
From Consciousness to Being Present

An Interview with Bill Shurtleff, Part 3

Julia Ferré

When did you first meet Herman and Cornellia Aihara?

The first time I met Herman was when Suzuki Roshi invited him to Tassajara. It was during the cold half of the year, and there was a big fire going in the wood stove. Herman talked about the importance of food and diet, and he said many of the same kind of things we were practicing at Tassajara. Herman liked the foods out of our gardens and liked that we made miso. The main thing that I remember was that Herman was sincere, kind-hearted, and humble. Suzuki Roshi thanked him for coming and working selflessly to teach people. Suzuki Roshi really valued selflessness in what you do in life—doing your work for others rather than for yourself—and the sincerity and humility with which you do it. Those are the hard things to get in life, and Herman had done that, one way or another. I was impressed with Herman and his simplicity.

My second encounter was in Oroville. Aikiko and I were driving around the country on our second American trip—the summer we spent at the University of Illinois and gave a course on soy processing—and we came across the northern route which takes you into Lake Tahoe. It was 5 pm and we realized we were too far



BILL SHURTLEFF

from home to drive that night. So we decided to take a chance to see if we could meet Herman and Cornellia and wondered if they were the kind of people who wouldn't mind if we just dropped in. We got there and knocked on the door, and I said, "Hello, Herman, I have read your books." He invited us in, and Cornellia asked us immediately if we had had dinner. I can still remember Cornellia in her kitchen with her big range. She made a nice dinner for us.

Herman asked if he could see

the slide show we were presenting to people. It was about tempeh, and Cornellia said, "I have always wanted to know more about tempeh. Can you show me how to make tempeh?" We showed them all the slides and had a very nice evening. They offered us a place to stay, which was across the street, and there we met Jan Herhold. I had never heard of Jan Herhold, but she knew us. "You are the people who wrote *The Book of Tofu* and *The Book of Tempeh*. Is there anything I can do to help you? I'm really good at setting type."

Now, I had just finished writing a book, and at that time, had never published our own books. So I thought we could have the *Miso Production* book typeset. So, I said that I would be willing to pay for the typesetting for the miso production book. She said I didn't have to pay her, but I wanted to do it anyway. She asked if I had the text along, and I did! This was an interesting coincidence, actually a string of coincidences. It was too late to make it home, we were able to find Herman's place, and we stayed over and met Jan Herhold. One step led to another, and look what it did to me. Every step was an accident.

The universe knows what it is doing. It is running the show. All it is looking for is people who are willing

to do this. Jan did a completely selfless gesture to us, and that little selfless gesture has blossomed into what you see on Google Books. Without Jan that may never have happened, and we may never have gone down the road of publishing our own books. It is pretty amazing. I also think if I were to sit here and cross examine you, you would analyze the origins of your life and you would find pretty much the same kind of thing.

I'll tell you another story, about how Erewhon got in the business beyond a little retail store. Bruce MacDonald was in Texas, and there were some guys running an illegal import business, and they got caught. Their front was unprocessed Mexican sesame oil. Bruce was there by accident. They said, "We have all this sesame oil, it is grown in Mexico, and you can have the whole thing on 10 cents a bottle." By that time, Bruce was an experienced businessman. He put the whole thing in the back of his truck, took it up north, put it into Erewhon bottles, and distributed it. This Mexican oil was Erewhon's first product. Erewhon got the names of little retail stores in New York City and around the East Coast and sold it. Then, they wondered if they could do the same with brown rice. They found a guy in California growing brown rice, and again, one thing led to another. There was a turning point—the whole matter looks like an accident. Who knows how that stuff works? It is beyond the ability of any of us to understand it.

Alfred Einstein had a famous saying about that. He suggested imagining two snails in front of a computer and what they would say about it. They would say, "I wonder what that is." Einstein said, "That is the way I feel when I look out on this majestic universe that I have tried to understand. I feel like those two little snails on the floor, and this is the thing—that is really all you can say." There was a point in Einstein's life where he had a profound mystical experience that left him on the floor for 2 or 3 days.

Nobody understood why the planet Mercury appeared to go backwards for a certain period of time. Einstein's theory of relativity said that the light coming from Mercury and the time it takes to get here explains the length of time that Mercury was going backwards. Einstein's equation predicted what the time would be. In this realization, Einstein's mind stopped. It was like he touched the hem of the robe of the universe.

Einstein was always opposed to organized religion, and yet was a deeply religious person himself, in the sense of that sort of mystical experience with respect to the universe. He didn't like organized religion and the stuff that it did.

"Why did Ohsawa come to the West? We completely missed it. Instead of seeing what he was trying to point us to, we ended up seeing food."

Religion is looking at the finger rather than what the finger is pointing at, and missing the mystery of it all.

Ohsawa is a beautiful example of that. Why did Ohsawa come to the West? We completely missed it. Instead of seeing what he was trying to point us to, we ended up seeing food. Maybe that is what we needed to see; it wasn't too long before other people came who helped people focus on the non-dual things. Ohsawa first came in 1959; others came during the 1970s. A lot happened during that period—namely the 1960s—and many people saw some things they had never seen before. So in a sense you can say that George Ohsawa was a harbinger of things to come.

I have a question that you touched on before, what do you think is the meaning of life?

Joseph Campbell has the best answer to that question. Joseph Campbell is the person who showed America that mythology is not irrelevant to life. Mythology is the message that our ancestors are trying to hand down from generation to generation. Once you learn how to decode and understand the myths, they contain the essential message. Myths carry the most important things from that generation. Joseph Campbell spent his whole life studying and teaching mythology, and he was asked this question. He said, "I don't think people are interested in the meaning of life, and furthermore, I don't think life has any meaning. What is the meaning of a butterfly? What is the meaning of the moon? What is the meaning of the cosmos? You are asking the wrong question," he says.

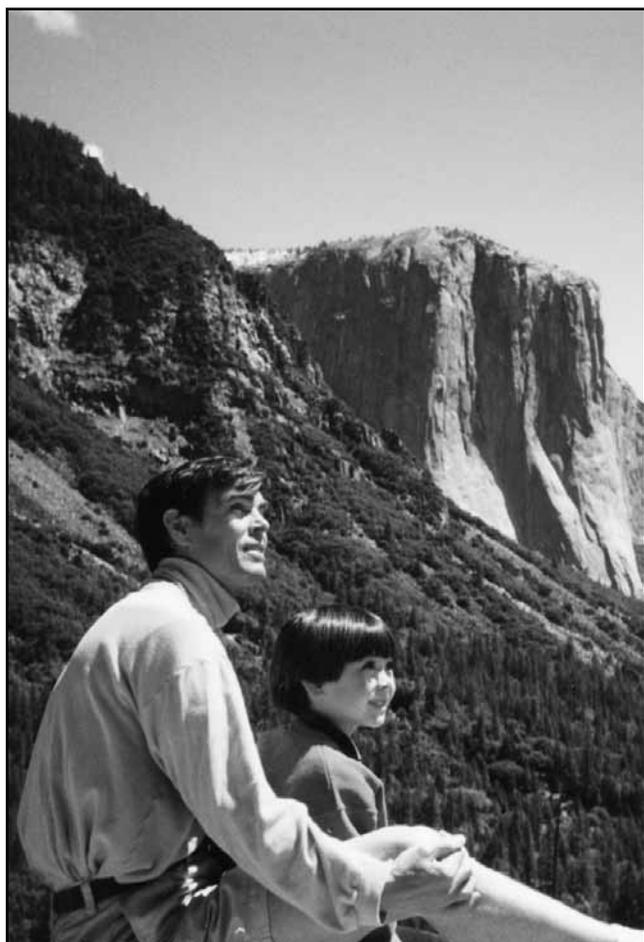
What is the right question?

He said, "What I think people are really interested in is the experience of being alive." When people experience being alive they never forget it. You might say that meditation is the practice of being alive all the time, or at least right now. I think that is a really good answer, although that is not my answer. The experience of being alive, let's leave it at that.

What is your experience with meditation?

At Tassajara, one of the first things we learn is sitting meditation—it is one form of meditation. But, meditation is not something that has different forms. Meditation is ongoing, although ongoing is the wrong word—Suzuki Roshi would never use the word ongoing. Meditation is basically within your life and outside of time. Meditation is stepping out of the man-made dimension of time.

Eckhart Tolle says suppose you went out into the wild world of eagles, bears, and salmon, before hu-



Bill and Joey in Yosemite 1994

man beings emerged, and you ask, “What time is it?” The bear and the salmon would wonder what you are talking about. Humans have invented time. Eckhart Tolle discusses well the subject of time and says there are fundamentally two types of time. The first is clock time which we need for practical purposes. For example, you say you are going to arrive between 10:30 and 11:00. Clock time makes the world go smoothly and helps us use our minds in a constructive way.

The second type of time is psychological time. Psychological time is when you imagine that time is running in your life—and is a problem. Many people’s lives are run by time, and many people live in a stressful time-pressured world, where time is the thing that is causing pressure. “I don’t have enough time to answer all

ing it in a way in which you are fully there with them. Same with your work and all the things you have to do.

When somebody says, “I practice meditation,” and talks about sitting on a cushion with their legs in a certain position and for a certain amount of time every day, that is great. That is the heart of meditation where you just get rid of everything else and just do that. But, you must be careful not to become proud of your practice. You can also do meditation during the rest of your life. That is the meaning of meditation that Suzuki Roshi tried to transmit to us at Tassajara, as far as I know. It is not a matter of meditating and then living the rest of your life in a distracted way. This is not a criticism in any way, but that would be like Christians going to church on Sunday and feeling they have fulfilled

my e-mails. I don’t have enough time for the kids and for my work. I don’t have enough time to finish this book.” You probably hear this all the time!

The way to live, the way to practice meditation is to be aware of time in your life, of how time is causing you suffering, and of how it serves no purpose at all. If you want to be efficient and focused on something without worrying, how you would get things done? It is really not a matter of time, but primarily a matter of quality. If you spend time with the kids, sometimes one big hug is worth an hour of watching television. You can have enough time for everyone if you are do-

their Christian duty for the week. Best to do both.

I like your definition that meditation is a practice of being alive.

I didn’t say that. What I meant to say is that meditation is a practice of being present; we are alive whether we are present or not. Being alive, living organisms are alive. Joseph Campbell was not talking about being alive; he was talking about the experience of being alive, which means the awareness of being alive. It is much different. A person can be alive and be out of it completely, or angry, or distracted, or any number of different things. The experience of being alive is like that special moment when you are standing in front of Yosemite falls and you feel the unforgettable experience of being alive.

I got this idea from Evan Root, who said, “I never use the word God. People think they know what you are talking about when you use that word, and they tune you out immediately.” Same with meditation. I like to use the words, “being present.” To a lot of people, meditation means sitting a certain way, so they tune you out as to what meditation is. But, being present, most people have never heard that before and so that is an open concept that they are willing to be open to—like whole-foods plant-based diet. Being present just means, being present. That is what meditation is to me—being present.

Thank you, Bill.

Bill Shurtleff is author of The Book of Tofu, The Book of Miso, and many other books. He is the co-founder (in 1976) and director of the Soyinfo Center, the world’s most complete collection of soy information, in Lafayette, California. Many entire digital books about soyfoods are now available free of charge on the Center’s website: www.soyinfo.com and on Google Books.