

Integral Leadership Review

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Notes from the Field

Radiant Mind One Day Workshop with Peter Fenner at the Integral Loft in Seattle

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Susan Cannon



On a gloriously sunny Sunday morning in downtown Seattle, a group of 30 men and women gathered for the day at Kore Leadership's cozy brick and beam Integral Loft in the historic Pioneer Square district. Their purpose—do nothing. To want nothing and know nothing other than what was happening, to be complete while sitting in an armless stacking chair for the better part of a perfect summer day. Peter Fenner, nondual teacher and former Buddhist monk, would be facilitating the group in a one day workshop of his particular interactive process for awakening into unconditioned awareness, and living in what he calls Radiant Mind.

As described at www.radiantmind.net, *Radiant Mind arises when unconditioned awareness radiates through the totality of our conditioned existence. When we live in radiant mind we experience ourselves as a unique human being, while at the same time resting in a unified expanse of centerless and boundless awareness. This state is called liberation, buddhanature, egolessness, pure presence, nondual wisdom, our natural condition, and effortless being.*

A postmonastic with a PhD in philosophical psychology of the Madhyamika school of Mahayana Buddhism, Peter has been offering his adaptation of Buddhist nondual wisdom in large part to mental health professionals, teachers, and counselors. Considered a pioneer in the field of nondual psychotherapy, his interactive workshop approach is built on a deep understanding of group dynamics.

The host of this Seattle workshop was Kore Leadership, in which I am a partner. Kore's primary offerings for the past decade have been women's integral leadership certificate programs. A signature of our work is individual transformation within a catalytic collective, which is consistent with Peter's approach. The world is hungry for more conscious, embodied leaders who can source their offer in the world with effortless effort. We are always scanning for practices and processes that can contribute to our own development as guides, and to the evolution of our work and community of practice.

Connecting with Peter's Work

I first connected with Peter's work in *Sacred Mirror: Nondual wisdom and psychotherapy*, which he co-authored. Not long after—late 2008—I completed my integral coaching certification with Integral Coaching Canada. To be certified, a coach candidate must engage in a structured integral development process and demonstrate growth. I was inspired to continue cultivating my own deep presence as a coach and teacher, and was on a lookout for an appropriate container that emphasized the spiritual line of development.

While randomly googling, I ran across a link to a 9-month Radiant Mind course which was being run in Canada, France and Germany that year (Peter is an Australian married to a French citizen, and was living in France). The curriculum design included elements that I've experienced as reliably transformative: an ongoing committed cohort, practices, quarterly in-person retreats, and phone coaching sessions with mentors. Although the drive to the meeting site in Canada was at least 6 hours, I had an intuitive sense that there was something here to continue to explore. However, my teaching schedule at Kore conflicted with the 2009 Radiant Mind retreat schedule, so the program wasn't an option.

I continued to follow the thread, and emailed Peter's organization, The Center for Timeless Wisdom, every so often to see if they'd landed on the 2010 schedule. One day I received an email for an introductory weekend being held in Portland, Oregon—a mere three hour drive. I figured it was an opportunity to kick the tires on this form of nondual teaching.

Suzanne Anderson, one of my Kore Leadership partners and creative sister, found that a friend of hers from Portland was attending and had even offered us a place to stay. We decided to go together and make a weekend of it, since the work had a relationship to cultivating what we call Radiant Presence, a primary outcome of our leadership programs.

During the weekend I was able to experience Peter's transmission and facilitation style, and indeed felt a resonance. It was one of the more consistent experiences I'd had of resting in the nondual for an extended period of time in an interactive group setting. I appreciated the sheer ordinariness of the experience. Just a simple hotel meeting room in Portland, a quiet, unassuming teacher who was both approachable and self-contained. I was struck by how naturally welcome I felt in the group, how coherent it was, and without any sense that they or the work were special in any way. Neither did I observe any need to adopt the traditions and baggage of another culture, though the work distills the essential wisdom from the Zen, Dzogchen, Mahamudra and Madhyamika traditions.

At the end of the weekend, Peter informed us that he had just found out he'd be moving from France to Seattle by the end of the year. That synchronicity seemed to signal that the thread was still worth following. Suzanne, who speaks fluent French, offered to assist Peter and his french-speaking wife Marie as they settled in Seattle, so the connection was made.

Morning Session at the Integral Loft

Peter sat relaxed and alert in an armchair at the front of the room, elevated slightly on a riser, rows of chairs curving gently before him. The one-day workshop had been limited to 30 in order to optimize the natural interaction and direct eye contact between he and the participants. It had sold out quickly, with a waiting list. Those in attendance mostly hailed from the extended integral community near Seattle—graduates of Kore's women's integral leadership programs, Pacific Integral's Generating Transformative Change programs, and members of Seattle Integral. A few were current or former students of Peter's. Another few were considering Radiant Mind or the Nondual Teacher and Psychotherapist training, both programs offered through The Center for Timeless Wisdom.

After a welcome to the space and an introduction of Peter, the session began with a brief centering, then an extended silence. No instructions were forthcoming. A slight tension began to arise in the room to fill the vacuum. Peter slowly, methodically swept his gaze from person to person, offering his very warm yet nonpersonal presence. The room settled slightly. Peter spoke a bit, soothing the group with a brief nugget about himself, the Radiant Mind process, and what to expect. Or more accurately, what not to expect. He advised us there was nothing to gain or lose, and nowhere to go. "The nondual is a different dimension," Peter began. "It is beyond pleasure or pain, attraction or aversion. And it's always here, available to you at

any moment, yet you can't get to it by striving. It is not a place. I simply help you to rest into it. You cannot *not* do it."

Consistent with the structureless, objectless, no-thing nature of the nondual, Peter offered virtually no structure or direction. There were no flipcharts, slides, name tags, bells, meditation cushions or the usual contextual clues for how to be. This resulted in a predictable unsettledness in a room filled with people used to a particular way of being in a workshop or a retreat.

In a nutshell, he explained, the intent of the Radiant Mind work is to eliminate the gap between what is actually happening in the moment, and one's expectations and interpretations of it. When we apply such constructions and project them into the past and future, we create the suffering, the gap. Peter was giving us a direct experience of it right out the gate.

Throughout the day he spoke mostly in paradoxes, koans, and pointing out instructions, using words that seemed meaningful and engaging in the moment, yet 30 seconds later seemed to evaporate without leaving an imprint on one's memory.

Peter's facilitation is fundamentally experiential and emergent, as he works with whatever arises in the moment in the group field. It is also informal and conversational, which differentiates the work from most traditional nondual teaching forms. When he's with a group, he is looking for the "maximum opportunity"- the greatest distance that he and that particular unique collective can journey together.

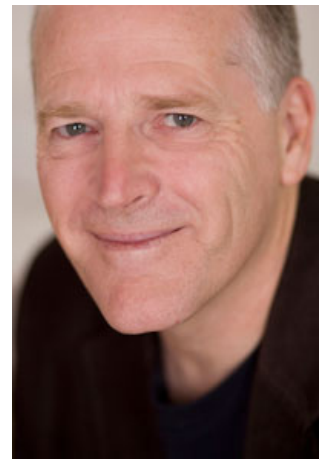
"What is *this*?" Peter asked. No one seemed to have an idea. After allowing some period of perplexed silence, he noted that we could conceivably point to no-thing, or to a gathering of people in Seattle. "The conditioned and the unconditioned level—it's all the same." With that invitation into no boundaries, the participants began to speak authentically into the space.

One participant expressed his frustration with not understanding. "You can't understand it," explained Peter. "I have no idea when *this* points to the unconditioned.

There is nothing to understand- there is nothing in it. It is a wide open space. Let yourself expand to feel consciousness. Connect to an awareness of infinite space. No boundary, no edge. It's right here but we can't know what it is. This is wisdom of not knowing, which is most profound because it is timeless. It lets us be at the end of the path that the great sages and seekers spent years and lifetimes upon. No more searching." He paused. "Isn't that wonderful? " Peter's slightly taciturn expression slowly spread into a smile. The countenance of the frustrated questioner changed. He relaxed, and his face brightened slightly.

Peter's presence, open and wordlessly approachable, invited a steady flow of questions and comments. One by one, responding to each individual's spontaneous expression, he worked the room. Through a series of direct questions he turned the individual back to themselves. Who is it that feels confused/anxious/happy? What is *this*—not what is arising at the perceptual, cognitive, sensate level, but what is happening *here*? Most participants would eventually land in some version of "I don't know." Peter acknowledged them as being right where they needed to be, either through a word, gesture or eye contact.

I observed that Peter initially validates each person's experience, creating ease and trust in the interaction. He then gently points them back to the nondual by indicating through his questions how they were actually creating a duality. My sense was that such an approach coaxes the ego into revealing itself, then finally confounds and exhaust the mind into letting go. It kept the questions coming, and the room a frothy mix of sudden insight and muddled confusion.



Peter Fenner

“There is more nothingness over by Peter!” a woman exclaimed. Peter suggested that her experience of a densification of nothingness wasn’t about him- the nothingness has always been available to everyone. “We can simply be sharing this,” he invited.

“Every moment takes care of itself” Peter assured the group. “We have the resources to live each moment as we’re doing it. Every moment of our lives brought us all here together in this room, to just this. Expectations and hope condition us—expecting something to happen.” After about 20 minutes, the group seemed to relax its collective expectation around what a workshop was supposed to be. As Peter continued to work the room, gentle spontaneous laughter often punctuated the solemnity. There were also extended periods of silence, some more comfortable than others.

I began to experience a palpable alignment in the room, the arising of a field. I let go of the sense of tracking time; my mind settled. A question would bubble up within me, and someone else would instantly speak it. The interactions took on a particular nuanced rhythm, and I could feel my state changing, a sensation of fine energetic substance filling the space, supporting my state of timeless relaxed alertness similar to what I experience when meditating with a consistent group over time. Peter noted that we were dancing in the paradoxicality of the nondual, which allows a presencing of coherentness in the group field and a natural break up of thinking. In this place there is no-self, nor is there not a self.

All nondual traditions work with paradoxes: it is because it isn’t--the nothing that includes everything—everything changes and nothing changes. Peter employed paradox liberally in his dialogue with participants, who in time seemed more able to simply be with it. Increasing the capacity for holding paradox, and for being comfortable with ambiguity and not knowing seem to be signature benefits of this work. In my own work in leadership development, I find these are necessary capacities for individuals and groups to deal skillfully with the chaotic pressure cooker of 21st century life.

“Resting in the nondual is giving yourself a profound break from pressure,” Peter remarked. “We are creating a pressureless environment. There is nothing to do, and nothing to understand.” A woman declared, “Being in the present without judgment or expectation would make me happy.” “This is not about being happy,” responded Peter. “That sets up a duality. We are opening up a totally different way of approaching life. The nondual dimension is not driven by thinking about polar opposites. It’s a whole new domain--happy/not happy, working/not working are not in the picture. It’s a different reality. That is the invitation.” The woman nodded slightly. The words now seemed to be landing more solidly in the room.

A man pragmatically inquired into how the work might actually change one’s life, if at all. In Peter’s experience, consistent access to the nondual percolates through one’s being over time. He estimated a time frame on the order of a year in a program or supported practice to build capacity. Then one could notice a qualitative difference in how they experience the world. This means that one’s life is less and less designed around avoiding discomfort or moving toward comfort. This is liberating.

The intention is to discover a person’s “natural state”, a way of being derived from Dzogchen. Some people are naturally way out in the world, while others are more at home to the self. “We’re not trying to be someone different than who we are,” offered Peter. “In the unconditioned state, we are able to be ourselves beyond pride or embarrassment. We’re not seduced by the need to be noticed, or conversely to be no one. Both produce a preoccupation and an agenda, two sides of a polarity. We eventually become uneventful to ourselves.”

A woman spoke about grappling with her sense of inadequacy. “It can feel small as we connect to the vastness of unconditioned awareness,” Peter acknowledged. He gazed with her for awhile, then slowly turned to sweep the room again, gazing from person to person. He did this from time to time throughout the day. Some

participants kept their eyes closed. Others met his gaze. I experienced a lightly held invitation into a natural transmission of his being.

One woman described her bodily sense of exhaustion as she settled into presence after years of being tilted forward on a spiritual path/goal of awakening. Peter acknowledged her suffering. “It’s exhausting for me even to think about having that intense forward focus, wanting to evolve. You may have concealed the bodily exhaustion while you were focused on the mission of becoming enlightened- and not connected with the cost of this goal orientation. To be here, there is nothing we have to do. Can I make it better? No. This is not a result of all the work I put in. We might even grieve for ourselves, what we put ourselves through in order to be here.”

“Is there a somatic corollary to just being here?” the woman asked. “Different somatic reactions can happen when we enter the nondual,” Peter explained. “From highly energized to profoundly exhausted. That’s great—the space allows it to happen. It’s a function of a person’s natural state—no judgment. It’s always changing so it doesn’t mean much anyway.”

“We still struggle in letting go—it can’t possibly be this easy!” he proffered. “We can’t afford to believe this because it upsets our modus operandi. Not knowing what to do is revolutionary—it is disorienting.”

Suddenly it was lunchtime. Where did the time go? I had been sitting practically motionless and mostly empty of thought, without needing anything to be otherwise, for the better part of the morning. The group spontaneously self-organized, happily clustering and pairing up to head out into the sunshine and sample the various nearby restaurants.

Afternoon Session

We gathered again at the Loft, sitting quietly with soft gaze, now primed to engage in the directionless, meaning-free milieu. Peter, however, changed course a bit, taking time to explain what was going on behind the curtain. Though the experience is organic and emergent, the method itself is quite precise.

As Peter described it, being with participants and not giving any direction stays true to the contentless transmission. It is revealed by not creating a direction or anything for the participant to think about. This allows the natural process of deconstruction to happen.

Radiant Mind is the union of the timeless, unconditioned dimension with the full embodied experience in this moment. What *this* is includes the conditioned and the unconditioned. If the facilitator asks “What is *this*?” and the individual responds without any recognition of the unmanifest, then skillful means on the facilitator’s part will distinguish *this* for the participant at the purely unconditioned level. This is accomplished through creative use of language and silence.

Here, language is used simply to see through constructions, not to provide meaning. “It’s an experiment in using language to do the opposite of its intention,” said Peter. “If what I’m saying sounds meaningful, then it’s not the nondual. That is pointing people in the direction of a structure.” (I can attest to the challenge of using words to write about this experience while staying true to what occurred).

“What we are doing here is not a nondual practice,” he noted. “The nondual just comes through in the way we are enacting it in this room.” Peter explained that there is nothing to apply—our minds are being invited into not thinking. On the way to that, the mind begins to function differently—it can paradoxically feel like it’s doing a lot of work. He suggested that it might be a last ditch attempt by the mind, which goes a little crazy trying to hold on to something before it lets go.

Peter explained that he identifies the participant's lenses through the words they share. Are they talking about something or nothing? For example, the word *understand* privileges the conditioned arena. If the participant says "my understanding is" or "I don't understand such and such" Peter might reveal the unconditioned by pointing out that there is nothing to know. A participant could be involved in either extreme- with emptiness or with the conditioned experience. "And if we make the unconditioned something we enjoy, then it is not the unconditioned," he reminded us.

Peter smiled. "I make no effort to do this." He gestured warmly toward the group. "I can go on forever with you, just like this". He added, "Seeing oneself being here forever dissolves the notion of looking for completion."

Peter went on to explain that we were participating in a form of nondual inquiry, sometimes called unfindability inquiry, that arises between the teacher and the participant as they presence contentless awareness. Traditionally this was done in private contemplation. Here we were doing it in an organic, conversational way. As with jnana yoga, objectless awareness must be revealed. In this case not privately and internally, but in a group and informally. Still it requires precision and skill.

Peter's work is not a meditative route to the nondual. He is accessing the nondual in the midst of being in an embodied relationship with the group. His formal programs explore how to be here now while in rich communication with others, something that he is cultivating in particular depth with psychotherapists, counselors, and others who hold space for the process of another.

The afternoon continued the unfindability inquiry between Peter and the participants, who by now were in a fairly easeful flow. The time was punctuated with a repeating question exercise in dyads, where one person asked the other "what is this?" (e.g. "this is an experience of a workshop in Seattle" or "this is in my experience"). The inquirer would then ask "where is that?" ("in the universe" or "in my mind"). After the respondent exhausted themselves of all speech, the inquirer asked again "where is that?" drawing forth the next deeper level of response until 10 minutes were up. It was another experience of the mind being pressed into letting go, all reference points deconstructed, dropping into pure awareness while in conversation with another.

The room gathered itself back into the theater seating, engaging in a final round of inquiry and dialogue. Peter offered praise for the coherence of the group field and our willingness to go straight into deep end and stay with it. He noted that this isn't always the case.

"It feels like we've come to the end", said Peter. "Have we?" The group nodded. Somehow it had become 5:00 and the afternoon was over. Another experience of time out of time. With heartfelt appreciations and namastes exchanged, the workshop drew to its close. We lingered for awhile, and then departed the space, carrying the benefits of the Radiant Mind experience with us into our weekend and beyond.

About the Author

Susan Cannon, PhD, is an integral evolutionary scholar-practitioner, teacher, Certified Integral Coach, and a partner in Kore Leadership, an “urban mystery school” designing and delivering deeply transformative university certificate programs in women’s integral leadership for over 10 years (currently through the LIOS Graduate College of Saybrook University). Her coach certification is through Integral Coaching Canada. Susan is also an adjunct professor with the Bainbridge Graduate Institute, which offers an MBA and certificate programs in sustainable business and entrepreneurship. After receiving a B.S. in Engineering Physics at Texas Tech University, and an M.S. in Chemical Engineering at Purdue University, Susan began her career as an interdisciplinary scientist and engineer in the semiconductor and defense fields.

Her turn toward the human and spiritual dimension of transformation, complexity, and evolutionary change began near the end of the Cold War, when she moved to Alaska and became involved in operating an historic charter flight service across the Bering Strait into the Soviet Far East. She lived half time in the Russian city of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, witnessing first hand the empire collapse and the rough years of early Russia. That experience led Susan to the California Institute of Integral Studies, where she received her PhD in Integral Studies with a concentration in Transformative Learning and Change in Human Systems. Her dissertation on The Positive Image of the Future of the US in the Year 2020 took her into the field of futures studies. Since then Susan has concentrated on two leverage points for influencing a life affirming evolutionary shift: conscious sustainable business and conscious embodied women leaders. As a senior executive in the demolition industry, she was instrumental in launching an award- winning recycling division. At Kore, she is deeply grateful to serve as a guide to initiate women into the wisdom, love, and power of integral leadership. Susan is a serious practitioner of hatha flow yoga, and a lover of art and The Beauty Way. She is happily living in downtown Seattle with her husband David and two cats, Rumi and Sammarah.

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