

An Interview with Pico Iyer, The Contemplative Traveler

BY PICO IYER | JULY 25, 2023

LION'S ROAR

Melvin McLeod: *You write about travel as a transformative spiritual experience, even a spiritual practice. How do we approach travel in order to benefit from it spiritually?*

Pico Iyer: I've always seen travel as a means of transformation. Part of its beauty involves not just leaving your home, but leaving far behind your habits and the self that you recognize at home. When you're in a foreign place, you can't define yourself in the ways you're used to, and therefore there's a chance to become a slightly different self.

I'm always seeking out those places that will overturn my assumptions, push me beyond what I think I know, and send me back a slightly different person from the one who left home. Of course, one doesn't have to physically travel to be liberated from oneself, but it's certainly a shortcut. If we're in the streets of Varanasi, we can't orient ourselves in familiar ways and we're freed from our illusions of knowledge and of control.

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The ways that travel humbles us are also the ways it releases us. When I'm at home, I'm living according to plan, trapped within my preconceptions. But put me down in Jerusalem, and reality is coming at me from all directions. Travel strips me of the comfortable notions I hide behind. It cuts through projections and illusions very quickly.

These days it's so easy to get the world secondhand, through small screens and in two dimensions, so there's a greater need than ever to encounter the world in all its confounding intensity.

For me, travel is a confrontation with reality. It's like when the Buddha left his gilded palace to confront head-on the realities of sickness, old age, and death. I left my comfortable job in New York City when I was twenty-nine, and I wasn't unaware of the fact that my first name is Siddhartha, that my parents named me after the Buddha. I felt I was living in something of a gilded palace, and I wanted to meet the world head-on.

t seems to me that a lot of the problems we have today—racism, xenophobia, toxic nationalism—are because so many people have never been exposed to different peoples, cultures, and communities beyond their immediate world. Basically, they've never travelled. Do you think travel can be an antidote to the pervasive fear and hostility toward the other we see around the world?

Fear, I think, is always based on ignorance. But it's a hard, vicious cycle to cut through. When I'm sitting at home and I think about Syria or Iran or North Korea, I focus on everything about them that's different from my world. But as soon as I get off the plane in Damascus or Tehran or Pyongyang, I'm confronted with the human realities I have in common with the people in those countries. It's only by keeping the world at a distance that we can preserve that illusion of difference. But as soon as we meet others in the flesh, we're reminded of all the things we share.

The world is always richer than our ideas of it. I called my new book *The Half Known Life* to remind myself that it's only when we're at home and in our heads that we assume we're so different from others. But when we're actually in the streets of the world, we see all the ways we're united with others that are beyond differences in custom or language.

The good news is that one doesn't have to travel far to encounter the world. Go to Toronto or New York or San Francisco, and all the cultures of the world are on your doorstep. The most important division we see now is between the city and the countryside. Our cities largely belong to a multicultural, global, twenty-first-century reality, while the countryside is often more caught up in the old black-and-white definitions of the nineteenth century.

In a typical classroom today, there are children from many places and traditions, and I think that's the signature quality of the twenty-first century. It's true that nationalism is on the rise around the world, but I think that's because it's on the run. It senses that the world is incrementally losing its old black-and-white definitions and borders and turning into a multicultural, multicolored swirl. Certainly populism is shouting very loudly at the moment, but largely because the world is accelerating in a very different direction.

Can we ever know life fully—through travel or education or contemplation—or is the half-known life inherently part of the human condition? We long to know life fully, but can we ever?

I love that question. My prejudice is that not knowing is a permanent condition—and it's a condition to embrace. Life doesn't offer answers, and our lives are defined by how readily we embrace the state of answerlessness. Our lives will be made by what we do with the myriad things we can't understand.

Don't-know mind and not knowing as a form of intimacy are basic principles in Buddhism, particularly in Zen. That makes all the sense in the world to me. I've found that everything essential that determines my life—falling in love, seeing my house burn down, suddenly having the world stopped by a pandemic, stepping out onto the terraces of the Potala Palace in Lhasa and feeling myself lifted to a state that I didn't know was inside me—all of these I can't begin to explain, and they would only be reduced if I tried to put them into words or ideas.

I feel that our permanent condition is akin to being in a little tent in the Himalayas late at night. We may have a lantern or a flashlight, but otherwise we're surrounded by the vast darkness of the nighttime sky, pinpricked with stars. We're surrounded by things far greater and larger than we are, and how ready we are to accept them will define how happy our lives will be.

The phrase "the half known life" comes from Herman Melville. The poignancy of Melville's life was that he was always trying to come to answers. What's the meaning of life? Does God exist? What's the relation of God to evil? I think

there's no answer to those, and he, by seeking answers to unanswerable questions, ended up walking sleepless through the streets of New York City, forgotten and unable to come to rest.

Unlike Melville, I feel that we need to come to rest in the awareness of everything that we can't hope to understand.

The subtitle of the book is “In Search of Paradise.” Many of the places you go in search of paradise, such as Jerusalem, Northern Ireland, and Iran, are places with deep religious traditions and ideals of paradise. But they're also places where religion itself is the source of great conflict. How do you experience the disconnect between their religious ideals of paradise and the reality of conflict?

For me, the disconnect is between the reality and the thoughts of reality I have, which will always be much smaller.

Jerusalem is a perfect example. It is the home of three great monotheisms, each beautiful in its own right. Yet the city of faith has been the city of religious conflict for more than two thousand years.

When I go there—and I'm not a Muslim or a Christian or a Jew—there's something in the air, something in those ancient stones, that moves me almost to tears. Every morning I walk through the predawn dark to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. There, I sit in this little ragged space where there's nothing but a rocky ledge and a glittering candle, and I feel transformed.

I feel that religious longing, the sense of something beyond us, is very real. But the theories and ideologies we create around that longing only cut us in two. What we do in the name of religion creates tribes of “us” versus “them,” “chosen” versus “unchosen” people. Whereas religious longing reflects the sense that there's something there that is surely universal to us all.

I think my greatest teacher is silence. Silence seems to dissolve me and open me up to something much wider. I think everybody who's been on a retreat, whether it's a Zen retreat or time at a contemplative Catholic monastery, partakes of the same silence and clarity.

As you said so perfectly, I go in the search for paradise to places of great conflict and difficulty. This book was written during the pandemic, when all of us were living with death breathing down our necks, and my sense was that the only paradise I could trust was one I would find right in the middle of the real world, and in the face of death.

Here in Japan, where I sit now, they often talk about living joyfully in a world of sorrows. Sorrows are nonnegotiable—they're a part of everybody's life. But the fact of sorrows doesn't have to preclude joy. And the fact of conflict in Jerusalem doesn't have to preclude real moments of beauty and surrender and wonder.

Elaine Pagels, the great scholar of religions, said that this book is just a Buddhist parable, and she's probably right. I suppose the book is my way of saying that we can't hope to live in a world without suffering or difficulty or challenge. But none of those things means the absence of hope, of possibility, and the chance for kindness.

The Dalai Lama came from an obscure, impoverished place on the far side of the mountains to suddenly become the global friend of us all. This is one of the things that really gives me hope in the world. Two of his great friends were Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Vaclav Havel. One day Havel was in prison, and weeks later he was president of his country; Archbishop Tutu had never had a chance to vote for sixty-two years, and then he became one of the leaders of a post-apartheid South Africa.

These are wonderful reminders not to be stuck in despair or depression. Because the world is as suffused with miracles as it is with unpleasant surprises.

You've written beautifully in Lion's Roar about your own spiritual practice, which draws on different contemplative traditions. What ties these contemplative practices together for you?

I think my greatest teacher is silence. Silence seems to dissolve me and open me up to something much wider. I think everybody who's been on a retreat, whether it's a Zen retreat or time at a contemplative Catholic monastery, partakes of the same silence and clarity.

This goes back to what we were saying about not needing Religion with a capital R—where I believe this, and everybody else believes something else—but trying to find that common core all the contemplative traditions share.

The contemplative tradition doesn't need to define itself as belonging to East or West or this school or that school. As somebody who doesn't have a Buddhist practice, I'm deeply grateful for what I have learned from His Holiness the Dalai Lama. As someone who's not Catholic, I've completed more than a hundred retreats with my Benedictine friends at the New Camaldoli Hermitage in Big Sur, California, where I benefit hugely from the monks' kindness and devotion.

I went to an Anglican school in England, and we had to go to chapel twice a day. We had to sing the Lord's Prayer in Latin on Sundays. So by the time I was twenty-one, I'd had enough crosses and hymns to last me a lifetime. Christianity was the one tradition I wasn't open to in the ways I might be open to the Zen tradition or Sufism.

So it has been a perfect blessing to end up spending so much of my life with these Christian monks, who are very grounded and decent people. That has also given me the chance to learn from Thomas Merton, Richard Rohr, Father Thomas Keating, and other great Christian contemplatives. I'm glad I've been

able to learn from these Christians, whom otherwise I think I would have written off.

In terms of my life, growing up between many cultures has been a challenge, because I haven't been rooted in a single one. But it's also been a blessing, because I've been able to learn from all of them. For example, I always try to spend autumn here in Japan, which is, for me, a deeply Buddhist country. My wife is Buddhist, and I met her in a Zen temple in Kyoto. I think the Buddhist tradition looks more closely at suffering, impermanence, and loss than any of the other traditions I'm acquainted with. So if you're thinking about how to live in the midst of death, how to love in the face of loss, the Buddhist tradition has something to offer, whether or not you have a Buddhist practice.

Then, I feel that the light and sense of affirmation and resurrection of the spirit in the springtime is very strong in the Christian tradition. So I tend to spend my springs in the Benedictine Hermitage in California, because the light and the flowering and the celebration that happens in the spring takes full-bodied form there.

So I'm very grateful that Buddhism can teach me about the end of life, and Christianity can teach me about the light within the end.

One of the greatest challenges facing the world is toxic religion. That's religion that is conflated with nationalism, racism, and forms of aggression and supremacy. It seems to me the best antidote to toxic religion is contemplative practice like yours, which is free from rigid, us-versus-them beliefs and emphasizes universal human experience. But how do we bring more people to the kind of contemplative practice you do when the hard certainties of toxic religion seem so appealing to people?

When I called my book *The Half Known Life*, it was a way of saying we don't need certainty and we don't need hard conclusions. But we probably do need spiritual counsel and wisdom to navigate a world that's always going to have shadow as well as light.

I think the medical example is a good one. None of us is going to be cured of life. All of us are mortal and no doctor is infallible. All a doctor can offer is her best prescription for the condition she has diagnosed.

I think we all need that kind of expertise in life, which is why we have turned to the great contemplative masters through the ages, why we go on retreat, why we look for teachers. Because we need counsel and we need wisdom, but we certainly don't need fixed or final truths.

Actually, I think the trend toward contemplative practice is developing very quickly. I think people are more and more exposed to traditions other than their birth tradition. We are aware of many more options than when I was growing up because there are many more teachers in our midst from every corner of the globe.

We take that for granted, but we're very lucky. When my parents were in college, fewer than two thousand Westerners in the whole of history had set foot in Tibet. Now the wisdom of Tibet is found in every section of the world. Growing up, my parents never imagined they could listen to a Vietnamese Buddhist teacher. Now we have all benefited from the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh. How lucky we are that people in every part of the world can meet these amazing bringers of wisdom.

That's why we're seeing this developing movement toward contemplative religion. I think the world is moving very quickly beyond borders, in the same way it's moving beyond fixed identities of every kind.

Your magazine is a perfect example of this. Forty years ago, if *Lion's Roar* had existed, it might not have been easy to find people who speak for contemplative practice. Now I'm sure there are more people than you have space for. I feel *Lion's Roar* has been chronicling not just the growth but maybe the explosion of this movement.

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