



## INTRODUCTION

In 2008, I reached out to Peter through his website, telling him I was a graduate acting student at ACT and requesting a dialogue on the overlap of “acting and spiritual practices”. He generously agreed and our first conversation went so well that we did a second. This text is an edited transcription of the first. The second was sadly lost due to a technical glitch. These dialogues with Peter and a few other early conversations planted the seeds for what became my PhD research at CIIS a few years later.

## BIOGRAPHY

Peter Coyote is an actor, author, and narrator. Born in the early 1940’s, his career has spanned several decades, earning him a reputation for versatile acting skills and a distinctive voice. Coyote began his acting career in the 1970s and gained recognition for his roles in films and television, working with directors such as Steven Spielberg, David Cronenberg, and Roman Polanski. Known for his commanding presence and depth, Coyote has portrayed a wide range of characters in notable films such as *E.T.*, *Patch Adams*, *Sphere*, *A Walk to Remember*, *The Right Stuff*, *Erin Brockovich*, and many more. In addition to his film work, Peter Coyote has been

a prolific narrator, lending his voice to numerous documentaries and audiobooks including the spiritual classics “Zen Mind, Beginners Mind” and “The Four Agreements”. Additionally, Coyote is the author of several books, including a memoir and several books on Zen and Acting. His contributions to the arts have been recognized with various awards and accolades, cementing his status as a significant figure in American film and culture. <https://petercoyote.com/>

# PART 1: A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

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*After some initial greetings and small talk, we got into our topic...*

**JW:** To get started... you said that you were studying to be a Zen priest, and you did the narration for “Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind” (and other spiritually oriented audio books), so you obviously have an interest in spiritual practices, yes?

**PC:** Yes, it's quite deep, I'm ordained, actually. I'm in my final year of a three-year intensive teacher training to be certified as a Zen teacher. I'm currently ordained as a layman, but at the end of this teacher training, I'll either take a green rakusu (which is a lay entrustment, qualifying me to teach but not to ordain people or pick a successor), or I may become a priest, in which

case I'd be able to do the whole hog. But I've been a lay practitioner for about 40 years, a serious student. I have thought a lot about the relationship between acting and Zen practice. When I was coming back from the counterculture, and making the decision to go back into acting, I spent two years doing nothing but back-to-back theater and teaching, and I ran a series of classes at UC California extension and at the Zen monastery of San Francisco Zen Center, teaching to Zen students. What I've been doing of late (at my teachers request) is working with senior priests who are being trained to teach: I've been doing mask work with them, because it's something I'm good at. Teaching them mask work is a way of teaching how an ego assembles itself, and it can also teach how you to move your ego out of the way to start receiving internal information from another source. Once you find out that the ego is mutable and flexible, it's that much easier to keep the ego in check. So, I've done a series of daylong workshops for senior students in the last year of their training as teachers.



*Peter Coyote at San Francisco Zen Center's Green Gulch Farm*

**JW:** Yeah, I didn't get all that detail before, but I got the sense from our email exchange that you were doing some mask work with the Zen teachers, which is a great segway to our

conversation today. I thought we could start by hearing a bit about your spiritual journey. It sounds like it's been mostly of the Zen variety. I try to be organic with these dialogues; I don't have a list of question; we'll just see what's comes up in the moment.

**PC:** Well, to start with, I think that people become Buddhists, because Buddhism answers an intuition that they've always had — a feeling about the world, a feeling about interconnectedness, interdependence, magic, and specialness. I know that was true in my case. I've always been a spiritual person. As a boy, I was raised by my earliest hero and mentor who was an ex-game warden who had been involved in gunfights in the Florida Everglades protecting egrets from poachers. When I was just six or seven, this was a guy was teaching me how to trap and snare, but he was also explaining the laws of nature to me: the circularity of cycles, the interdependence of different species, and how animals have their own completely coequal intelligence. I was just immersed in that as a kid, and as I got older, during the 60s, I got really interested in indigenous communities all over the world – interested in the kind of storehouse of information that indigenous cultures possessed. So, I lived for a long time with a guy named Rolling Thunder, who is a Paiute Shoshone shaman, and then later I lived with a Hopi snake priest in the late 90s. I pursued a lot of stuff: I met Carlos Castaneda; I ingested those books; I learned everything in those books that could be called a practice. When I met Castaneda, I recorded two of his books for him, and he clapped me severely on the back of the shoulder blade, which was something that I understood was a kind of marking, a way to keep track of me. I was overjoyed about that, because those books had been important to me, but then he died shortly thereafter. At a certain point, I realized that neither the Shoshone, the

Hopis, nor the Paiute were under any pressure to teach me the deepest wisdom of their cultures. It's just not going to happen. I was not a Hopi. I was not a Shoshone or a Paiute, and I had been in Paiute church for a long time! It was all interesting, but I realized that Buddhism was a world religion; they had to take me. Ultimately, I felt that all transcendental information was similar, so I switched paths. I had also fallen under the influence of Gary Snyder and the beats, who were almost all interested in Buddhism. When I met and became friends with Snyder, I was really impressed with the way he lived his life: how orderly, disciplined, ascetic, loose, un-judgmental, and all the things I wanted to be, but far more effective than I was. A little while later, I started dating a girl who lived at the San Francisco Zen Center. Around 1974 or 1975, I began to practice Zen meditation regularly, and it stuck. I just kept it up. So... that's sort of the gyra of my personal journey.

**JW:** To give me some orientation to our shared reference points: How familiar are you with the work of Ken Wilber?

**PC:** I've read some of his work and thought it was interesting. I thought he was a brilliant man, but his work was too intellectual for me. I have a predilection for over intellectualizing, and his work led me further in that direction, so it just wasn't what I needed. For a long time now, I have tried to steer into my body and into my intuitive senses as an antidote to overthinking.

**JW:** I asked because his work is an unavoidable part of my worldview: it has been a big part of the orientation for my explorations, so I wanted to see if we had any shared ground on that note.

**PC:** I think the shared ground might be that I believe he has good intentions. He's a real scholar, and I think there's a purpose and utility to excellent scholarship. I'm a scholar. I've spent much of my life in scholarship, but it didn't take me where I needed to go.

**JW:** Yes, reading is first degree torture, at best.

**PC:** *(He laughs)*

**JW:** The real transformation is something else entirely, but I did find his maps useful for orienting to various schools of thought. His work also helped point me towards third degree torture (the actual fire of transformation) by directing me towards practices that seem suitable to me.

**PC:** I see.

**JW:** Also, my interest in the kind of dialogue we are having now is partially because I want to put some third person maps out there for actors, hopefully pointing them to richer first-person experiences. Yes, these dialogues might be intellectual conversations for starters, a sort of

general mapping (conversations about the experience, not necessarily the experience itself) but hopefully, I do think that the philosophical context in which we hold things can change how we practice and how we orient our experience when we're in the middle of it - how we navigate lived experience. So, my interest is to engage in that kind of dialogue with fellow actors with similar interests, like yourself. I'm sure you're familiar with Michael Murphy and the Esalen Institute?

**PC:** I've known Michael for years, Michael and George Leonard. Those guys were pals of mine and in my social circle.

**JW:** Right. George unfortunately passed away recently.

**PC:** I was just with his wife yesterday at a priest ordination, for two members of my Sangha who were just ordained. I should say that, despite being social friends with these guys, I always had a reservation about them, and I used to tease them all the time. I thought that they were unforgivingly egocentric in the sense that, you know, what was wrong with Buddhism? Or any number of practices that were already out there? What was the difficulty with submitting themselves to those traditions? Why did they have to think up their own philosophical matrix, religion, and practices? And, I said that to their faces.

# PART 2: TRADITION & INNOVATION

**JW:** How did they take that?

**PC:** Well, we were friends. They would ramble on and sort of answer me, but it's just a different worldview. I don't have any problem submitting myself to a tradition; I can take on the tradition I choose and be the kind of priest I want to be. For me, it seemed they were taking on something unnecessarily heroic and vague by starting from scratch.

**JW:** Well, I think that might be a great segway to the other half of our conversation about the craft of acting. We both come from traditional roots, in some ways. You got your start with the San Francisco mime troupe; their techniques and practices go way, way back. I trained at the American Conservatory, where the idea of a conservatory is (obviously) to 'conserve' the tradition, and yet some of the theatre artists I am most inspired by recently (Joseph Chaikin, Jerzy Grotowski, Antonin Artaud, Peter Brook) were massive innovators in their own time. So that balance between innovation and tradition, I think is an interesting part of the conversation.

**PC:** Well, that's fair. That's a good question. I mean, good reminder. I was completely thrilled by "*Commedia Dell'Arte*" work with the mime troupe, and I started in a traditional theater. I



started in the precursor of ACT, which was the Actor's Workshop here in San Francisco, which generated Herbert Blau and Jules Irving and sent them to Lincoln Center, and I came to San Francisco to get my master's degree right about the time that the shreds of that theater were reassembling itself. It was not overly interesting to me; I spent a year or so there, and then I gravitated to the Mime Troupe. I loved the physical discipline of *commedia*, sort of becoming an ideogram of the character, an ideogram of the emotion we were playing. In some ways, that led me into the counterculture, into the farthest reaches of the counterculture, and when I came back, I was an ex-addict and a single father, needing to make a living.



I had some success in politics, and it gave me the courage to believe that I might be able to take a shot at being an actor. I told myself that I'd give myself five years to pursue it, and if I didn't make it, I'd let it go, and at least I wouldn't die with the what ifs. I had taught acting, so I went back to teaching acting. I loved teaching; I still love teaching, and I have read everything that has been ever written about acting, but I had always been, I had always felt a little deprived by

the fact that I never had the opportunity to... well, if I'd had my way, I would have gone to England and studied at RADA or LAMBDA. Because to this day, I think that the English actors are the most interesting guys on the planet to watch - the most skilled, the most dedicated to serving the script through character. And I felt a great disservice had been done to American acting by — what's his name, from The Actor's Studio...

**JW:** Lee Strasberg?

**PC:** Yes. By Strasberg, who came up at the height of the McCarthy period and basically liberated the actor from the text. He threw the actor into his own vocabulary of self-expression, which seemed to be the perfect vehicle for the time, but he had come from the precursors in Jewish theater, you know, left wing guys, who had an activist agenda. Their theater was dedicated to ideas and dialogue of great public importance done in front of an audience. It seemed to me that the English were more in keeping with that older tradition of having the actor find a character that would serve the story and that the actor's responsibility was to the story. Unfortunately, I had started to earn a living already, so I never had the opportunity to do formal training. It's been a great sense of loss (and some insecurity) to me because I'd never had any formal theatrical training, so there are things I don't know how to do so well. When I got in trouble as an actor, I didn't have training to fall back on. I would have to either kill myself in trying or jump through incredible hoops to reach something that I wanted to do. So, in some sense, although I'm well versed in the literature of the acting tradition, I'm not nearly as versed in the training of the tradition. I was maybe lucky enough to be a little more talented than

most, and of a good age and body type to fit in when I got started, but I consider myself more of a writer who makes his living as an actor. While acting has been very good to me, and I would never discredit it, I certainly don't feel inordinately gifted or that it's where my genius (in the Elizabethan use of the word) resides. I think I'm a good actor. I think I'm a smart guy, and I think I'm quick and improvisatory, but for instance, I don't think I have a very vast and deep emotional reservoir. There tends to be something a little cool and watchful, observant about my nature, which is not always so congruent with being a great actor. Having said that, it may explain something about why I am drawn to tradition, but it's also true that I'm in a Zen tradition which is innovating; we're trying to find the original face of American Buddhism. Zen is Japanese - just like Nyingma is Tibetan and Rapa (sp?) is English, when Buddhism came to these different continents, it altered itself, and we're trying to find out what American Buddhism will be. So, while I'm grounded in the tradition of Zen practice (sesshin, chanting, robes, and all that stuff), we're actively trying to take baby steps away from that tradition and find something that's indisputably American, yet at the same time, responsive to it.

**JW:** I'm curious, if your genius is writing, what's that cutting edge for you, artistically?

**PC:** Well, you know, I don't think very much about a "cutting edge". I think about being authentic; I think about being true. To me, the idea of a "cutting edge" is always referential. It's just, you know, where on the blade you position yourself, but around the edge of the blade, as opposed to the point of the blade, or as opposed to the handle. It doesn't matter to me. If a performance is true at any time, in any place, it's going to go directly into the heart of other

human beings. You know, I look at old movies, from the 30s, and 40s, and the truthful, authentic performances just stand out like gems littered on the ground. That's what interests me. I'm not so interested anymore in being the avant-garde, or the cutting edge, it's just not a concern.

**JW:** In some ways, that authenticity (the presence, honesty, or truth of what's happening in the moment) is what your Zen practice and your acting and writing are all aiming at, aren't they?

**PC:** I think so. I think so. It's funny. I feel like a person who's very, very much in the moment, at the same time, I can barely remember breakfast. I apologize often to my wife for things; she can remember what she was wearing on our second anniversary, and we've been together for years. It just astounds me. But I know that in the moment, I come up fresh, so that's what I'm interested in, I guess. And I understand, I know Joe Chaikin's stuff, and I am in awe of Peter Brook and these kinds of guys. That's just authentically who they are. It's not authentically who I am.

**JW:** I wonder if you have any stories that would be the fun to look back on - some landmarks or moments when you had and spiritual or transpersonal experiences on stage – moments when you felt a larger energy, something supernormal or archetypal happening. Do you have any peak performance experiences like that you might be willing to share?

**PC:** Well, I mean... so, what is acting training? Acting training is what you use when you don't have an intuitive channel into a character. If you have an intuitive channel into the character, there's never a problem, right? So, I've been lucky enough to have some roles in my life where I just knew how much spit the guy had in his mouth. I just knew everything about him, and those kinds of experiences are somehow transpersonal; there's something coming over the spinal telephone that is informing me, and I'm kind of like a kayak on whitewater. I have a modicum of control, but just that. I have to hang on and ride from moment to moment to moment. On the film "Bitter Moon", there were periods of filming that movie for Polanski that were just sort of out of control. There were moments when I fell off the boat. I look at it now and I think, oh my God, why did he leave that scene in there? I just can't believe it.



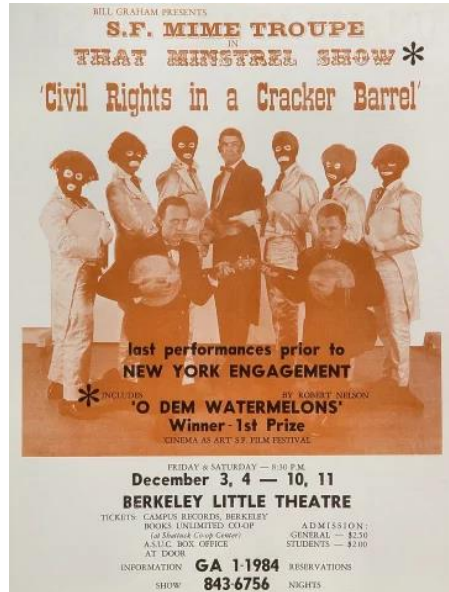
*Peter Coyote as OSCAR in "Bitter Moon", directed by Roman Polanski (1994)*

That's sort of the terrible thing about movies: someone else gets to choose and edit your performance. Also, I did a play called "Jake's Women" (a Neil Simon play which we were preparing for Broadway, 20 years ago or something), and the play was seriously flawed, but

there were moments in the play that were just transcendental. Stockard Channing was in it. Felicity Huffman was in it. Neil Simon gave us pages every day; he was unhappy. He canceled the show publicly, leaving the actors with three weeks of performances to do. Still, you're on stage every night. It's real people, and sometimes everything just gets into congruence, and everything is happening perfectly, right? You just don't know how you got through the play. You just went from one end to the other, like driving home stoned, and it worked.

**JW:** You mentioned this notion of the “spinal telephone” and receiving information or inspiration that way. It's like we're an antenna, and things come down to us, literally from above it seems.

**PC:** I was in a show called “The Minstrel Show” once in the 60s, which was arguably the most dangerous show I've ever been in. We were arrested in five or seven cities. We were invited to New York by Dick Gregory and Harry Belafonte. Three black actors, three white actors in blackface makeup, wigs, gloves, and tuxedos doing an old minstrel show for a white interlocutor. We took over the stage and got rid of the interlocutor, then went on to tell American Black history from what might have been Malcolm X's perspective, full of singing and dancing and music and horrible stereotypes. It was great, ribald fun. In the intermission we'd dance and grope the white women in the audience. We won an OBIE for that show! It was a great, great show, but there were times when I was literally out of myself or there was somebody else operating.



*The Minstrel Show – San Francisco Mime Troupe (1965)*

I feel really blessed to have had those experiences. Having said that, I'm not really an actor like Daniel Day Lewis, who courts challenges, because I don't really have the confidence in my ability to court certain kinds of challenges. I just don't seek them out, whereas I have lots of confidence in myself as a writer.

**JW:** What strikes me as I listen to you is this notion of doing mask work combined with Zen training as a way of understanding ego formation and cultivating the ability to transcend it. I've just come off doing some paratheatrical research, a sort of a Grotowski-based theatre ritual work. The topic for the last two months was developing a relationship with the archetype of the “muse”. It was interesting because over and over again there was this feeling of becoming a vessel or surrendering, service, or submission to a creative force that was choosing us - deciding when it would take us and where it would carry us, demanding that there was a certain amount of devotion on our part in order for that force to show up or be present. A lot of times, having a

lot of ego in the way would get in the way of being available to what was happening, you know, what was wanting to come through. So, I don't know if there's something in there about this deconstruction of the ego and the availability to inspiration in service of that energy. I'm imagining over time, doing Zen practice, you saw that start to dissolve a bit, maybe you noticed yourself being more available to the spontaneous.

**PC:** Well, that's indisputably true. It's a mistake to think that in Zen practice, we ever destroy the ego, or do anything to it. It's always there. It's a product of our karma. It comes with these five skandhas - these five aggregates that make up a human life: form, feeling, intention, consciousness, and impulse. Ego is the thing that tells you to brush your teeth, wash your face, cross on the green light, and take care of yourself. In and of itself, it's not a problem. It's a problem when you become identified with it and stop having a Big Field to run around in. If you listen to those Suzuki Roshi tapes, he says that if you always want to know where your tower is, put it in the big field. Whereas, if you stake it too close, it's always going to be tangled up in the chain; you're going to have to be untangling it and futzing around with it. Just put it in a big field and leave it alone. So, I think daily immersion in meditation gives you the confidence that you can let your ego wander out of sight, and it's not a psychotic episode, and it's not threatening your life. The more confident and the more that your body understands that practice, and has confidence in that practice, the more you can bring that with you into theatrical or any kind of creative endeavor. I mean, basically, getting rid of the ego is no more complicated than losing yourself in what you're doing. So, I found that going down to Ground Zero every day and meditating is a great utility for an actor, just sort of dissolving into your breath. It's cumulative.



Your body learns it and your body gets confident in it. I think it makes you more available. Do you know the work of James Hillman?

**JW:** I don't.

**PC:** Look at a book called "Blue Fire". James Hillman as a psychologist is a big critic of the Freudian triptych of ego, id, super ego. He believes in a kind of polytheistic interior life: that we've got Jupiter in there, we've got Athena, we've got Zeus, we've got all of these characteristics and this polyphonic interior reality. He's very interesting for an artist to read, because like you said, if you change the philosophical model, suddenly, you can tolerate all these contradictory and antipodal voices and impulses. You realize they're ALL available to you.

**JW:** I'm looking him up as we speak. It looks like he created archetypal psychology, studied at the Jungian Institute.

**PC:** Yeah.

**JW:** Very interesting. Yeah. With archetypes, I've been doing paratheatrical work, which is a ritual method. Paratheatrical methods work with archetypal forces in the psyche as an energy body; working with energies as they exist within the organs and within the flesh as power and dynamism. So, I'm with you on that, I'll have to follow up on Hillman a little bit. Thanks for that.

**PC:** You'll like him. "Blue Fire" is my favorite book of his. It's interesting, but the other thing is, I mean, when courage comes into it is what you do when the muse deserts you. It's the difference between being integrated (having this intuitive idea of a character) and having to assemble a character like a baseball. So, it ends up this Frankensteinian, stitched together identity, where you feel like the stitches are showing to the audience, you know, as you assemble posture, intention, dialect, and that stuff. Well, courage comes in when the muse deserts you and you rely on that craftsmanship and commit to it fully. Listen James, I've got to make a request. This is a really interesting conversation, but I have to be downtown to host the Goldman Awards, which are the kind of preeminent environmental awards, and I have this whole show riding on my back. I have to be there in 40 minutes, so I'm going to suggest that you reach out to my assistant again and reschedule a second half of this, if you don't mind.

**JW:** I'd love that. It's been rich and I look forward to continuing.

**PC:** I'd like to honor your intention, and you're asking really smart, interesting stuff. So rather than be rushed, let's just pick up part two.

**JW:** Sounds good. And thank you so much for your time. Talk soon.

**PC:** You're welcome. I look forward to hearing from you.

\*We did record a second conversation, but sadly it was lost due to a technical problem.