

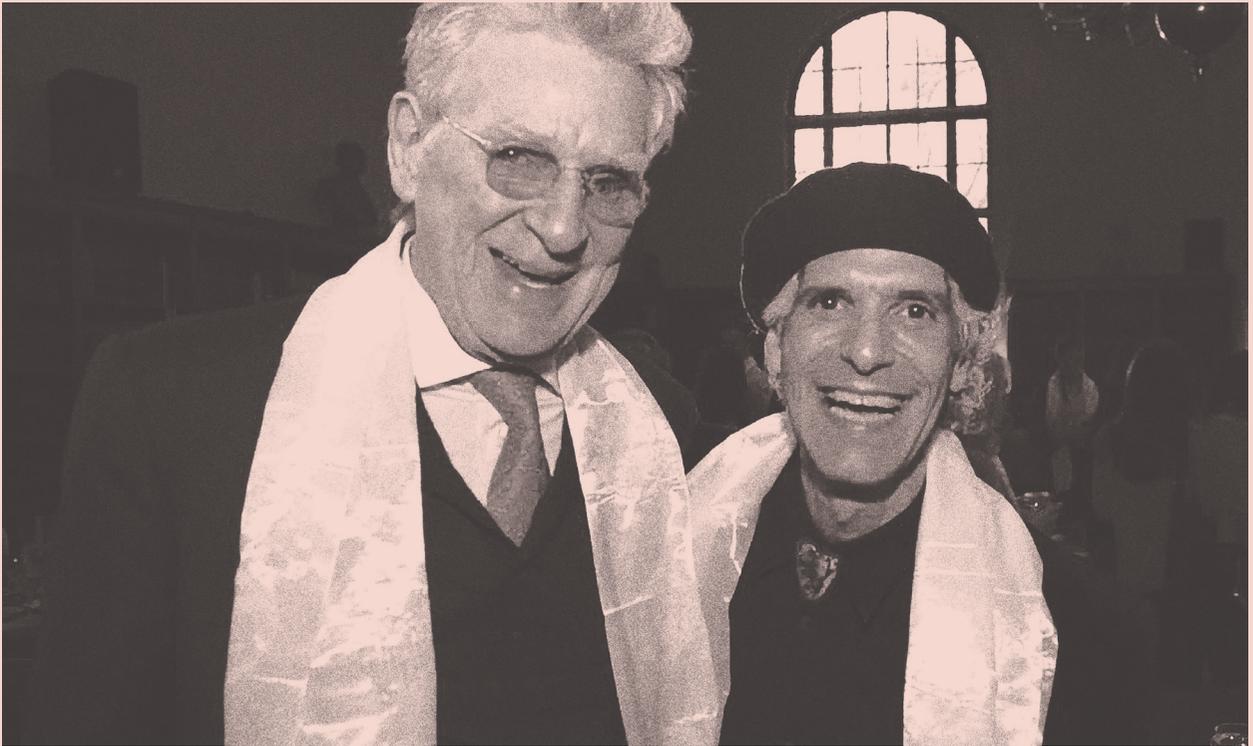
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FROM THE MIND-BODY  
THERAPY TRACK

# Why We All Must Be Scholar- Practitioners:

Towards a Global Renaissance of the  
Science and Practice of Human Awakening

Words by  
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Joe pictured with  
Robert Thurman.

Have you ever wondered why the trend in modern science, scholarship, and practical expertise seems inexorably headed in one direction—towards more and more narrow specialization? I have. Since I was a teen, for some odd reason, this trend has felt so wrong to me that, in hindsight, much of my adult life and work have been dedicated to answering that question and reversing the trend. Here’s some of what I’ve learned and done on my journey thus far to bring the pieces of our humanity back together again.

### **WHY WE INVENTED CULTURAL FRAGMENTATION AND HOW IT IS KILLING US**

The modern fragmentation of knowledge and expertise, along with the rationale driving it, have become so pervasive in our culture over the last five centuries that we naively believe they simply reflect how much more we know and can do than our forebears. While most of us in the West learned to trace the drive towards “precise” knowledge and skills to the Greeks and Romans, historically our fragmenting approach is not only a recent trend but also a radical departure from the consensus shared by the ancient learning traditions that gave rise to our global civilizations.

Socrates, Jesus, Zoroaster, Buddha, Mohammed and Confucius each founded traditions of human awakening and self-mastery which were not fragmenting but integral in their approach. The common aim of these ancient traditions was not formulaic knowledge and technical expertise as ends in themselves, but the cultivation of a specific way of being human, characterized by the integration of self-transcendent wisdom, mind/body mastery, and compassionate ethics.

That is why the countercultural urge to revive that ancient tradition in the fifteenth century, after it had been lost in the medieval West, is linked with the ideal of the “Renaissance human,” personified by integrative minds like Leonardo da Vinci, Marcello Ficino, and Giordano Bruno. The myth of history forged in the following centuries was that Europe singlehandedly revived the science and philosophy of the ancient Greeks, after centuries of repression and neglect by the Roman Catholic Church. What this received myth concealed is how radically our “modern” approach to learning—identified with the Enlightenment rise of physical science and technology—discarded and dismantled the humanistic consensus that had guided our major traditions of learning from the birth of civilization up to the Eurasian Renaissance.

In addition to hiding how radical a break we made with our ancestors, the West’s modern Enlightenment myth concealed the overwhelming majority of the global history of human philosophy, science and technology. Specifically, it covered up the inconvenient truth that the European Renaissance was borrowed from the Islamic Renaissance, which revived Greek science and philosophy centuries before the West. It also hid the still more humbling fact that Islamic scholars not only revived Greek traditions but updated and integrated them with the more advanced philosophical, scientific, and technological traditions of Persia, India, and China. And last but not least it obscured the fact that the so-called Dark Ages, which Enlightenment thinkers blamed on religion and claimed to correct, were actually localized to “the Far West;” that there were no similar interruptions to the progress of science, philosophy, and technology in the equally religious civilizations of Byzantium, Persia, India, and China.

This historical context helps set the stage for the radical departure which modern science and civilization made from the mainstream of Eurasian science and civilization. I trace that departure to

the decisive ways modern scientific minds like Galileo, Francis Bacon, and Descartes chose a “divide and conquer” approach to knowledge and expertise. Galileo’s division of subjective experience from objective reality set the West on a path to increasingly eliminating the human subject from the modern pursuit of knowledge and expertise. Descartes’ division of mind from body further cut off modern knowledge from lived experience, and split the new disembodied science and technology from affective experience, interoceptive input, and embodied action. Finally, Bacon’s strategy of gaining knowledge and power by breaking everything into its smallest parts and analyzing and controlling each part separately was effectively enshrined as the “empirical method” of modern science.

We can readily see how committing to these divisive axioms and methods fueled today’s explosion of fragmented information and siloed intellectual and practical disciplines. But what few people realize is just what was discarded and dismantled when Western civilization effectively crossed the Rubicon to modernity and burned the bridge back to the time honored approach to learning that aimed at human integration, personal integrity and inclusive community first, and objective knowledge and technological power second.

Of course, modern science and technology have given us such awesome blessings that we may all be forgiven for buying into Bacon’s “inquisition of truth.” Much of humanity has benefitted materially from the rise of modern science and technology, and a majority of us are now healthier, more interconnected, and better informed than even the most privileged elites throughout history. Nonetheless, the damage caused by Bacon’s divisive and invasive method of “hounding nature’s secrets out of her...without scruple,” mixed with Western colonialist myths of history like Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, has left our environment in dire peril, and more and more of the earth’s living species going extinct by the day. Still more insidious and destructive aspects of the modern approach to nature and life remain in the shadows. First among these is the fact that our own human natures and the nature of our human communities have been so utterly fractured, disrupted, and violated by the modern drive to knowledge and power at all costs that our sanity, health and well-being as individuals and as a civilization are in critical condition.

But that is not all. I believe the very worst damage scientific modernity has caused is the least visible. That is, it has undermined our faith in humanity and in the perfectibility of human society

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and civilization. In my view, the most harmful assumption Bacon and company made is assuming the protestant ethic that we human beings cannot save, heal, or even know ourselves. Bacon's metaphor of learning, as a bee hive in which no human sees the big picture or can be responsible for the whole, assumes this modern skepticism about our human potential for personal and social integration, a view which modern science in the meanwhile has effectively disproven.

#### **WHY I SOUGHT AN INTEGRAL APPROACH AND HOW I TRIED TO EMBODY IT**

As the son of immigrants from Sicily and Southern Italy, I grew up in a home more grounded in the culture of the ancient world than in the modern. That cultural distance from secular scientific modernity was reinforced by my early childhood in the old Europe of French speaking Switzerland. It was stretched even further by the integral nature of the interests that emerged in me as I came of age, no doubt stimulated by my family and my French Marianist high school. Those interests ranged across the humanities: Romantic poetry; the history of Western philosophy; Western mysticism, hermeticism and alchemy; Jungian analysis; Renaissance art; classical music and opera. But like the Renaissance

figures whose reproduced paintings I hung on my bedroom walls, I was also deeply drawn to the practical—singing, guitar, carpentry, furniture-making, and sailing—and to science, especially anatomy, neuroscience, and neurophysiology.

Growing up in suburban Long Island in the sixties and seventies, I was well aware that my sensibility and interests clashed with the ambient culture of my peers and society. I knew that intellectual disciplines were considered superior to practical ones; that the sciences were supposed to matter more than the arts; and that philosophy, religion, and poetry were dismissed as arcane relics of a bygone age. I was aware that I was supposed to choose one of the disciplines I was passionate about and “succeed” by focusing narrowly on it in school and eventually making it my “bread and butter.” Both my parents, in their drive to assimilate into the dominant White Protestant culture of the US, urged me to do just that.

But something in me leaned towards and longed for a sense of wholeness, integrity and community that felt antithetical to the world around me and the society that was supposed to be mine. In fact, while both my parents had mainstream roles—my dad as a psychiatrist and my mom a history teacher—I noticed that they both drew strength from other sources. My dad nourished himself by listening to Neapolitan music whenever he could and by ritually re-reading the worn copy of Thomas a Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ* he literally hid in his closet; my mom by reading the poetry of Dante and Emily Dickinson before bed, slipping quietly off to mass every Sunday, and spending much of her evenings and weekends gardening, as she had with her dad.

A final element of my home life that reinforced my inclination to resist my ambient culture was watching the diverging trajectories of my parents’ development. Since my mom and dad chose somewhat different strategies to pursue their common aim of assimilation, they unwittingly provided me with a sort of “double blind trial” of modern versus traditional approaches to living and learning. My dad chose a more radical assimilation strategy: becoming a physician and psychiatrist, committing more to modern scientific materialism, abandoning his religious education and practice as well as his practical skills—the accordion and carpentry—and relying instead on alcohol and food as stress-relievers. My mom chose a more hybrid strategy: getting higher education in history and sociology, becoming a high school social science teacher, but staying true to

her religious education and practice, including her spiritual values of non-violence and social justice, abstaining from alcohol and over-eating, and relying on reading, gardening, and prayer as stress-relievers.

While my dad's success as a psychiatrist brought more status and rewards than my mom's teaching, his gradual trajectory towards increasing stress, burnout, depression, and irritability, combined with trading healthy practices for self-defeating habits, stood in stark contrast to my mom's. While less outwardly successful, modern and Westernized, my mom's fidelity to the old world approach to learning—as a lifelong path of self-transcendence and compassionate community—combined with her marrying ongoing intellectual and practical endeavors, seemed to clearly contribute to her growing healthier and happier, aging and dying gracefully, with a strong sense of meaning and purpose. Although the findings of this real life trial could have been just anecdotal, I soon discovered that the divergence I witnessed in childhood was entirely consistent with the findings of what came to be called positive psychology.

Given my home experience, when the time came for college, I went intent on studying religion and philosophy, not pre-med. I promised myself that if I chose to follow my dad and become a therapist, my focus would be not on modern medicine and psychiatry but on the neuropsychology and healing power of religious experience and practice. I packed my guitar and a handful of books: Jung's *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*; T.S. Eliot's *Collected Poems*; Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*; Thomas Merton's *Contemplation in a World of Action*; Sabota's *Atlas of Neuroanatomy*. What I encountered when I began my studies not only confirmed but intensified my conviction that I was on the right track.

In my first college religion class I was introduced to the ancient humanistic traditions of India and Tibet by Robert Thurman, one of the first Westerners to become a Tibetan Buddhist monk. In the transformational depth psychology and contemplative neuroscience of Vajrayana Buddhism, I found a rich living tradition that exemplifies what I'd been longing for—the integration of science, psychology, spirituality, ethics and aesthetics to cultivate positive personal and social transformation. Gaining direct access to such a rigorous, complete, and meticulously preserved ancient tradition of human awakening felt like it saved me decades of scholarship trying to unearth long buried and forgotten traditions, as Jung had

Photo Right: Joe pictured with HH the Dalai Lama.



unearthed Western alchemy. Specifically, it offered me a time-tested paradigm and template for an integral human contemplative science and methodology for our day.

Of course, however profound and powerful, this tradition—developed at Nalanda University in ancient India and preserved in Tibet—would have to be cross-linked and updated with modern Western developments in physics, neuroscience, evolutionary psychology, pedagogy, social justice, and optimal health. So it was clear to me that, to actually use the Nalanda tradition as a template for an integral science and practice of transformation today would require a multi-disciplinary approach that could bring together the siloed scholarly and practical disciplines crucial to the work.

Unfortunately, what became obvious when it came time to graduate and I looked at the options available to further my studies was that the only way I could continue working seriously on the Nalanda tradition was to become a scholar who translates and explains Buddhist texts, without bringing them into rigorous dialogue with modern disciplines and without putting them into current practice. Another avenue, a career path in neuroscience, would allow me to study the mechanisms and benefits of meditation, but would restrict me to academic research, divorced from the lived experience of contemplative learning and practice. A final option, a future in medicine or psychology, would allow me to integrate science with practice, but would limit my work to conventional research and—at least when I graduated in the late 70's—seemed to preclude any rigorous integration of the healing power of mediation, spirituality, compassionate ethics or aesthetics.

I chose medicine intending to specialize in psychiatry, with a long term plan of becoming a psychotherapist. I saw in psychotherapy a rare middle way in modern culture, where a scientific view of mind and brain was applied to facilitate personal self-knowledge, growth and change. Given its unique place at the intersection of humanism and science, lived experience and behavior, psychotherapy seemed like the most fertile ground for transplanting the Nalanda tradition of contemplative science and practice into our day and age. At the same time I committed to pursuing an intensive study of Tibetan Buddhism outside of school, as a critical philosophy, transformational practice, and an altruistic way of life. By studying the Nalanda tradition as a paradigm of an integral science of contemplative life learning, I hoped I would be able to internalize and embody its wisdom and

arts well enough to use it as a living template for an updated integral science and practice of human awakening today.

In order to deepen my immersion in the tradition, I took a leave after my first year in medical school and went to India to meet and study with Thurman's Tibetan teachers, including HH the Dalai Lama, two of His Holiness' tutors—Ling Rinpoche and Serkhong Rinpoche—as well as Gelek Rinpoche, who would become my closest Tibetan mentor. This trip propelled me into intensive study and practice of the Unexcelled Yoga Tantras, the esoteric alchemical method of embodying wisdom and compassion that formed the backbone not only of Tibetan Buddhism but also of Tibetan medicine and psychiatry. When I returned to medical school, I continued my traditional studies by deepening my mediation practice and reading texts with Geshe Lobsang Jampal, a Tibetan monk-scholar I had met through Thurman who happened to be in New York City. Finally I devoted my senior year to working in Herbert Benson's mind/body medical lab at Harvard, where he was completing the first ever study of the neurobiology of Tibetan Tantric Yoga.

While continuing my parallel studies of Tibetan Tantric science and practice alongside my residency training in psychiatry, I was lucky enough to have several opportunities to study with HH the Dalai Lama in his first trips to the US. In one of these, the first Mind and Life conference organized by Thurman and Dan Goleman at Amherst College in '86, I was able to present to him on the potential for integrating Buddhist psychology with modern psychotherapy. That would be one of many such opportunities for me to dialogue with His Holiness over the years, but at that time, the very idea of integrating Buddhist insights and methods into psychotherapy and healthcare was still all but unheard of. It would be four more years until the publication of Jon Kabat-Zinn's best selling first book on mindfulness and ten years until Mark Epstein's first book on a Buddhist approach to psychotherapy. And I was well aware that the challenge of researching, explaining, and practically integrating the compassion training and the embodied methods at the heart of the Nalanda tradition would be orders of magnitude greater, requiring much more study, thought and care. So in the 1990's, when Thurman moved from Amherst College to Columbia University, I moved back to New York to pursue doctoral studies in Buddhist philosophy, religion and psychology. Fortuitously, by that time, the world had become much more open to the health benefits of mindfulness, as well as to

His Holiness and Tibetan culture, so I was asked by my supervisors at my day job in the psychiatry department to develop a Center for Meditation and Healing.

Finally, thirty years after setting out to apply the integral science and practice of the Nalanda tradition to modern life, I had my own laboratory to develop and test integral methods of training professionals and the general public in Tibet's distinctive fusion of mindful insight, wise compassion, and embodied flow. In the following years, I was able to continuously offer the Compassion-Based Resilience Training (CBRT) I developed at New York Hospital, and to participate in five successful pilot studies showing its efficacy. To more effectively train professionals from all walks of life in the approach I evolved, I founded an educational non-profit, Nalanda Institute for Contemplative Science, where I began offering professional education and training programs—CBRT Teacher Training, Contemplative Psychotherapy, and Boundless Leadership—with my students and colleagues. Thus far we have trained over a thousand professionals in the rigorous Nalanda tradition of contemplative science and practice, informed by the latest in neuropsychology and social justice.

### **WHY EVERYONE MUST BECOME A SCHOLAR-PRACTITIONER**

I'm not writing this piece from a sense that I'm in any way unique. I don't believe that personal and social integration are luxuries to be enjoyed by the few. They are absolute necessities for our survival, health and well-being as individuals, communities and as a planet going forward. All around us we see the unsustainable costs to both human and non-human life on earth of a divisive modern civilization that has fragmented knowledge and power into decontextualized big data and digital technology, and let them spiral out of control, divorced from the practical guidance systems of human conscience, mindful self-mastery, and compassionate community.

While much of humanity has benefitted materially from the rise of modern science and technology, and we are now healthier, more interconnected, and better informed than ever, our modern culture has clearly reached a tipping point. Without a truly civilizing science and practice that can empower each and every human being on the planet to have the self-knowledge, self-mastery and integrity to use their power and technology wisely and with care, our global civilization is heading over a cliff and will take much of the life on our planet down with us. Although most of us naturally

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feel overwhelmed, confused and powerless about what's wrong with our way of living, those peoples who have preserved the timeless integral knowledge and arts of human thriving are crystal clear about the problem, and are holding the solution out to us. It is both historic and critical that modern science has finally come full circle to realize the wisdom and benefits of humanity's timeless traditions of contemplative science and practice, as well as of sustainable ways of living preserved by indigenous peoples.

But that is just the beginning. Most modern educated individuals and mainstream institutions are still unwittingly embedded in the divisive ideas and methods the West developed centuries ago. We urgently need a whole new system of educating and training everyone in contemplative science and practice. One that can help us cultivate the human qualities of mindful insight, wise compassion, and embodied vision and flow that can empower us to get the big picture and the moment-to-moment skills to steer our lives towards sustainable happiness and inclusive community. That is why, as quickly as possible, we all must become scholar-practitioners of human integration and well-being, if we want to learn to thrive together in our increasingly interdependent, interconnected, and machine-driven age.

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