit of a mysterious character, and this was a way of allowing for unknown aspects, because I was in unknown territory myself.

RICHARD: That's a beautiful description and shows what a good phrase can do in two words. And we can go almost straight to photography from there because what's really hard for words to do is sometimes possible for images to do.

AURA: That is so true, Richard. I have an appreciation for putting words together that are unexpected and paradoxical.

RICHARD: And that's an art. I have to share this quote from Gertrude Stein. She says, "Now listen, can't you see that when the language was new as it was with Chaucer and Homer, the poet could use the name of the thing and the thing was really there. He could say, 'Oh, moon,' 'Oh, sea,' 'Oh, love,' and the moon, and the sea, and love were really there. And can't you see that after hundreds of years had gone by and thousands of poems had been written, he could call on those words and find that they were just worn out literary words? The excitingness of pure being had withdrawn from them. Now the poet has to work in the excitingness of pure being.'"

AURA: I have never heard that before, and it is fabulous. Thank you for sharing that.

RICHARD: You're welcome. I love that quote. And it's true.

AURA: It is true. And what she refers to as the "excitingness of pure being" is maybe what I was referring to as the freshness of presence. When a word bypasses our conceptual mind and we have a direct experience of it—like moon, as opposed to our idea of the moon—then it's very alive; then the moon is present. Your mind isn't busy making all these associations, there's a direct connection, and language becomes a bridge to direct experience. Otherwise, it can become tired, as she describes.

RICHARD: I think "dharma coyote" has that. It's alive. Now I noticed in your photography, that there are a lot of different kinds of birds and I thought of the 16th Karmapa. Do you know about the 16th Karmapa and his love of birds?

AURA: I do, and I'm aware of his love of birds, but I haven't heard any particular stories about his love of birds.

RICHARD: Well, I'm not schooled in this, but I just thought it was interesting. I don't think people get tired of birds. If I see a bird in a bush outside my window, I'm always attracted to that. So talk a little bit about what you found in your photography of birds and your feeling for birds. What do you think is there?

AURA: I think I would say, to begin with, that I'm in accord with you that birds have held a fascination for human beings for as long as we've recorded anything of our history. We can go back to cave paintings and to many of the early gods—even some of the gods that are still worshipped—and birds have figured in all along the way. I think there's a way

that birds capture our imagination as messengers of spirit through flight—and the freedom they represent. I think there’s a collective, and deeply human, response to birds that’s always been there and that’s always been commented upon, drawn upon, and honored in some way. So of course, that’s part of my make-up as well.

I share that fascination with and appreciation for the magic of birds—and then the diversity of birds, the incredible variety and subtleties there, the behaviors and differences among them, the kinds of intelligence they express in the ways they protect themselves and care for their young—all the varieties of things that they do. When you start paying close attention to anything, you begin to recognize so much. Though I would say that in some ways, my photographing birds started, I can’t quite say as an accident, but I didn’t really set out with that intention.

I always had a feeling that photography was something I could resonate with and could have some affinity for. I’d had a point-and-shoot camera, when I was traveling in Asia for the first year of my travels. I could see by looking at my photographs that I had an eye for it, a sense for composition, and I enjoyed it. But then I sold my camera to be able to stay longer in Asia and I didn’t get another camera.

Years later I had one of those first digital cameras Sony made sitting on a shelf somewhere. In the beginning of 2014, I was home as a result of health circumstances that had caused me to withdraw from the work that I was doing, and I was talking to my husband, Stephen. He was preparing to lead a business weekend for executives and was thinking about what would be some good icebreakers to help people connect a little. Are you familiar with a show called “Inside the Actors Studio”?

RICHARD: I’ve seen a couple of episodes, I think.

AURA: We’d seen some episodes over the years and James Lipton always ends with a little questionnaire that originally came from Bernard Pivot—questions like: “What’s your favorite word?” “Least favorite word?” “Favorite sound?” “Least favorite sound?” You’re supposed to answer with whatever pops into your mind. Stephen thought that might be an interesting way for people, like in a dyad, to connect with each other.

So he just started asking me these questions, and I was just sitting there answering. Then there was this question, “What profession other than your own would you like to attempt?” And what came out was I would be a photographer in the natural world.

I was pretty stunned because I’d never thought that. But that inspired me to start using my little Sony. I started photographing the birds outside my window because I loved watching them.

There’s a little bit of land around our home, so I see a lot of birds. Of course the photographs were terrible because the birds are this big [gestures, really small]. There was this beautiful Indigo Bunting that, in the photo, looked like a little drop of blue ink in a tree.

Then a week or two later, Stephen says, “Maybe we ought to get you a camera.”

I said, “That’s a great idea. Maybe for my birthday.” Which was in July, several months away.

He goes, “Well, there are birds outside the window right now!”

So true. So why wait? So I started looking online. I had a particular affinity for Canon because the Canon Company is named after the Goddess of Mercy, Kwan Yin (also known as Kwanon). Kwanon, was the original name for Canon and their original logo was an image of Kwan Yin.

I have a tremendous feeling of connection to Kwan Yin. I thought I needed to get something as lightweight as possible and Canon’s new Rebel SL1 was the lightest DSLR on the market. I ordered one with two lenses and started photographing birds around my

house.

I already loved the birds in and of themselves, but the challenge of photographing them, capturing the movement—I've always loved movement of all kinds, whether it is dance, the flow of poetry, or a bird in flight—so photographing birds in flight was very captivating for me. Those two things came together, and that's how I started photographing a lot of birds. Then I expanded into photographing other things. But it was the birds outside my window that were drawing my attention, and I was receiving so much joy from connecting with the birds that were all around me.

RICHARD: That's a great story. I relate very much to it, by the way. I got into photography by accident, too.

AURA: And of course, to love photography is to love light. That figured in tremendously to my interest in photography, and then my love of photography. I imagine that's true for you as well.

RICHARD: Absolutely. And now I have to bring this up because you just focused on light so beautifully there. Have you ever thought about, or studied, what is a photon?

AURA: I don't think I could speak to it with any depth from the physics point of view.

RICHARD: I can't either. The photon is very mysterious. They have no mass and travel at the speed of light—because they are light. So it occurred to me if they're traveling at the speed of light, no time passes. So that means eternity, doesn't it? Anyway, I'm sorry to make this wild leap, and we can move on. But light touches us in a way that's kind of inexplicable, isn't it?

AURA: Well, we are light. It's not that light is touching us; we are also made of light.

RICHARD: Can you say more about how we are light?

AURA: [a pause, several seconds] At the more subtle level, the light that we perceive is also the light that we are. What we are perceiving is also what we are made of. The awareness with which we perceive is also connected to that light, so we talk about the light of consciousness. Light is pervading all things. I don't know if that...

RICHARD: Well, it's sort of an impossible question.

AURA: It's experiential. One can discuss it, but there's an experience of light. It is a deeper, more subtle dimension of ourselves.

RICHARD: Well, I can accept that somehow. Now I just want to say that on the homepage of your website, the close-up of that bird—that's an amazing image.

AURA: Thank you, Richard.

RICHARD: You're welcome. Going back to your first camera, your Canon, there must have been some big moments.

Aura: Yes. I had the camera, and of course I didn't know anything about shutter speed, ISO, or f-stops. So I began with this little video course where I could learn bit-by-bit. Then I would go out and experiment. What started to happen was that I experienced the moment in photographing where there's no separation between myself, the subject that I'm

photographing, and the camera. I recognized that regardless of subject matter, this was what the photographs were essentially about—communicating through image that the unique radiance of whatever I'm seeing or photographing is part of one unified field of presence.

Presence and unity of life are, for me, at the heart of my photography. And then learning the technical pieces I needed, in order to be able to bring photographs to life—to see what it was like to capture a bird in flight and freeze that motion and see that detail of it, or to blur the motion and see what that looked like.

There was the excitement of learning how these different applications of technique could bring different results and the images would appear very differently.

There's also the magic of those times when I didn't know I'd captured an image in the camera until I actually saw it, and I'd say, "Oh, my goodness! There's an incredible moment revealed here!" There's something so powerful about seeing in such depth and detail, because when you're seeing it just with your eyes you're not seeing that micro-moment. It was very compelling to see what was emerging, and the way in which things would reveal themselves in the photograph. I would see things that I hadn't seen when I was taking the picture. Especially when photographing subjects in rapid motion.

I started taking my camera with me when I would go out for walks. Then I started seeing different things and different birds. I started going to places where I might see water birds and some of the larger birds, like herons and egrets. And not that long after I'd started, I shared some photos with friends like, "Oh, look, I saw these warblers on a walk, and here they are!" Or, "There's a nest of a Cedar Waxwing by the river," just to share the joy of those moments.

But I want to go back to something you said earlier about images and words. One of the things that was so powerful about moving into photography and diving deep into it was I felt it was bringing me to another level of integration and wholeness.

So much of the work I had done was through words—speaking to people in a therapeutic context, teaching, writing, conversing—being of service in those ways. But focusing instead on image, and working in a completely different medium, was deeply nourishing. I loved that I could communicate so much with an image, and that the image communicated so much to me as well.

Then one of the people I was sending some photos to suggested they had a quality that would be worth sharing with others. I hadn't thought about that at all. You could say I was living a bit of the life of a forest yogi. So she mentioned there was this café in town and encouraged me to see if they might want to show any of my work. She believed people would really respond to it.

I happened to be meeting a friend a couple of months later at that café. They had paintings on the wall so I approached the manager and said, "I have some photographs and I wonder if you might be interested in seeing them and possibly showing them here?" To my utter amazement, she said, "That would be wonderful." So I went and showed her a slideshow and ended up having a show at that café.

That was a surprising and lovely development. Not that I was looking to sell my work particularly, but that I was being invited to share the beauty I saw in the sacred world with other people in this venue that was so unlike my other avenues of sharing in the past. Does that give some sense to what you asked?

RICHARD: Yes, thank you, and there's so much in there. And with your other ways of sharing in the past, you would be talking, while this was a visual sharing, another modality.

AURA: Yes, it was another modality. Prior to that it was through direct contact with

people, through being with others, and through teaching in a more formal setting - or from being in a therapy environment. Or through writing. But to be able to have the work communicate and the images communicate in that way, was something I had not experienced before, as you said, in the visual arena. So it was a big surprise, and the things that unfolded from there were unexpected. I was very grateful for that.

RICHARD: I think Ludwig Wittgenstein said, "That of which we cannot speak, let us pass over in silence." But also, "That of which we cannot speak can sometimes be shown."

AURA: Yes, I think that's very much the case. Image can communicate things that words do not. Interestingly, poetry has a way of doing that also. Perhaps it's that freshness we were talking about earlier. The words come through in a different way, and there's so much metaphor, which conjures imagery and feeling.

RICHARD: Yes. And there's the word "beauty." It's a big word that fits with Plato's "Truth, Goodness and Beauty."

AURA: The big three.

RICHARD: Yes. Every now and then, I try to think about that - what is it about beauty? I haven't gotten very far, but I'd invite you to reflect upon beauty.

AURA: Wasn't it Tolstoy who said beauty will save the world? Or Dostoevsky. It's one of the Russian writers.

RICHARD: That's such a hopeful vision. Here's another quote and hearing it will give you time to think about what you're going to say. It's from Soetsu Yanagi who wrote *The Unknown Craftsman*. He found beauty in the pottery of unknown Korean potters making utilitarian ware - cups and bowls and the like. The pieces were free of ego - masterful and yet ordinary. Ultimately, the resuscitation of folk art in Japan, *mingei*, came through Yanagi. So he writes, "A sense of beauty is timeless. It may be said to exist at this very moment, unbounded by past or future. A beautiful object may be said to exist on this very spot, unbounded by right or left. Regarding a beautiful object then, is the same as looking at one's own native home. Put another way, it is the same as looking at the original condition of man himself."

AURA: That's a wonderful quote. There are obviously so many ways of talking about beauty because it is one of the great mysteries. Beauty is truth, beauty is radiance - and everything radiates its own beauty and aliveness in a way that does not require anything from anyone. It is beauty in and of itself.

I think that when we experience beauty, we are experiencing the timelessness within ourselves. The psychologist James Hillman, talked about aesthetics as a breathing in [Aura can be heard inhaling]. In that moment when you're having an in-breath, there's a gap - or you can say that in the gap between the exhalation and the inhalation, beauty is present.

When we experience something as beautiful, it brings us to that place of gap where there's no right or left, where there's no up or down, where there's no past or future - where there isn't even a present, but only a vast unconditioned Now.

These three - beauty, truth, and goodness - being spoken of together has held up over the millennia. There's something intuitively whole about the way they co-create each other and co-emerge and co-exist. I do think they open the door. When we experience it, it stops the momentum, and it opens up; it cuts right through into that vastness. And he talked about it reminding us of home; I would say yes, it reminds us of the true home, our

inner nature.

RICHARD: That's beautiful, Aura. Pavi, I know you have some questions.

Pavi Mehta: Yes, I think are three domains in which I have questions. At this time [in the pandemic] we're all considering what healing means. My husband's health journey over the last six years has brought us personally to some new frontiers of understanding and humility. I'm just wondering what your own journey, navigating your own health, has opened you up to.

AURA: Yes, all right. Well, I'm contemplating how to get to the pith of what has been a journey over several decades. There have been so many levels in my healing journey - at different points in time and different stages, and micro stages. There have been challenges of finding skilled assistance, of relinquishing control, of discovering through a deeply felt sense the difference between acceptance and resignation. How does acceptance allow us to move forward with a sense of both agency and surrender, to continue in a healing process, and allow for the possibility of the body's regenerative abilities while letting go of outcomes? How is that different from resignation, which has a kind of pushing away and avoidance, passivity and defeat, and potentially, anger within it?

For me, the healing journey, and the conditions I've experienced, have been some of my greatest challenges - and some of my greatest teachers. Both. It's very individual and it's very much working with whatever is arising right in this moment. What is the fear that is arising? What is the avoidance that is arising? What is the fortune-telling about the future that is arising? What does it mean to stay present in the face of difficulty? To embrace the radiant wholeness of who and what we are and remain kind to the soft tender flesh of the body? How to love our life, no matter what?

That's not easy to do when it feels as though life is taking so much away. Yet, my own experience is of finding over and again a place of passionate equanimity where the recognition of my wholeness no matter the conditions remains - and recognizing that that wholeness can also express itself through physical healing. But the surrender to the mystery is needed too. However things unfold, I don't control the outcome.

So these are a few of the life lessons I've experienced along the way - profound teachers - and I don't say that lightly. They can bring you to your knees, but also - in that kneeling - one can come to that surrender to love, and to the life that is here, and to the truth that we are so much more than any one of these things that happen in our sphere.

There's that paradox between actively engaging, surrendering, allowing for whatever happens. I've had all kinds of ins and outs in the process, and I've been surprised by some things that I wouldn't have thought would have been as hard as other things.

These difficult things did, however, through my opening to them, bring me to such new and deepening levels of presence and love. I don't know if that answers your question.

PAVI: It does. And I'll combine the two other parts. One was around compassion and how that is a domain you've explored quite deeply, both in writing, as well as in practice. Since you wrote the book, has your experience evolved in any particular ways with compassion?

The second part is, I was struck by how you answered that question from your husband from the questionnaire, how it wasn't just photography, but photographing the natural world. It feels like they're very connected. Like there is this boundary myth. I wonder what it means to rekindle that permeability to the natural world. I feel it's so related - the compassion piece, the healing piece, the natural world, and this idea of experiencing our permeability in a healing way, or in an evolutionary way.

So, I guess the first question is around compassion and how your understanding of it, experience of it has evolved, and the second part is around the natural world and what that has opened for you. Sorry, all my questions are kind of big and rambling.

AURA: That's quite okay. I just have to wrap my arms around them. Compassion, in my way of approaching it is love and compassion combined. This has been a lifelong theme for me, starting in my early childhood. When I was really small I had a great-uncle. He died when I was very young, so I only knew him for the first few years of my life. I called him Uncle Joe, but as I didn't have grandparents, he was kind of a grandfatherly presence in those early years.

One day, I was sitting on Uncle Joe's lap and he asks, "Aura, who do you love the most?" After pausing for a moment I said with gusto, "I love everyone!" My father was within earshot and he was so happy to hear me say that. He and my mother were Holocaust survivors and coming through that and bringing children into the world, was already a miracle, but having a child emerge from those ashes saying, "I love everyone!" there was another level of miraculousness in that. He reminded me of that many times during my angry teenage years. "Where is my girl that loves everyone?" But I had other issues to work out at the time.

I had a very strong proclivity, you could say, in the direction of compassion and love. I didn't consciously understand that as a three-year-old, but as I came to know more about my family background and what had happened, and working to process the unimaginable in terms of people's darkest actions and capacities, I felt like compassion and love were the only things that made any sense. Of course, at a deeper level, when we experience that we are pervaded by the consciousness that pervades everything around us, that we are made of the same sacredness, then love is a very natural expression of that. Love is the natural expression of that experience, and I don't think there's a limit to its reach.

I'll go back to say that my initial connection to the Tibetan tradition was fueled by the inspiration of bodhicitta, by the Bodhisattva archetype, for lack of a better word. I was already very deeply engaged with Vipassana meditation. I was in India at the time. I had studied with S. N. Goenka in Sri Lanka and felt like I was all set in my spiritual practice. I had a metta, loving kindness practice, along with my Vipassana practice, and was feeling very fulfilled, in terms of spiritual life and practice.

Then I ended up in Dharmasala. It's the Dalai Lama's capital in exile, and the Tibetan Library of Works and Archives is there. Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey gave teachings almost daily to Western students. He had a translator, a lovely young monk, Lobsang, who was translating for him.

So I started going up to the library for the classes with Geshe Dhargyey. One day I was walking up a path, below the library, and ran into one of Geshe Dhargyey's more senior students. He had been living there for a number of years and spoke fluent Tibetan. He recognized me and asked, "Are you going up to the library today?"

I said, "I don't know. I wasn't necessarily planning on it. Why?"

He said, "Well, Geshe Dhargyey is giving Bodhisattva vows. It's a very special opportunity. He almost never gives them as a standalone ceremony." I didn't know what a Bodhisattva vow was and he explained, "It's the vow that you take to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings."

I felt instantly moved to my core. I probably ran up to the library. It was a transformative ceremony, and after that I got deeper and deeper into the Tibetan tradition. But the universal compassion of the bodhisattva was always at the root for me.

I didn't say anything about nature, but wanted to share that. It felt important.

PAVI: I'm glad you did.

AURA: Sharing that is part of the larger picture of the role of compassion and love in my

journey, and the inspiration it's given me. Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj - I just call him Maharaj - has this wonderful quote, "Wisdom is knowing I am nothing, Love is knowing I am everything, and between the two my life moves." I think that's such a great summation of everything we're talking about. Would you still like me to answer the question about nature, or do you want to ask something else?

PAVI: I'd love to hear that answer. I just recently came across the phrase, ecopsychology and it was a little light bulb moment; that's partly where the question came from. It seems like a thread you've been holding onto for a very long time, and it's probably never been more relevant.

AURA: It's never been more relevant than it is now with all the challenges we're facing as humans on this earth. At just a simple, organic level I've always experienced nature as one of the greatest teachers and healers in my life, and it remains so. I mean, the things that a tree communicates about beingness and relatedness - there's just so much. Whether we're talking about trees or rocks or flowers or fish or a caterpillar, it's endless. So when I considered spending time with a camera there was an automatic knowing that I would want it to be in the natural world. I was already walking outside every day, so it was a natural extension of that to take my camera with me. I wouldn't photograph every time I would be out. Sometimes things felt very raw and tender and nature sustained and held me in a way that's uniquely nourishing. That was also a part of it - nature holding a space for whatever was happening and then reflecting that spaciousness back. So that also drew me very much to it.

PAVI: That's beautiful. It reminds me of a practice that's prevalent in my hometown of India. Let's say there's a young woman or a man in their early 30s and still not married. The tradition assumes there's something preventing the natural flow of life, a karmic complication or something of that sort. What I never knew was that in certain cases, they will marry the person off to a tree.

AURA: I've heard about this.

PAVI: And trees are believed to have divining resonance, and the holding capacity that you referenced that's in the natural world. They can then ground and realign that stuck energy. In some sense, the tree would then be sacrificed in order for the flow to continue, and then the person could get married. I mean there's many complicated things about the practice, but the traditions will turn to the natural world for that help. It's so powerful, you know?

AURA: It is. I think it was in Thailand, when the monks wanted to protect trees that were being deforested, they went out and ordained the trees. They put robes on the trees, and basically said, "These trees are now ordained and they cannot be destroyed."

You know, Jung was so into the story of the rainmaker that during his later years - I don't know to what degree he insisted - but he encouraged every analyst whenever they would give a talk, to tell the story of the rainmaker, because he thought it was so central. This is a slightly different angle, but it's also pointing to that non-separation between ourselves and the natural world.

Richard Wilhelm, who was the translator of the I Ching, told Jung this story. The people in a certain village in China had a drought. They were suffering and had tried all kinds of ritual ceremony to bring the rain, and nothing brought the rain. Finally, they heard about some eccentric guy called "the rainmaker," a dried-up old man who lived alone

somewhere, and very far away. Completely desperate, they went to get him. "Can you help us?"

He agrees and comes to their village. Upon arriving, he says, "Just set me up over there in that little house. Bring me some food and leave me alone there."

They say, "What?" But they do as he asks.

So he's living in this little cottage and starts tending the garden. Three days later, the rain comes.

The people are astonished, "How did you do this?"

He said, "Well, when I arrived here I realized something was out of alignment in myself. I could feel I was not in proper harmony with life, so I took these days living here to bring myself into harmony. And then the rain came."

In our limited view, things appear separate. But in reality, it's all deeply intertwined and connected. The internal landscape impacts, and can't be separated from, the external landscape. It all moves together. So marrying a tree can make a lot of sense.

PAVI: Yes. That's wonderful that story. It gives me goosebumps. I remember something in ecopsychology's framing that suggests nature is a living tablet of the unconscious - like our ancestral people read nature.

AURA: Yes.

PAVI: Shakespeare too, right? He'd talk about the sermons in the stones.

AURA: Yes, that's right, yes.

RICHARD: This is sounding a note that we badly need in the culture - a sense of connection with nature, not our disconnection. We need to know this.

AURA: We do need to know, and it's very possible to know. The reason it's difficult is because you need to slow down enough, and become receptive enough, to experience it. Then it becomes quite obvious. We've separated ourselves to a radical and dangerous degree. But the separation doesn't actually exist. We're dreaming it up. We breathe the same air. My inhalation and your exhalation mix together. We are all in this air space, this boundless life space, this magnificent and mysterious web of life together. All life. All of us. To anyone who wants to see it, who is willing to see it, it's unmistakable that we are all in this together. As Robin Wall Kimmerer said in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, "All flourishing is mutual."