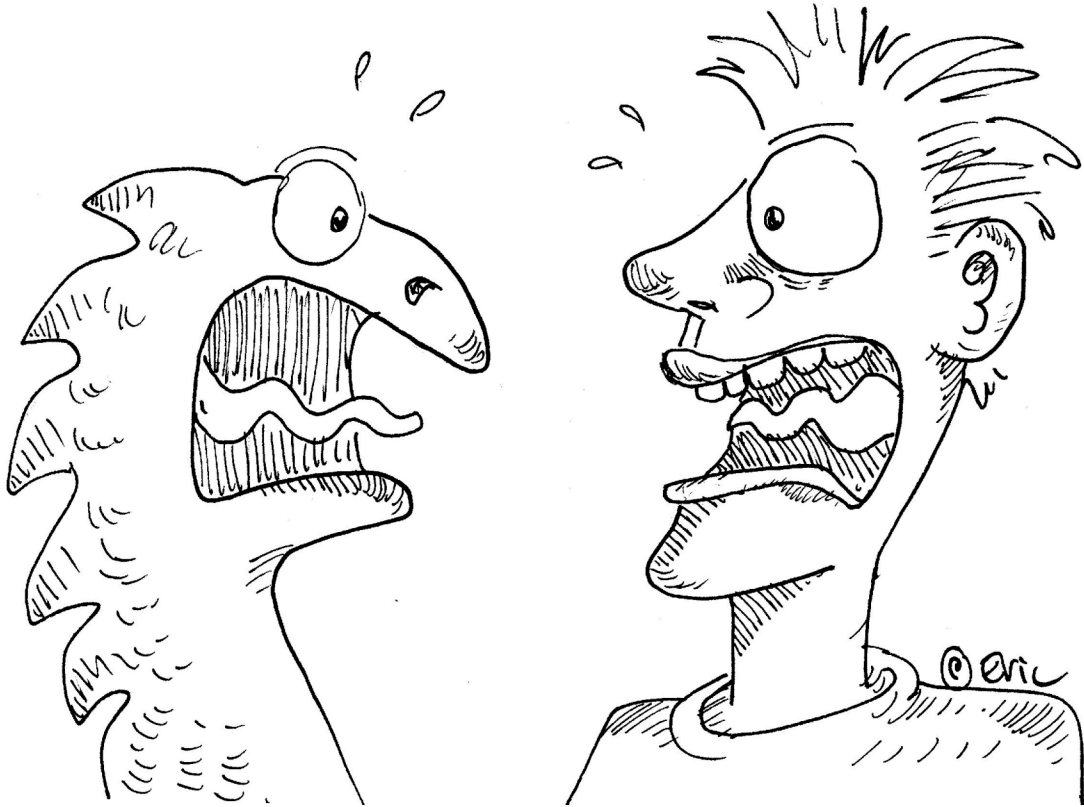


# **Lizards & Leaders**

## **How Meditation Accelerates Change**



by

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## **How do you spell f-e-e-d-b-a-c-k?**

Performance reviews, coaching, mentoring, leadership-360s? All these different ways you can look into the leadership mirror to see yourself. To understand your strengths and zero in on what you need to develop to be more effective.

It all sounds logical. Data. Feedback. Action planning and presto – effectiveness.

It just doesn't tend to work that way. And the more often you've gone through the process - the fewer surprises you find.

### **Little, if anything, seems to change.**

Your strengths are still your strengths. And you've still got the same weaknesses needing improvement.

Reading over your leadership-360 or going to a coaching session can call up the Yogi Berra line, "It's déjà vu all over again."

### **It's not that the data isn't accurate.**

And it's not like you haven't drawn up action plans, partnered with colleagues, and worked with a coach.

It's just that it's really hard to remember to use the new behaviors when you're in the middle of your day.

### **Things are moving quickly.**

Decisions need to be made and actions taken. You're busy and the thought "*Now's a good time to practice that leadership skill*" doesn't surface.

Even when you remember, taking that next step and act in a new way can seem impossible.

### **Or, more accurately – impossibly risky.**

So, what's at risk when you recognize that instead of following the well-worn path of your habitual behavior you could meet the situation in a new way?

### **It would seem like a good thing.**

Like a developmental . . . um . . . opportunity. A chance to take your leadership to the next level. (That's what all the gurus, coaches, and consultants try to tell you, anyway.)

But, in the moment, when the developmental opportunity strikes and the door to the next level opens, it's not so easy to step forward.

### **It feels risky.**

You're not sure what will happen when you try the new behavior. And to abandon your well-traveled road of competence in order to head off on to an untested path is threatening.

### **To move outside your well-honed circle of competence triggers a fear button deep in the ancient parts of your brain stem.**

Neuroscientist John MacLean pointed out in the 1950s that the human brain is more like three brains layered on top of each other. The deepest, most ancient of the three is known as the reptilian brain. That's where the fear button is buried.

When it's triggered, your inner lizard treats you to a 3D movie of what will happen if you cross the threshold of your known competence and venture into new behavioral territory.

Your inner lizard floods your mind and saturates your body with images, sounds, and emotions. (And this all happens in a nanosecond.)

### **You see yourself on the big screen.**

You're being laughed out of the organization, losing your job, your house, your reputation, the respect of your kids and your peers, as well as all your savings.

Jump-cut to wet cold winter day and a slow panning shot of a city street – where you're pushing a shopping cart into the freezing wind.

It's no wonder, that as you glimpse the opportunity for taking your leadership skills to a new level, you recoil at the thought.

**Your history of success, your sense of competence, your world, your identity are on the line.**

And your inner lizard ain't about to let you cross that line. Even if you've read the latest research on neuro-plasticity and how talent is overrated.

When you're about to cross the threshold from competence into the unknown - the research doesn't matter.

**It doesn't matter that you've gotten feedback.**

It doesn't matter that you've analyzed your data and identified the leadership competencies you want to develop. Analysis and action planning are perfectly reasonable. And perfectly safe.

They will do you no good when you're about to leave the confines of your familiar patterns of thought and action. When your sense of self, your world, and your competence are on the line, you need to deal with your inner lizard.

**When the inner lizard screams, your action plan is toast.**

It takes stronger *juju* than an action plan to tame the inner lizard and to embody a new way of leading. Learning about and cognitively appreciating new perspectives and behaviors – through reading leadership books or attending programs - are necessary first steps.

But, it's critical not to equate your ability to talk about leadership with the capacity to embody new perspectives and fluently enact new behaviors in your day-to-day world. To convert leadership concepts into your way of being in the world requires something more than understanding – and even appreciating – the data.

## **Mastering a new level of leadership calls for a new self.**

What do I mean by the term self?

Start by thinking of every leadership behavior as a software application. There's an "application" called strategic thinking. If you can run that application, you're a skilled strategic thinker.

There's a whole suite of leadership applications (behaviors) including decision-making, emotional intelligence, coaching, listening, etc. The list goes on.

You can only run – or enact – a leadership application if it can "run" on your operating system.

### **Think of your self as the operating system.**

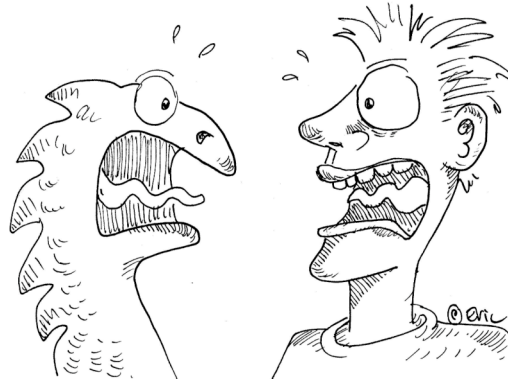
As you've developed from childhood, to adolescence, to adulthood – your sense of self changed. It's as though at each stage of life your self-operating-system was given an upgrade.

Each upgrade corresponded to an enriched identity – a renewed self - capable of "running" more complex and powerful programs of thought, speech, and action.

### **Mother nature provides some automatic upgrades.**

Capacities that were totally out of reach when you were seven months old became natural when you turned seven years old (because of your more powerful operating system – or self). You didn't have to work at it. The upgrade happened courtesy of Mother Nature.

But roughly around adolescence, this processes of naturally occurring upgrades ended.



## **It's not that your developmental journey has to end.**

Just that, the free ride is over.

As an adult, you can continue to upgrade your inner operating system. You can continue to deepen your sense of self and enrich your capacity to create and contribute to the world. But, only if you do so deliberately.

So, why bother?

## **Through upgrading your inner operating system you establish the platform for upgrading your leadership.**

Your current self-operating system allows you to “run” certain versions of the leadership applications, versions that were installed in your past.

In order for you to run the full suite of leadership behaviors or to upgrade your expression of a specific behavior, you need to upgrade your operating system.

Your current operating system has limited capabilities.

It's not bad, *not at all*. It has worked for you in the past. Your current operating system is the foundation of your current success. It's just not capable of supporting the ways of thinking, acting, and interacting that you need to continue to be successful. The old ways won't take you into a successful future.

## **Hence, the need for an upgrade.**

Only a renewed sense of self – a renewed internal operating system - can “run” the ways of thinking, speaking, and acting that can meet the challenges you're now facing. Only an upgraded self-operating system can support you in fulfilling your dreams and achieving your goals.

Clearly, talk of upgrading your internal operating system is a contemporary metaphor for a complex process of mental, emotional, and behavioral change.

## **An older word is transformation.**

Because, it's the transformation of your self – from one level to a higher level – that provides the inner capacity for embodying more complex, impactful, and effective leadership behaviors.

## **How do you renew your self?**

It would be convenient if you could download and install an upgraded inner self with the click of a mouse. But, this is where the upgrade metaphor breaks down. Personal transformation - and the development of a new self-operating system happens when you spend time at your learning edge.

So, what is your learning edge?

### **Your learning edge is the place where outer challenges and inner development meet.**

Your learning edge is your most intense challenge. Your learning edge is a situation, relationship, challenge, or event that calls you to embody a new level of leadership. And one that you find yourself confronting repeatedly.

### **Your learning edge is a cat with nine lives.**

You can't kill it using your old strategies. Your best efforts aren't enough. Because, your best efforts are still expressions of the old operating system, the old self. Your learning edge calls you to transform.

### **It's a challenge that can't be solved from your current level of development.**

The challenge that takes you to your learning edge reveals the limitations of your current self-operating system. It reflects the data in your leadership-360.

It holds up a living, breathing, real-time mirror.

## **It won't budge until you transform.**

Your learning edge challenge takes you to a neuro-psychological position of great vulnerability and great potential. It's the place where transformation – the internal upgrading of self-identity – occurs. Although, typically this doesn't happen right away.

Initially, the learning edge is experienced as a threat. While it's nice to talk of transformation and inner upgrades, being at your learning edge threatens your sense of self. And this alerts your inner lizard.

## **As far as your inner lizard is concerned transformation is just a fancy word for death.**

Your inner lizard makes no distinction between losing your life and letting go of an outmoded sense of identity. None.

Which is why your inner lizard goes berserk when you venture towards your learning edge. It feels the process of letting go – the old beliefs, assumptions, and patterns slipping away. And it panics.

It's trying to save you and triggers a torrent of physical reactions that immerse you in waves of powerful emotions:

- Anxiety
- Confusion
- Overwhelm
- Fear
- Anger

As the body is flooded with chemicals and emotions, automatic behaviors, habitual responses and coping mechanism override any self-awareness.



## **And the goal of self-renewal is replaced by a mad scramble for preserving the status quo.**

As your original intention (not to mention action plan) is washed away in the hormonal and neurological tides, you lose your focus. You just react to . . . save your ass and get away from the anxiety of the learning edge as quickly as possible. Leadership is the last thing on your mind.

It's one of the paradoxes of development:

- You must move to the learning edge in order to transform your inner operating system.
- Yet, the very neurological, hormonal, and emotional intensity of being there triggers your most reactive tendencies.

## **The goal is to cross your learning edge.**

Not spring backwards into lizardy reactivity.

To do this you have to let go of the structures, beliefs, and habits that constituted your old sense of self – without losing awareness. It takes a resilient awareness to remain at your learning edge without being overtaken by the inner lizard.

### **It takes a form of awareness that sustains itself even as the structures of your old self are let go.**

But, how can you let go of beliefs, attitudes, strategies, and self-images and still be aware?

Even more to the point, what is left to be aware when all those mental and emotional supports are withdrawn? To discover this takes a special kind of practice. A practice that allows you to discover and strengthen a quality of awareness that:

- Is not identified with any particular patterns of thought, belief, or action.

- Remains undisturbed by the antics of the inner lizard.
- Allows for you to continue your developmental journey with a minimum of drama.

The good news is that this specific kind of practice has been developed and refined for thousands of years by researchers and practitioners around the world.

### **I'm referring to the practice of meditation.**

Meditation practice develops your inner capacity to remain aware when the conventional supports of position, title, beliefs, attitudes, and self-image are let go.

How does meditation do this?

By cultivating a specific type of attention known in traditional literature as witness consciousness or the inner observer (in contrast to the inner lizard).

## **What is the inner observer?**

The distinctive feature of the inner observer is that it is non-identified. It can witness whatever arises – thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, and the shrieks of the inner lizard – without becoming lost in or claiming what arises for itself.

Your inner observer can be present – even while the inner lizard break-dances on your nervous system.

### **This is essential for crossing your learning edge.**

Without the presence of the inner observer, whenever the inner lizard is threatened:

- Your awareness degrades
- Your intention dissipates
- Reactive, defensive patterns derail your developmental progress

**It is this witnessing capacity that has allowed you to upgrade your inner operating system throughout your life.**

At every stage of development, you identify your self with specific perspectives, beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, etc. You don't *have* these perspectives. You *are* them.

You cannot *observe* them. Rather, you *see life through* them. In order to upgrade to a higher level of development, a shift needs to take place.

**A shift from being identified with your current perspectives to being aware of them.**

Each time you've made a developmental shift, your inner observer has been active. It has helped you *dis-identify* from your old self – and its beliefs, values, assumptions – and observe or be aware of it.

You have the subjective experience of “outgrowing” your old self and its ways of thinking, interacting, and acting.

With an upgraded self-operating system, *the world opens up* before you. New opportunities appear. And new ways of acting become not just possible but natural.

**To deliberately accelerate your development, you need to strengthen the capacity of your inner observer.**

You strengthen the inner observer through meditation practice.

As this capacity strengthens, you discover a state of unconditional presence that provides for continuity of consciousness as you cross your learning edge.

**Try this little experiment.**

Imagine, in your mind's eye, a birthday cake.

Now, look at that birthday cake through the eyes of a five-year-old.

- What are you aware of?
- How does the cake appear?
- What five-year-old thoughts and emotions arise?

Now, step out of the five-year old perspective and view the cake through the eyes of an eighteen-year old.

Take the perspective of a young adult turning eighteen. Notice how *shifting your perspective* from five to eighteen changes the cake experience.

Shift again and be aware of both those perspectives. Notice how you can adopt and let go of these two perspectives. And, perhaps, even more importantly, how you can step back in consciousness and be aware of both without identifying with either.

**You can do all this because of the strength of your inner observer.**

You are capable of witnessing – experiencing and letting go - both the five-year old and eighteen-year old perspectives of birthday cake.

Through the practice of meditation, you will be able to regard your current level of self-development in the same way. Your current perspective will no longer own you. Rather, it will be available to you as one perspective among many.

**You'll appreciate the gifts of your current operating system without identifying with it.**

You'll stop drinking your own kool-aid and be less inclined to defend the boundaries of your self-identity and more disposed toward learning and transformation.

And so you will approach the learning edge and the unraveling of your current self-image as a natural and necessary part of the developmental process.

**Anxiety can still arise.**

Emotions can arise and your heart rate can still speed up. More than likely, they will. Meditation doesn't remove your neuro-

logical wiring. You still have natural human responses and reactions. The difference is that through meditation practice you develop the witnessing capacity to stay present even when the inner lizard reacts.

And you will be able to progress across your current learning edge to embrace a new level of self-development. One that can “run” more complex, fulfilling, and powerful leadership behaviors.

## **Through the practice of meditation you learn to face your own reactivity with composure and awareness.**

Rather than avoid or override disturbing thoughts and emotions, you bring awareness to your reactive patterns.

Recent advances in neurological imaging have provided us with documentation and pictures of what it looks like when you do this.

The research reveals that through the practice of meditation, you fire specific neurological patterns and literally change the structure of your brain. You build new more complex neural networks that include – but are not confined by – the old patterns. You upgrade your neurological functioning.

Subjectively, this expanded capacity produces states of harmony, peace, and wholeness. Objectively, you’re able to act in ways that were previously not available to you.

**The key is regular practice.**

Like any other capacity – the strength of your inner observer – increases with practice. It’s like building up your awareness muscles. Meditation practice builds the muscles of pure awareness.

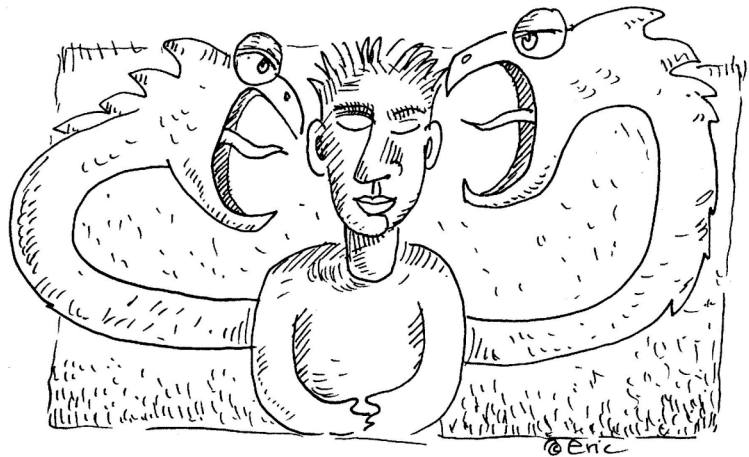
Why should you want stronger awareness muscles?

### **Awareness is the transforming agent.**

It’s what all the feedback techniques - 360s, coaching, etc, are trying to activate. And sometimes they do. Often, they don’t. In any case, they’re indirect.

Meditation goes direct. Through meditation, you bring awareness to your learning edge. This accelerates the upgrading process.

Meditation brings you to a place of clarity that is both open to and at the same time fundamentally undisturbed by the machinations of the mind. You learn to remain in this effortless place of steadiness – which naturally releases you from outmoded forms of thought and action.



Simply through the power of awareness – the very presence of the inner observer – you replace reactivity with wiser and more skillful ways of interacting with others and contributing to the world.

### **With practice, this state of awareness integrates more and more into your daily life.**

In this way, your everyday life becomes a crucible for your on-going leadership development. Soon, the very conditions that once threatened your sense of self become reminders to your inner observer to be aware.

And with that awareness, you realize – experientially - that the journey of development is on-going and that the opportunity to upgrade your inner operating system is *now*.



## **Appendix:**

### **A Simple Practice of Meditation:**

#### **Breath Awareness**

When one examines the variety of meditation practices from around the world a common denominator is awareness of the breath. The breath is a universally honored as an object of meditation.

The breath is always available as an object of meditation, whether you are in a quiet room or an active meeting – the breath is an ever-present invitation to steady your attention, let go of reactive patterns, and develop your awareness muscle. Here's how:

- Sit with a straight spine and let go of tension. Sit on the floor or use a chair with a straight back.
- Keep your spine straight but not stiff.
- Focus your mind on your breath. Notice the rise and fall of your abdomen. Feel the passage of your breath in and out of your nasal passages.
- Take several deep diaphragmatic breaths. Place your hands on your belly and feel the expansion as you inhale, the relaxation and subtle contraction as you exhale. For several breaths extend and deepen the breathing. Use the diaphragm in a conscious yet relaxed way.
- Then let the breath return to its own natural rhythm.
- Maintain a still and relaxed posture as you focus your complete attention on the incoming and outgoing breath.
- If thoughts or sensations arise, simply dissolve them into the breath. Return to the breath. Put your full mind on the natural rhythmic pattern of your breath.

When your mind and body have quieted, let go of any particular concentration and just sense the quality of stillness. You may

feel it in your heart or sense it as an all-encompassing spaciousness. The stillness can include the sounds of the environment around you.

Don't try to define it. Just experience it.

### **How long should one practice?**

Everyone asks this. Here's my suggestion: meditate for as long as it is comfortable for you. Start with 3 minutes each day. That's doable. And build from there.

More isn't better. Consistency is more important than duration. It's like going to the gym. Building your awareness muscle happens with regular practice. Be gentle with yourself. Keep it simple and you'll want to practice again.

### **The key is to start practicing.**

Begin to incorporate moments of reflective silence and meditative stillness into your schedule. Make time every day— even for only a few moments – to release your mind from the bustle daily life.

When you're practicing, no matter how many times the mind wanders, simply bring it back to the breath. Do this with a sense of graciousness and ease as though you were placing a rose carefully in a beautiful vase.

### **Through practice the inner observer awakens, awareness becomes steadier, and distractions begin to drop away.**

As they do, you experience the aliveness of the present moment more and more completely.

The great American psychologist William James has written, "The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will. An education, which should improve this faculty, would be education *par excellence*."

Meditation is a practical and portable way to train the wandering attention and to enhance those qualities of character that promote on-going leadership development.



Eric Klein is a visionary, author, community leader, business advisor, and professional speaker on leadership and resistance-free change.

For 25 years, Eric has worked with over 20,000 leaders from a wide variety of settings: Fortune 500 companies, healthcare, municipal, governmental and non-profit organizations—as well as mid-size companies.

Over the past two decades Eric Klein has been a leading voice in the movement to bring greater spirit, meaning, and authenticity to the workplace. His transformative message and practical approach has helped leaders create organizations where values and purpose fuel productivity, accountability, and collaboration.

Eric Klein has held management positions at two Fortune 500 companies and successfully developed businesses in the education, publishing, and consulting industries. Eric combines his experiences in business with 40 years of teaching and practicing meditation. He is one of the few Westerners to have received ordination into a 5,000-year-old yoga lineage.

Eric's most recent book is *You are the Leader You've Been Waiting For: Enjoying High Performance and High Fulfillment at Work* which earned a silver Nautilus Award as a world-changing book in the leadership and conscious business category.

He is also the co-author of the best selling book *Awakening Corporate Soul: Four Paths to Unleash the Power of People at Work* (over 250,000 copies sold) and *To Do or Not To Do: How Successful Leaders Make Better Decisions* based on research and experiences with more than 200 companies.

His unique work has been featured on CNN and in the LA Times, HealthCare Forum, The American Medical Journal, Leadership Reflections, Quality and Productivity, and the Association Management Magazine.

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