

**A personal reflection on 'Zen and the Brain' with James Austin at Frenchman's Cove, Jamaica**

**Zen and the Art of Snorkelling After Two Beers and a Barbecued Lobster  
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I probably wouldn't have gone to Frenchman's Cove if some friends had not invited me to see the Millennium in on a beach in St Lucia. Being an avid fan of multi-tasking, I immediately thought: why not sign up for Jamaica, and spend the month in between writing a book? So I spent January doing just that, and arrived at the seminar on 4th February disgracefully brown, in rude good health, and eager to study with JIM AUSTIN. When I first saw his book *Zen and the Brain* advertised I thought 'This is going to be right up my street', and, having noted the price, immediately ordered it for my university library. I took it home full of enthusiasm and good intentions, but when I sat down with it, I'm afraid it was just too big. I am intimidated by big books - I never got past the first 30 pages of Ken Wilber's monumental *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* either - so the opportunity to sit in the sunshine and get the Reader's Digest 'condensed version' from the author himself was too good to miss.

By the time the course proper started - most of us wisely turned up a couple of days early to get settled in and acclimatised - we were about forty. Early arrival is strongly recommended: Frenchman's Cove is so beautiful that it is hard to sit still and listen to a human voice when you have not yet got used to the tropical smells, the stunning views, and the sounds of strange birds and the sea. And a good company we were, ranging in age from teens (or 18 months, if you include Master George Lorimer, and why not?) to - well, let us say the well-matured. There was, I'm sorry to report, a Raucous Tendency that was inclined to congregate on the terrace of the increasingly infamous House Two after dark, and sing, dance and selflessly do their bit to support the Jamaican rum industry. Jim Austin told us at the beginning of the course that silence was to be our most important teacher - but the denizens of House Two were wont to skip that class, especially after dinner. A surprising number of these Owls did manage to stagger up to join the more virtuous Larks for meditation before breakfast, though - a fact that occasioned lengthy comment and analysis from the Secretary to the SMN Committee for Wild Birds (Jamaica Sub-Committee) --one P.B.C. FENWICK - who helpfully started each morning's class with an update on the latest sightings. (The 'Clift', for example, previously thought to be nocturnal, was to be seen at all hours of the day and night, and seemed to have mastered the art of doing without sleep altogether.)

The day's schedule was rather too demanding, I thought: Jim's class started as early as 10am, and continued right through till 12.30pm, allowing a scant three-quarters of an hour to get down to the beach and have a little swim before lunch. Chicken, fish and lobster were available, and often 'jerked' - a concept that one or two of us (CAROLINE ELEY) found rather hard to grasp until we realised that it simply meant 'spiced'. Then an all-too-short siesta on the sand, or a hurried snorkel, before dashing back to the main house for an hour's 'discussion' from 5-6pm. There were often outings to pack in too - trips to the mysterious Blue Lagoon, shopping in the local town of Port Antonio, a spot of gentle rafting. And then eating out in the evening in an interesting variety of nearby restaurants and hotels. Top marks, for me, went to Anna Banana, a small local restaurant where the lovely proprietor, Colin, would bring you fresh coconuts and fruit cocktails for free, and serve you the best fish

and chips in the world. (Harry Ramsden, eat your heart out.) Less successful were some of the grand, but rather sad, hotels where the decline in the tourist trade meant that we were often the only people there, and it sometimes felt as if they had taken the dust covers off just for us. But the period feel was rather poignant: it was quite a while since I had had Brown Windsor soup (and may well be some time before I have it again).

Jim Austin presented the course itself as part 'retreat', part series of lectures. He kindly did his best to 'be' zen, as well as to talk about it, dressing for the classes in a zen monk's work suit and leading us in a variety of meditations and the occasional song. But for the most part he worked his way through the book, interweaving the understandings and stories gained from many years as a student of Japanese zen with detailed information about the functions of different neurological micro-structures. Much of this information was fascinating, though I confess that a lot of it went past too fast for me to get a firm grasp on, and my sun-softened brain needed more opportunities for digestion and rumination than there was time for. In general, though, Jim's pioneering work has strengthened my conviction that the dialogue between 'science' and 'spirituality' is more fruitfully pursued through specific 'conversations' than through attempts at grand syntheses; and that the most fruitful of these conversations, at the moment, involve the biological rather than the physical sciences.

All in all, a wonderful experience - worth it for the magnificent setting and the lovely warm and playful camaraderie, as well as for Jim's erudition - even if the weather wasn't all we had hoped and the kettles were in short supply. A wealth of funny, happy and touching snapshot memories - HELEN CAMPBELL unselfconsciously using Jim's tome as a foot-stool; Elleke van Kraalingen's so-moving account of her extraordinary last year; Tina Jenkins singing 'Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend' at the cabaret on the last night... Zen seems to be saying that there is no 'I' - but somebody had a great time. Whoever it was is looking forward to being able to go back.

*Professor Guy Claxton is visiting professor of education in the University of Bristol. His most recent book is Hare Brain, Tortoise Mind. He will be leading the next seminar at Frenchman's Cove in November.*