
THE FRANKLIN MERRELL-WOLFF FELLOWSHIP NEWSLETTER

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The Franklin Merrell-Wolff Fellowship is a publicly supported, non-profit corporation whose mission is to educate the public about the twentieth-century American philosopher Franklin Merrell-Wolff through his writings, audio recordings, teachings, and life. Our activities include publishing and distributing his works, and the sponsorship of forums and events to study and discuss the life and work of Franklin Merrell-Wolff, as well as to explore the connection between Wolff's teachings and those of other traditions.

A Message from the Chair

Chuck Post

Franklin Merrell-Wolff left us a copious amount of written material, perhaps the most notable of which is his two published books; but, he also penned many essays and plenty of teaching material. He also delivered hundreds of lectures, most following well-planned outlines. In the last decades of his life, he compiled significantly more material in the form of audio recordings.

A primary mission of the Fellowship is to make this material accessible to the public, and a good amount of Wolff's archive has been posted on the Fellowship's website, where it can be downloaded by anyone that has an interest.

And, as we learned in the Fall 2015 issue of this newsletter, the academy has taken an interest in this material. Indeed, I am happy to report that the Dutch scholar David Vliengenthart—after thoroughly working through the collected archive—is close to finishing his dissertation on the life and work of Franklin Merrell-Wolff. It was Wolff's desire to have his work receive scholarly evaluation, and the Fellowship is grateful to have helped make this possible.

In this Issue

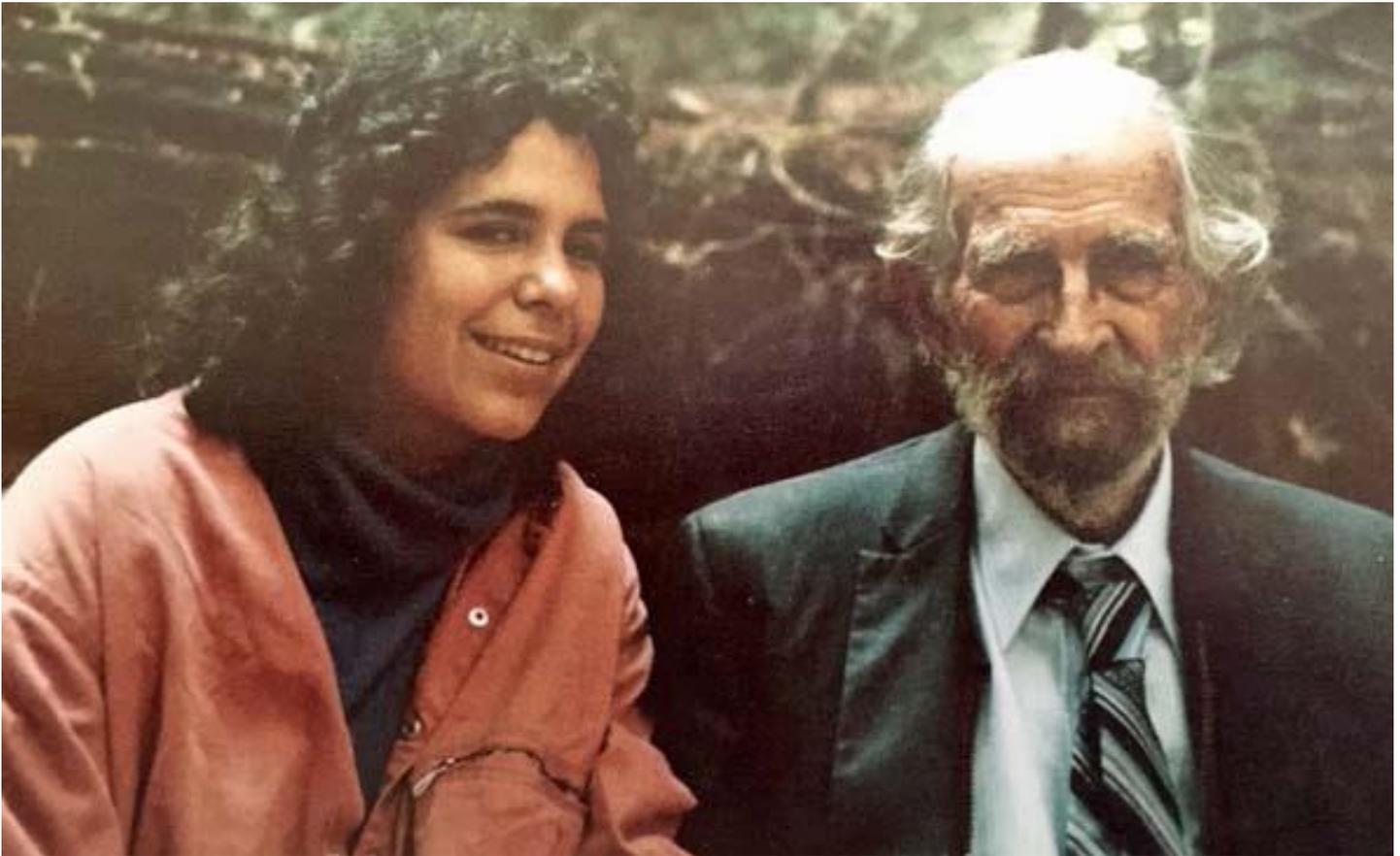
Franklin Merrell-Wolff's "Last Word on Tape" was ten months before his death and this recording, like most of his late production, was biographical. In the bulk of this material we witness Franklin's attempt to deal with his grief following the death of his wife, Gertrude.

At the time of Gertrude's death, Franklin was almost ninety-two years old, and in the following six years of his life he had a number of "assistants" that attended to his everyday needs. In this issue of the Fellowship's newsletter, we are delighted to present a memoir from Andrea Pucci, who was Franklin's devoted assistant for the final two years of his life. Andrea shares not only her reminiscences of that time, but also of the man, "Dr. Wolff."

The best record we have of Franklin in these years comes from those that were close to him at that time. Recent issues of this newsletter have featured John Flinn, one of Franklin's closest assistants, and Joseph Rowe, another assistant whose reflections on his time with Franklin can be found in his insightful and genuine memoir, "The Gnostic of Mount Whitney." Other individuals close to Franklin during his closing years include Dorene White, Joel Morwood, and Bill Stow—all of whom have also been featured in past issues of this newsletter. These issues and Joseph's memoir are available on the Fellowship's website, and are part of our attempt to fulfill our core mission—that is, to educate the public about the life and work of Franklin Merrell-Wolff.

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A Memoir of Franklin Merrell-Wolff

by Andrea Pucci

I first met Dr. Wolff in February 1983 in Apple Valley, California where we were both visiting at Sky High Ranch. Dr. Wolff's attendant John Flinn had brought him there to stay while John visited family in Arizona for the week.

I was participating in a ten-day retreat led by Richard Moss, a former emergency room physician who was a student of both Brugh Joy and Dr. Wolff. And, I had been assigned to a room in the house where Dr. Wolff was staying. In retrospect, I guess that was a strategic placement. Dr. Wolff was ninety-six years old, and I was a nurse and spiritual seeker with a "virgin mind," as Dr. Wolff would later joke.

When Dorene White, who was living at Sky High Ranch, introduced Dr. Wolff to me, I was immediately taken by his twinkling eyes, his elegant suit-and-tie demeanor, and his formidable presence.

He appeared as the archetypal wise mystic, grandfather sage, with long thick grey hair and beard. We had breakfast together each morning, and I felt like he was my grandpa and I his beloved grandchild—blessed by his joyful laughter, his stories about the West, his witty rendition of some of Aesop's Fables, his thigh-slapping laughter, and his colorful storytelling. I was charmed by his elegance, his beauty, his magnificence. Dr. Wolff saw through my adventitiously obscured mind, and reflected back a wordless and vast perfection, and it felt so good to be with him. His gaze softened "me" into a smiling, silent joy. Dr. Wolff's presence was spacious, warm, fresh, vibrant and vastly delightful.

What can I say? Six months later I was living in Lone Pine as Dr. Wolff's attendant and student. I had been practicing as a neonatal nurse at Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York City, and was then planning

to go into a one-year silent vipassana retreat at the Insight Meditation Center in Barre, Massachusetts. Then, I received the written invitation to come to Lone Pine.

I thought about it for a while and followed my heart, thinking that I might be of service to an extraordinary elder, and that it would be another version of a meditation retreat. Living on the remote east side of the Sierras, looking up two miles to the snow-covered peaks with a Master, I imagined bountiful time to meditate. I'd been having dreams of snow-covered mountains for months, and my heart was filled with the spirit of inquiry and adventure.

I hadn't anticipated how the next twenty-eight months with Dr. Wolff would be filled with the joyful and bustling social activity of an active ashram. Students would visit regularly, some staying for weeks or months at a time, and I was overjoyed to play hostess. Brought up in a traditional extended Italian family, staying with my grandparents each summer in the mountains until I was twenty, I loved to cook, be outdoors, stargaze, and spend time with wise elders.

Now, with "the" elder and interesting fellow seekers, it was my great delight to be exhausted every night, and fall asleep before my head even touched the pillow. Before retiring to sleep, I would often walk the ranch's dirt road in moonlight that lit up the crystals of the surrounding thousand-foot granite walls, or in the great darkness, with a trillion stars lighting the way.

Life with Dr. Wolff was rich and nurturing; he was spry and strong, and never needed any physical assistance from me. He always smelled sweet, like flowers, although I never assisted him into the shower because he declined the necessity. He was always dignified and formal in his presentation and appearance. He wore a suit and tie every day, had a cigarette every few hours (he would jest—"smoke here or in the hereafter") and enjoyed a small glass

of port before and after supper. We turned on the generator to watch the news each evening.

Everyone who visited helped to keep things running smoothly inside the houses, and out—on the land and in the orchards. We were all his spiritual family and he shone bright for each of us. My friend Ellen, who accompanied me from New York, stayed for a month, and then returned a year later to help me attend Dr. Wolff.

After the annual Convention that was held on the ranch, some of Dr. Wolff's students, visitors, and family would stay on or return again for longer visits. Joel Morwood lived on the hill for a year and a half while he was writing a book, and would check in daily for a visit. Joel would often answer questions of visiting students, as Dr. Wolff listened, and usually nodded in agreement to his responses.

Dutch, Robert, Jim, Ed, Chris, John, and others all worked on the Ashrama roof to keep the rain and snow outside. We would make frequent trips to the Ashrama all season long (if the snow wasn't too deep) for solitary time and retreat, or for group outings.

We were inspired by the magnificence and view from "Stone House" (as the Ashrama was secularly known). It was perfectly poised to avoid avalanche damage, across from the great white granite walls of Lone Pine Peak, with a swiftly flowing creek between them. Walking the path to the Ashrama was a deep and inspired meditation practice.

Dr. Wolff enjoyed the company of visitors, the conversations, and the sharing of stories and good humor. He enjoyed being surrounded by young people. As he would remind us, anyone less than ninety-six years old was young! Every moment in time with him was a pointing out of timeless presence. Brugh Joy would visit unannounced, but I could tell that he was around as soon as I opened the door—and into a dimension that was light, bright and spacious. They expanded in one another's company.

We had a weekly study group that focused on the book, *The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object*. We had poetry readings and entertainment offerings, and our share of drama with so many varied personalities seeking liberation (or at least some attention!).

Dr. Wolff was surrounded by creative, caring, kind and devoted students of all ages. It was very inspiring living in such a big-hearted beehive. His family (through marriage to his first wife Sherifa) would visit from Phoenix. Dr. Wolff had visitors who were scientists, professors, writers, authors, artists, clergy, spiritual teachers, and students of all ages. We were often invited to their homes during the winter months.

We also went on trips to visit family and friends in California, along the coast, to Arizona and Oregon, and on almost monthly Death Valley excursions. He was a wonderful navigator who had a birds-eye view of what lay ahead. His memory of early days was astounding. His stories flowed like water. He enjoyed life to the fullest!

Being with him, there was little need to speak. Silence with Dr. Wolff was incredibly rich, full and informative. We communicated without a sound as he whispered ever so softly in my mind. It was so very simple and profound to abide in space and time with him. It was also quite disturbing to the ego, which was forced to admit that it was literally nothing in light of the delightful and vast peace that Dr. Wolff radiated. His great spacious silence always got the better of the chattering, conditioned, torturing mind.

Dr. Wolff's elder students Gene and Lillian Sedwick (who were in their eighties) lived on the hill, and visited almost daily whenever they weren't away on a local trip. Dr. Wolff and I would drive to Anne and Pete's place, just below, and Murray and Viola, who lived a few hours away, would visit every few months. George and Sita and Alex would visit from Stanford, along with some Stanford alumni and professors.

Richard Moss and his community had moved to Hidden Valley Ranch near Lone Pine (and Dr. Wolff) around the summer of 1983. They regularly hosted conferences and gatherings, and so Dr. Wolff had visitors quite often, as some of Richard's students were eager to meet him. "Yogi" (as some of us referred to Dr. Wolff) was like a sun attracting many planets into his orbit. He was both loving and loved, and many minds blossomed in his radiance.

We did not have a telephone, so we had to depend on our intuition to get wind of guests arriving "out of the blue." After the weekly Sunday Meeting at which we would play one of Yogi's previously recorded teachings, he would joke, "Did anyone understand what I just said?" Sunday dinner would often include twenty people gathered around the dining table, sharing stories, questions and curiosity. Many guests arrived broiling with confusion, sadness, or raging emotions; after sitting near Yogi they would leave calmed out of their ephemeral turmoil.

Dr. Wolff was a joy to behold in a myriad of circumstances. Living with a master, one is blessed with ordinary moments of their presence, and is fortunate to witness their responses under various conditions.

On one occasion I recall that Dr. Wolff and I had walked together arm in arm to the guest trailer, so that I could prepare for the arrival of some guests (Maggie and Amit Goswami). As we entered the living room, I suggested that he "sit down" and I went into the bedroom to prepare the bed. A few minutes later, I heard him call out "Oh Indira" (as he called me) to find him holding together the chair that he was sitting on, which was crumbling apart beneath him in slow motion. He was calm and laughing, and quipped "you meant that literally didn't you Indira."

I remember another time while having lunch in a restaurant in Bishop—a town about seventy miles away, where we would drive every few weeks for an outing. While sitting across from Dr. Wolff, I

commented that his nose was a bit crooked. He responded “that’s so I can smell my way around corners!”

Here are some more of his “one-liners” that I can recall:

How are you feeling Dr. Wolff? “With my sensorium, of course.”

Sitting aside a lake: “Are we moving or is the lake moving?”

At the garbage dump: “Make sure to look up at the snow white peaks while throwing out the garbage.”

Sitting at the dining table to a student: “It’s not so much what you put into your mouth, but what comes out of it that matters.”

Passing out his card with the Bodhisattva Vow on it: “I highly recommend it.”

Picnicking at 10,000 feet: “We have all the time in the world, and if you don’t have time to descend slowly down the mountain, you shouldn’t have come up in the first place.”

On a road trip: “If one is currently a prisoner on this earth, California is my choice, and such a wonderful place to be.”

On his way into his office: “I’m going to soar in some transcendental infinities.”

During the winter months, when I would read aloud to Dr. Wolff, if I came upon a word I did not know, he would direct me to the five-inch thick *Century Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*. This happened quite often, and hours would go by looking up the root and usage of words. Dr. Wolff was a man of his word, and impeccable with his use of them.

Although at times he would display annoyance with a particular viewpoint, he wouldn’t disparage the speaker, but would criticize the position using

reason and logic. In the time that I knew Dr. Wolff, I never heard him make fun or speak ill of anyone that he knew of or personally knew. His character was the manifestation of virtue. He remained the light in the darkness of any situation or drama going on around him. I have no doubt that he was completely harmless, and of benefit to everyone who ever saw him, or heard him, or read his work.

Dr. Wolff loved to visit the redwood trees in northern California, and we did so in the fall. We always made our longer trips with either John or Joel. Yogi would take us to the places he had visited with his second wife, Gertrude. He would speak gently of the two women in his life who were his devoted and beloved companions in marriage—Sherifa and Gertrude—and he enjoyed sharing memories of past trips and places they had visited. Dr. Wolff said that the redwoods were the Bodhisattvas of the plant kingdom: that they were straight and true, tall and beautiful, could endure a fire, and that we could grow up like them.

During the time I spent with him, his grief over the loss of Gertrude was still palpable, sad, and deeply touching to witness. He ran from nothing. His heart broke open to include more of life every day that he lived. Then one day he said that after years of feeling that he was bleeding with sadness, he had awoken that morning and the feeling had just ceased. Dr. Wolff was brilliant enough to live the mystery in all its rich fullness.

Each morning he awoke near dawn, and later I would hear his footsteps heading to my bedroom door followed by three knocks (always at 7:00 a.m. sharp) that heralded his cheery greeting “7 o’clock, time to rise and shine.” Dr. Wolff spent many hours of the day in contemplation in his office. In the warm weather we sat in the garden with the two giant sequoias that he and Gertrude had planted.

A few weeks after I arrived at the ranch, I drove his well-loved Mercedes Benz down the hill to the ranch house to retrieve something. The gear did not hold, and I had not pulled the parking brake up. The

car rolled thirty feet down a ravine. When I sat down at his side, feeling horrified at what had happened, he gently patted my hand and said “Now you know what this country is like Indira—there is no even ground, it’s either up or down.” In his loss, he could only comfort me. We had the “Buddha Mobile” repaired, and simply continued “down the road.”

Dr. Wolff could not intentionally hurt another person. He was kind and true in the same moment. That is the question I had held in my heart and that led me to him. How can I be kind and true to myself in the same moment? We each find our teachers through our heart’s longing questions. Dr. Wolff answered my questions by simply living and being. He never left the heart of the Great Space, which was spontaneously flowing with Compassion. He saw through weakness and flaw, and encouraged us to go deeper and vaster by his example. I never felt judged or diminished, but rather was healed into a greater wholeness in his presence. His writing and recorded lectures also inducted us into very deep states of awareness. He introduced me to the true, empty, clear nature of mind.

In February of 1984, Dr. Wolff wanted to visit a friend of his, the Tibetan lama Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, who is the abbot of a monastery in Woodstock, New York, and the teacher of the then young, and now current, Buddhist Karmapa. Dr. Wolff and I travelled with the Rinpoche when he made an extended teaching tour through Arizona. Wherever we went, whenever Dr. Wolff sat next to Rinpoche, the waves of compassion and peace radiated to all who gathered round.

In Phoenix, Dr. Wolff, Ellen and I took “Refuge” with the Rinpoche. As is customary with the ritual, we each received a Tibetan name. Dr. Wolff was given the name “Moon of Complete Goodness.” I have continued to study and practice with Tibetan Buddhist teachers ever since.

Yogi would often comment on how the Vajrayana Dzogchen Buddhist teachings came

closest to speaking the truth, as far as religious doctrine went, in its presentation of a spiritual path (good in the beginning, middle and end). And, he said this in light of his statement that “anything we can say is a lie.” Yogi had a great appreciation for the teachings of the Buddha, and how these teachings were embodied in the wisdom and compassion of its Rinpoches (an honorable name given to Buddhist practitioners and monks greatly advanced in philosophical studies and meditation practice).

In the spring after Dr. Wolff passed away, B. Alan Wallace (then a Buddhist monk) arrived at the ranch on his motorcycle, intending to meet the mystic master who lived on the mountain. I recognized Alan as the monk to whom I had once asked a question when on retreat in Barre, Massachusetts. I asked him that day if he would be interested in giving ten-day vipassana teaching retreats at the ranch. He was happy to do so, and so began the wonderful teaching retreats that Alan went on sharing at the Great Space Center for decades. Once again, I was cooking for a spiritual family of twenty-five or so. For a couple of decades, hundreds of seekers found their way through Dr. Wolff’s door to hear the Dharma. Alan also lived at the ranch for some time, and did a year’s meditation retreat there.

Since I was six, there has appeared to me to be an irreconcilable rift between kindness and honesty in the same moment. I remember wondering why people fought so much, when the world was so very much filled with magic. My work as a nurse revealed a world overwhelmed with endless suffering. And, the closer I looked, the more I saw how ignorance, conditioned habit, and unexamined beliefs only created more suffering. How, I wondered, can I be true and kind, and of benefit in any moment?

Dr. Wolff helped answer my question by simply being THAT—the indivisibility of wisdom, compassion and power to benefit suffering sentient

beings spontaneously. Indeed, Dr. Wolff was one who lived the virtue of always taking responsibility for his vision of the world, for his moment-to-moment experience, and for his moment-to-moment response. He was spacious enough, with keen wit and intelligence, to have a choice about the best course of action to take on a relative level.

Dr. Wolff turned the Dharma Wheel by turning the light of awareness in upon itself, in deep meditation and in deep interaction with suffering. Personally, Dr. Wolff brought me “IN.” Of his frequent visitors he said that “Whoever finds their way to this door finds it open,” and in fact, he opened the doors of perception for many who came through that door.

When we returned from one of our trips to Stanford in the fall of 1985, we each came down with a cold, and Yogi was admitted to our local hospital (Lone Pine Hospital, which is now closed) for respiratory complications. While he was in the hospital, I spent each night next to him, in a reclining chair. (I was never too far from him during the time that I was his attendant, and felt that we were connected in a very sweet and deep way).

During the day, Ellen, Dorene, Richard and community, old friends and students drove or flew to visit him. There was someone with him around the clock except the night of his passing just before midnight on October 3. I was on my way back to the hospital after having had dinner with some friends from Richard’s community, and did not arrive until a few minutes after he had ceased breathing. Earlier I had felt him calling, and although I kept saying that I had to leave, it was suggested that I stay longer; still, I was anxious to get to the hospital. When I arrived, he had just been pronounced. I placed the Tibetan blessed pills in his mouth, which had been given to me for the time of his passing by Khempo Karthar Rinpoche. I also called Rinpoche in New York to inform him of his passing. I stayed with Yogi, and within a few hours his body was brought up to the ranch.

Like a river rushing in, Yogi’s house was swiftly filled with students and friends who kept vigil. He was beautiful in his suit and tie and formal teaching gown. Richard read to him from the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Within the next few days, family and students arrived from afar. Yogi continued to bless our space with his presence. We sang, and meditated, and ate together, and remembered the times when he had blessed us with his presence.

It was a beautiful sharing of love in every sense of the word. After three days—just before his body (which still smelled like flowers) was taken away—a great wind came up and whirled throughout the house. The wind continued for a few more minutes and then subsided, and all was perfectly still again as Dr. Wolff’s body was taken away and later cremated.

The director of nurses at the hospital offered me a job during the time that Dr. Wolff was in the hospital, so I continued to live on the ranch and work in Lone Pine after Dr. Wolff passed away. Visitors continued to come, some not knowing of his passing. We continued to have retreats at the ranch and annual conventions. I later married and moved sixty miles north and eight miles west of Bishop to an altitude of 6000 feet (the same altitude as the ranch), where we built a lovely house.

For the next thirty years, I explored the beautiful mountains and the back country, and became a passionate hiker. I’m currently living on the ocean, immersed in the sound of waves and sea gulls, in the little village of Trinidad, amidst the redwoods that Dr. Wolff loved so much. I see and feel him everywhere in the stillness of the great old-growth forests, where I hike and remember the lines of a 1931 poem by Joseph B. Strauss titled “The Redwoods,” a poem that Dr. Wolff would often recite:

To be like these, straight, true and fine,
to make our world like theirs, a shrine;
Sink down, Oh, traveler, on your knees,
God stands before you in these trees.

In another year, when I retire from my current work as case manager for client medical care at home, I will return to the magnificent Sierras once again, and take in the views of the snowcapped mountains, or as Yogi would say, the mountains wearing their “Sunday Come to Meeting Clothes.” Living on the ocean is very different from living in the great silence of the high desert, at the foot of 14,000 foot mountains. They are both wild places of beauty and vastness.

I lived on the ranch for a total of seven years. Since first driving beneath a deeply vast cobalt blue sky through the giant boulder terrain of an otherworldly moonscape to Granite View Drive, the three-mile dirt road that headed straight up the mountain to Dr. Wolff’s home, the Eastern Sierras became—and still remain—my favorite place on earth. It’s where I was taken home to live with the Great Grandfather of the Universe.

A Quote from Franklin Merrell-Wolff

The following quote is from chapter 7 of volume 2 of *The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object*, which is titled “Introceptualism”:

But even though we knew the last word which could be uttered with respect to method, we would then be placed in control of only one side of the problem. The other part of the arousing process is autonomous or spontaneous and is thus something which no man can command by his consciously willed efforts alone. To use a figure in the Oriental spirit, the individual through his faithful employment of method merely prepares a cup which is filled when something other, and quite beyond his control, acts on its own initiative. . . . So the conscious employment of method is neither an absolute essential nor does it provide a positive assurance of success within a prescribed time. But the consensus of Oriental experience abundantly confirms the view that the application of

appropriate method vastly increases the probability of success, so that work in this direction is well justified.

Back in the days when I was a university student this problem came to my attention and so largely challenged my interest that it ultimately came to occupy a central place. I finally proved that the discovery and use of the appropriate method could eventuate in a successful outcome, though success was not attained until after more than twenty years. And, yet, today though I am aware of the office of method and the meaning of what it can achieve, I still find it impossible to define the crucial step. In the end everything hung upon a subtle psychological adjustment that is truly inexpressible, since the very act of expression gives it a false appearance of an objective character which is not at all true to the real meaning. I found that the key consisted in attaining a moment within which there is a thorough going detachment from the object and from the activist attitude of ordinary consciousness. The simplicity of this statement hides its real difficulty for there is implied an uprooting of very deep seated habits. There is a sense in which we may say that thoroughgoing breaking of the dependence upon the object and of the activist attitude is like a conscious dying, and long established psychological habits tenaciously resist this. It may take a lot of work to attain the critical state.

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