

Meditative Story Transcript – Henry Shukman (Soul Curriculum)

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HENRY SHUKMAN: Our table is crowded with pint glasses, sporting varying degrees of foam. The place is buzzing, but I feel completely out of sorts. I can't even bear to join the lively conversation with my classmates. In Ecuador, the lightness and freedom and love lingered for a few weeks. Then I journeyed back home, and instantly it was gone.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: Welcome to Soul Curriculum, an episode of Meditative Story in which, through conversations with our storytellers, we get the chance to explore the insights and the wisdom they shared. I'm your host Rohan.

In his Meditative Story, Henry Shukman is taught an important lesson with the help of an old family friend about how the act of deep listening can help guide us to a more extraordinary life. And it's that theme we'll explore further with Henry today. Listen deeply with us, and hopefully, there will be some inner wisdom unlocked for you too.

GUNATILLAKE: Hi, Henry. Great to have you on the show.

SHUKMAN: Hi, Rohan. Lovely to be with you.

GUNATILLAKE: Now, some of our listeners will already be familiar with you through your poetry and other written work, but you also run the Mountain Cloud Zen Center just outside of Santa Fe, in New Mexico. Isn't that right?

SHUKMAN: Correct. Yeah.

GUNATILLAKE: So obviously you are deep in the Zen tradition and you know, my own meditation background is in a slightly different tradition, but I've always thought the relation between meditation or contemplative practice and story has been really important and rich for as long as meditation has been around. I think back to the really early Buddhist cannon and the Buddhist tradition and how stories are used as a device for teaching.

As someone who doesn't know the Zen tradition particularly well, I was wondering whether you could say a little bit more about how you see the relationship between story and wisdom from your deep experience.

SHUKMAN: Oh my, what a wonderful question. For sure, story plays a huge role. So there's an idea that some scholars and, you know, thinkers have that if you analyze what makes a good story and what makes a story complete, the critical thing is that there's some central character, some key character, who faces an opportunity to change. And I feel that it's true for the story of spiritual development. That it's all about us finding that we can change and, in a sense, grow.

And one of the distinctive features of Zen is that it doesn't really like talking in the abstract about the nature of things, the nature of consciousness, different kinds of consciousness. It prefers using concrete things as examples. And even more than that, there's a way that Zen sees the world before us as our primary teaching actually, and the way we go through moment by moment through our lives, that's where the great teaching is always to be found.

So it's invented these amazing little stories known as koans, which are not really great stories often to listen to. They can seem quite puzzling and enigmatic, and some people think of them as riddles, but actually all of them are inviting us to go through a shift in perspective, so that they help us recognize our part in generating the story of our own life and potentially changing it.

GUNATILLAKE: Fantastic. Well we are so thankful that you shared your story with us, and we're excited to dig a little deeper into it here. In this first moment of your story, we are introduced to Flora who opens your eyes to a wisdom that lies outside your normal world. Let's listen.

SHUKMAN: While my parents clear the dishes, Flora leans over and looks at me. Her eyes are black and bright, penetrating, alive. In her subtle, musical accent, she asks, "What are your deepest loves in school, Henry?" There isn't much I love about my life, mostly because I suffer from the intense discomfort and shame of chronic eczema. I hate this skin disease. It leaves itchy red sores and gashes on my hands, legs, and back. I can't play soccer or any sport where I might touch someone. I can't wear short-sleeved shirts. But I immediately know the answer to Flora's question: My deepest love? "Poetry!" I say. Flora listens deeply. Her curiosity affirms my own interest.

Flora smiles and pulls out her well-used copy of the *I Ching Book of Changes*. It's an ancient Chinese text. She uses it to read my fortune. This would usually seem outlandish in the academic world in which I grow up. But Flora's presence makes my parents relax their rational stance. We delight in her predictions and laugh together. But looking past the twinkle in her eye, I know a part of her takes it seriously: the possibility that there may be wisdom in the world completely outside my rigid English schooling.

GUNATILLAKE: So Henry, I think it's quite clear in the story that Flora is a really pivotal figure in your life. I was just interested: how important do you think that the role of an advisor or wise mentor is at a young age?

SHUKMAN: Wow. Yeah. I mean, I feel that at any age it can be important. And if we are lucky to be exposed to some kind of broader wisdom, some kind of wisdom that has a wider perspective on life when we're young, it's a great blessing.

And I guess there's also the matter of whether we can receive it, whether we're able somehow to let it in. That's where an additional piece of wisdom that somebody might have is how to help somebody be open to it. In her case, she did it in a way that the

defenses I might have had dropped. She made it easier to open up to what she had to offer.

GUNATILLAKE: Yeah, exactly. And my sense of what Flora was really good at was knowing the right questions to ask you to open you up. And she did that by seeing you and being fully present with you in that moment.

SHUKMAN: Yeah. And certainly in my own story, I mean, you know, I went through quite a number of years of being very closed and distrustful and not open to guidance. And it was really my good fortune that I reconnected with Flora who reminded me it was possible to trust somebody. And I was very unhappy, and I recognized that somehow she was showing that there might be a door out of unhappiness, which I didn't previously recognize.

I just thought I've made some terrible mistakes, and there's no way out of this. And she really helped open me up to the, you know, maybe, there is a way of feeling better, doing better, functioning better and loving more.

GUNATILLAKE: That's really wonderful. And, you know, it can be such a rare thing to be with people in that kind of relationship — especially those who are able to model that sort of listening that Flora had with you. Henry, I'm curious, how do you think about the art of listening and cultivating that in yourself?

SHUKMAN: Yeah. I mean, it seems like it's sort of part of our whole relationship with time. And so setting up contexts where we are really encouraged to let go of the kind of harried rushing, it seems to me, is part of being able to have deeper, more meaningful interactions.

So I think in my own training in meditation, you know, there were times when meeting with a teacher who was just immediately doing that, they weren't thinking about what's next. They were only thinking about how expansive this moment can be and sensing, "Oh, I'm being offered the chance to kind of give myself time." And to have a conversation that doesn't have a digital clock secretly ticking in the corner.

So being invited or offering an invitation to that kind of time-free zone. That seems to me the critical factor for a deeper engagement with one another.

GUNATILLAKE: And with that in mind, Henry, how about we move onto our next moment from your story? You've taken some time off from school, and decide to travel the world. You stop on a small island near Ecuador and have an experience that feels like it's beyond time itself.

SHUKMAN: One evening I cobble together some Ecuadorian sucrés and hire a little boat to take me to an uninhabited island off the coast. Once the boat motors off, I'm all alone on this little 200 yard long stretch of sand with a few rocks. I look out to sea. The sun is probably three or four fingers off the horizon. Its rays cast a great path of light on the ocean surface. I'm just staring into this great highway of light.

Then something totally unexpected happens. Somehow in the midst of wondering about the light, suddenly I am no longer a separate consciousness registering what it is seeing. I am just part of this whole scene. I'm not in any way separate from it. Everything disappears, and there is just a boundless, scintillating, emptiness. And I think to myself, "This is so beautiful." And at this moment I recognize, I feel like I've come home to some ultimate kind of home.

GUNATILLAKE: Henry, what I love about this spiritual experience is that it happened in nature. And I've always been interested about the role nature plays in these sorts of moments. From your perspective, how important was being on that island for you in terms of catalyzing this experience?

SHUKMAN: Yeah, I think it was pretty important that there was something about timelessness. There were no markers really of even the century that I was in. You know, I was just a human on sand with sea and sunlight. And actually there was a boat anchored out there. And even that little boat could have come from almost any human century. You know, it allowed something to drop away.

GUNATILLAKE: I'm interested, also, in when you returned home, and you are no longer in that state. You put it really well, you said, "I've completely lost that baffling sense of beauty and aliveness on the deserted beach. How do I find that spaciousness in my daily life?" How do you deal with that sense of lack or loss after a super, super high peak experience like yours in Ecuador, or even just a nice moment of calm and you feel like you've lost something?

SHUKMAN: Yes. Well, I think recognition that the path is long is one thing that we are in a long process, and it's great to be in the process. Also, that you can't engineer it. And, the very wanting of something like it will hold it at bay, which puts us in a real bind if we're on a spiritual path where we hope something like this might happen. And, you know, it's worthy and good, and great to be on the path of a seeker, I think, you know. But we somehow have to do that without actually engaging in the hope and the wanting and the attempt to bring about an experience like that. Because they don't seem to come when wanted.

And I would say that the hope of spiritual training, if we use that terminology, is to reach a point where we don't mind the highs and lows. We're less captivated by the highs. We're less despondent with the lows. We're just, we are really finding true equanimity. And in the Zen path, it's kind of less of a big deal. You know, and somehow we can sense it all the time if we want, or we might forget about it for a while. It doesn't really matter so much.

GUNATILLAKE: And I also found it interesting, Henry, that your body seemed to offer clues in terms of your eczema clearing up when traveling and then returning when you were back home. Do you still get cues that steer you and give insight into which way to go?

SHUKMAN: Yeah, I definitely do, but I've been really lucky to be free of eczema for some decades now. But I'm more tuned-in to cues really around emotion in the body. And actually when I came back from Ecuador to my home, I had a minor breakdown really, and I probably should have reached out for help much sooner than I did. I was kind of limping along, really broken.

And my view of it now is that I came home, and I was very open. And the traumatic aspects of my childhood really showed themselves very clearly. And it would've been a great opportunity actually for healing, I think, had I been in a state to be aware of that and had I been a little wiser, but I think it is a feature of these experiences that they open us and therefore broaden our emotional range. And so there's a great healing potential, but it's also challenging.

GUNATILLAKE: Absolutely. Henry, for our final scene from your Meditative Story, we'll revisit the moment when you reconnect with Flora after some years and bond over the spiritual experience you had on the beach. Let's listen.

SHUKMAN: Flora's hair is gray now, but her eyes, wide awake, still take me in with delight and keen interest. She still wants to know how I am, what I love. She wants to go deep.

"And why are you doing all this studying of Homer?" she asks. "Why do you think you're not happy? What do you really want?"

I'm honest with her about my academic struggles. My eczema. The shame I feel about being depressed. Why can't I be more sociable? More gregarious? Flora hears my yearnings. She pays deep attention to me. Suddenly she asks: "Have you ever experienced life in a really different way?" And immediately the beach in Ecuador comes to mind. I tell her how time stopped, and I became one with everything and filled by a sense of infinite happiness. "Ah!" She says it in a way that illuminates the whole room. She understands exactly what I'm saying.

And in this moment, I feel absolutely galvanized. Whatever that strange encounter was on the beach, it wasn't just random. It was a recognizable human experience. In her way, Flora helps me realize that finding awe and paying attention and feeling washed by love can even become a compass heading in life.

GUNATILLAKE: Now Henry, Flora's response to your experience unlocks more understanding and taking the time to see and being seen is, again, super integral to that. And it makes me think, how can we cultivate the ability to hear and see one another amidst all the busyness and movement of life?

SHUKMAN: Oh man. It's...

GUNATILLAKE: It's just a small question.

SHUKMAN: I mean, honestly, you know, the first thing that comes to my mind when you ask it is to just put down the phone. Because as long as the phone's within reach, you'll know it's there. And your own mind will pull you to it. You know, what we need is micro gaps, micro openings.

So having a way of sort of enforcing micro gaps in the flow of the day, like it could be as simple as every time you sit down just don't do anything for three breaths, or every time you're about to get up, pause, take one, slow conscious breath before you get up. You can build in little micro hits of attentiveness, but also longer ones.

Even if it's just 30 minutes a day, maybe you light a candle, close the door, sit down, and just kind of know that you are actually giving yourself time. You're really giving yourself your life in a way.

GUNATILLAKE: And one other thing that struck me was that you and Flora are very different ages. Do you think friendships across generations are an important way to get access to different kinds of stories and different kinds of wisdom?

SHUKMAN: Yeah, I do think it's really important and really healthy. It's a way of broadening our environment, our social environment that would've been so normal in any human age until now, perhaps. And it's one thing that actually I value about being part of a meditative community is that it does span, you know, multiple generations.

And I'm not the oldest, and I'm definitely not at all the youngest as well. So it's nice to be surrounded by that age range that's intentionally gathering around, you know, a project of greater wellbeing for all.

GUNATILLAKE: Yeah. Lovely. And to close off, you know, you use this term about your experience in Ecuador about it being a compass point for your life, and I'm interested in any advice or reflections you might share on how all of us might steer ourselves towards it whilst we're off course or drifting in a different direction.

SHUKMAN: I suppose the biggest thing would be trusting it. You know, that's something that Flora really helped me with critically because her recognition of it, being seen by her, having that experience recognized by another really helped me trust it.

We need to trust ourselves and what our own intuitions are about our sort of deepest purpose. And we should feel encouraged to explore that if we want to, and then find affirmation wherever we can. And I mean, today, it's so great that there's books on this, there's podcasts on this, there's apps that address it.

And, you know, back in the mid 80s when I was exploring this territory or wishing, it was more rarefied. It's so healthy that it's not like that anymore. There's more discourse about these kinds of possibilities of human wellbeing.

GUNATILLAKE: Lovely, Henry. That's a beautiful and fitting way to end our conversation today. Thank you for the opportunity to go deeper into your story together.

SHUKMAN: I'm really honored and humbled and grateful. Thank you so much, Rohan. Really nice to get this time with you.

GUNATILLAKE: When I was younger I remember reading a book called *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, by Joseph Campbell. It came out years ago, and if you've not read it, you'll certainly know some stories influenced by it — *Star Wars*, *Hunger Games*, *The Lion King*.

In the hero's journey pattern as Campbell outlines it, someone leaves their familiar surroundings on a call to adventure, they meet wise — often magical — advisors on their way and through hard work achieve a great victory, afterwards returning to share the benefits of what they've obtained with others. Sounds familiar at all?

What most made the idea of Hero's Journey idea come to mind when I listened to Henry and his story was that Flora is the ultimate wise advisor. Full of mystery and wisdom, she validates Henry's mystical experience and perhaps ultimately sends him on his way to where he is now, heading up a much loved Zen center.

It made me reflect on the Floras in my own history, and how I might find one today, and what new adventures they might propel me onto.

So how about we make a deal, and be open to meeting our next Flora. You in? Good.

Best of luck, and see you soon.

GUNATILLAKE: That's all for today's episode. I hope you enjoyed listening. We'd love for you to share your thoughts about what you've heard. You can find us on all your social media platforms via our handle @MeditativeStory. Or you can email us at Hello@MeditativeStory.com.

Thank you so much.