I was traveling with two friends over the weekend to and from our Master’s home in Wisconsin. The drive was long and my friend Juan was riding next to me as I drove the car. We talked about a plethora of topics, ranging from spiritual practice, Vedanta/Jnāna, dhyāna and music. We discussed Self, non-self, emptiness.

Since we are Taijiquan practitioners, we discussed our experiences during the practice of taiji or Tai chi (as it is popularly known). We both acknowledged the state of stillness that arises in course of the moving meditation, and how it is timeless, in the sense that there is no sense of time having elapsed at all when the stillness manifests. In course of the practice, unless the mind is very distracted, we end up in a state of stillness, and a sense of timelessness. As the practice winds down, it seems like hardly any time has elapsed, yet, the watch shows that an hour or so has passed.

A strange thing happened, unbeknownst to me about five or six years into my practice of Tai chi. I noticed that when I practiced, I was observing everything that was occurring. It was like a running commentary in my head. “Now I’m stepping to the left…now I’m raising my hands…now I’m breathing out…slowly…breathing in…slowly…”...

I found that strange, as I was told that the practice of tai chi was supposed to lead to “no mind”. However, I had a radically different understanding of what “no mind” meant. I thought, “no mind” meant no thoughts (and that was a rabbit hole I traversed for many years). To get back on point however, slowly I started to notice even the contents of my mind. All sorts of thoughts. Happy thoughts, dark thoughts, even some thoughts one might consider downright psychotic. I noticed that with time, more of the negativity seems to be surfacing.

It was a difficult time, as we all have a self-image we create and like to believe ourselves as upholding. And yet, the mind content was not pristine and pure like I’d like to believe. It took me a long time to figure out what was happening. And in the meanwhile I suffered through guilt, shame and even self-loathing as I fought to vanquish my wayward mind.

The reason I’m sharing this is not to make people afraid of tai chi or meditation. Rather, I am sharing this so people understand that this scenario is actually a great opportunity. All we need is the right knowledge (jnāna) and patience. I had the patience but the jnāna was yet to come. After the initial 3-4 years, I learnt to live with this. By this time, the “observing state” had spilled far beyond “tai chi time” into everything I did. I was constantly observing everything that was happening. It was almost like I was constantly watching movies. I’d even watch myself get angry at the spouse or kid, or get road rage (very rarely by then) or feel upset about something or feel elated about something else. There was a part of me that was constantly observing the goings on.
At that time, I didn’t realize what it was and was mystified at who or what was doing the observation. I still identified with the body and mind. Yet, there was something that was clearly distinct from both my body as well as mind, that was observing everything. In retrospect, it is evident that this witness was always free of the suffering the body and the mind was having to endure.

In any case, fast forward a few more years and I met my Master. During my first encounter with him, he initiated me, a sort of shaktipat. He touched my forehead with his index finger, asking me to inhale from the forehead to the elixir field below the navel (called the lower dan tien), three times.

As he disconnected his finger and I inhaled, I felt a pressure on my forehead that relieved a little as a cool flow traversed through my body into the lower dan tien (LDT). My vision started to swim a little and I felt a little light headed. I sat down for a couple of minutes and then drove home. That night I was unable to sleep due to a heavy pressure building up in my forehead (third eye). The next two days, I spent a lot of time meditating, which seemed to be the way to alleviate the pressure in my third eye. On the third day, I seemed to have permanently split into two states of awareness. One was completely at peace, blissful and joyful, and the other was my “normal” state, doing stuff that happens normally. I spent about fifteen days like this, spontaneously meditating.

The most telling was one evening when I was driving to the grocery store that is literally less than five miles from home. It took me almost an hour to reach the destination due to a traffic jam, but I didn’t have a sense of time really. I was just blissed out, grinning and smiling like an idiot amidst the chaos and anger that was flowing all around me.

I stayed like this, in a split state for almost eighteen months. In the meanwhile, my friend, who started down the advaita vedanta part, started discussing these things with me and as I tried to analyze and then explain what was happening to me, I felt, to my horror, the blissful state slowly dissipating. One day, in despair I asked my Master “Sifu… I’m losing the state I was put into after you initiated me… what do I do?”

Master responded laughingly “Two thing are happening. One is your body is getting used to the energy. Second, you were running on some “borrowed” energy from me and it’s also dissipating. But don’t worry.. just keep practicing and it’ll come back.”

Sure enough, it came back to me (because it had never left me). But the key thing that happened is that I began to correlate practically, the advaita vedantic jñāna with my tai chi practice. I was able to map what this “witness” state was…it was “Sākshi bhāva”. At the time when this had started to manifest, if I had a jñāna guru who would be able to explain to me what was happening, I might not have suffered so much. However, given that nothing in this universe happens without a good reason, I am certain that I was meant to live through
the suffering of witnessing the dark side of my mind, so I could truly understand why I am not the mind.

Many little realizations, deep cessation of mind (some call it samādhi or satori) happened along the way.

Another aspect of Tai chi practice that is very essential to try and see whether the insights and realizations (jñāna) that arise actually can be embodied in practice. This aspect is called Push Hands or Tui Shou. Push hands involves two people going through a set of free-form or pre-orchestrated sequences, with the intention of developing and honing their skills of releasing tension and listening. The releasing of tension is a continuation of the Tai chi form practice, wherein, one releases progressively deeper and deeper layers of tension stored both physically as well as mentally. This takes on an entirely different dimension as soon as there is another “person” involved, which activates all sorts of subconscious triggers.

With time and as one progresses higher in their practice, the awareness and energy expands far beyond the limitations of their own physical body and the duality of “Me” and “Other” starts to disappear. When one is clearly established in non dual awareness, there is only energy and awareness, and the “Other” is just a part of the continuum. Then, seemingly magical things start to happen. But they are only mysterious and magical from the perspective of the separate beings. For the tai chi practitioner, it is normal. This allows us to test the non dual insights in a realistic manner.