

Beyond Meditation

by Matthew Madrigal

Sitting in his pitch-black bedroom with electrical tape covering his eyes, Tomas thought about how for the majority of his life, he had a difficult time connecting with others. He consistently failed to create personal bonds and friendships with people, and the few that he did, typically didn't last long. He struggled with practicing mindfulness, 'being present', and seemingly important spiritual things like meditation. Although he understood the basics on a fundamental level, he could never truly view himself as 'one with the universe', no matter how hard he tried. This was no fault of his own, though: three years ago, a board of doctors and psychiatrists diagnosed Tomas with chronic scopaesthesia, the very first diagnosis of its kind.

scopaesthesia: the scientific term for the sense of being stared at, even when you can't see the person looking at you.

chronic scopaesthesia: the same thing, but chronic.

Years ago he attributed his shallow introspective abilities to his self-diagnosed ADHD, but his scopaesthesia diagnosis gave him a much better understanding of it all. A life of unrelenting sensory torture through paranoid hallucinations was enough for him to abandon his hopes of reaching any kind of internal peace, let alone a meditative state. He considered the rope and stool daily, but not only was he incredibly scared to physically die, he also worried about going to Hell for doing it. *There could possibly be one upside to Hell*, he often thought to himself, *the incineration and infernal torment would distract me from the constant staring.* What a relief Hell might be.

The only person in his life that truly believed him about his scopaesthesia was his wife Amanda, but even that relationship had been deteriorating for quite some time. His family stopped speaking to him after he informed them of his condition, and the few friends he had left followed suit. They simply didn't believe him, neither did a majority of his early doctors. Finally, after going through various tests and examinations across three different states, he found a board of doctors that believed his predicament enough to be diagnosed with the first genuine case of chronic scopaesthesia.

One of the saddest and most difficult parts of his diagnosis was that some of his condition might have actually stemmed from his family in the first place. His mother was blind, allegedly. Tomas had a hard

time believing this growing up, but according to his mother's medical records, and local & family history, it was true. 100% blind. She stared at the sun for almost an entire summer when she was 8 years old, so much so, that it faded her eye color from a rich textured sapphire to a flat milky grey. Her staring continued, however.

Tomas' mother at the time, lacking the self awareness that your average 8 year-old does, never learned the common courtesy to properly shut her eyes when talking to people. Unwittingly, she stared dead-eyed into countless friends, classmates, family members and strangers with her perpetually icy eyes. With the suffering she had already endured, nobody had the heart to tell her, *Honey, I don't mean to be rude, but you're staring.* Because what's staring even supposed to mean if your iris and retinas have been burned back to oblivion?

The other unsettling part was that even though she was completely blind, she still knew exactly where to look you in the eyes, and never broke contact. It was like a sixth sense, but if you did the math it was technically a fifth sense now.

Throughout her life, loved ones and strangers alike were disturbed by her unintentionally creepy countenance, particularly her son, for as far back as Tomas can remember.

Who needs friends and family anyways? At least his Amanda believed him. Plus, she never minded his really bad days, she found them to be quite useful. Self-care days, girls night outs, and happy hours became much more frequent for Amanda as of recent.

Tomas' strong desire to enter a meditative state was driven by his failures with the other perceptive doors. He had pretty much tried it all by this point; weed, LSD, antipsychotics, benzos, anticonvulsants, tons of downers and disassociates, all to no avail. Other tough tests trying to reshape his brain with ibogaine, auhuyascha, DMT, and electroshock therapy (the legal limit within his state) also failed. Trials with virtual reality simulations and physical abuse therapy (therapy *through* physical abuse, not therapy *for* it) provided no conducive results. He needed something new, something natural.

One of Tomas' biggest issues with meditation was that it required the closing of both eyes. His compulsive fear that somebody was staring at him prevented him from ever keeping his eyes shut. Reason and logic meant nothing to him. He couldn't even close his eyes in an empty elevator or

airplane bathroom; though he reasonably knew nobody else was in there with him, he *felt* otherwise, and that's what mattered most...

Just this morning, Tomas' large order from Amazon.com came in, which he was hoping would help solve some of his problems. Thirty packs of extra-large blackout curtains, electrical tape, and a staple gun.

By midday, every inch of the bedroom was covered by the curtains. Pure black. Not a single wave of the visible light spectrum was represented in his room. Vantablack.

Tomas smiled as he guided his way through the room with his phone's flashlight, the curtains absorbing the light into a nothingness, making it less a flashlight and more like a dimly lit match.

He sat down in lotus position on his bed, grinning. He felt the roll electrical tape on the bed beside him and was relieved that he had backup. He turned off his cellphone and kept his eyes open, staring into the void around him.

He was finally going to meditate, eyes wide open, with no distractions.

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Only moments after settling down in the room devoid of light or shade, Tomas took serious issue with his scenario.

Keeping his eyes open in the absolute darkness caused him to hallucinate intensely, not scopaesthesiaic senses of being watched but actual full-blown visual hallucinations. The illusions did distract him from his feelings of scopaesthesia, but were much more hellish in their ethos and imagery. Scopaesthesia was like an eternal feeling of paranoia and impending doom, while these hallucinations in the darkness were more of a fluidly sequenced nightmare, moving through door after door but not really in the physical sense, every new entrance and vision revealing something more grotesque than the last.

He wasn't sure what was happening to him and he started to panic. He could feel his knees and butt touching the bed but he wasn't sure which direction to move in, or which way to get to the door. He was terrified of pretty much everything that he was seeing and trying to avoid it all, so there was nowhere to

really go. His squirming from fear caused him to fall of the bed, and upon hitting the floor he realized this might be his chance to crawl his way out. No phone flashlight to guide him, trying to duck from the horrors, he tried his best to navigate. He tried to reach for what he thought was the door knob but instead knocked over his TV set. Even with this new information, he still had no idea where he was in relation to the door. He was so petrified from the visuals that there were times throughout his crawling that he forgot he was even looking for a door. He was so tormented by what he was seeing that it put him in a sort of mental paralysis, his thoughts not only freezing but rapidly depleting. His most basic instinct of survival being the only recognizable part of him left, he somehow managed to drag his body across the room to the door. Within this frenzy that probably lasted only seconds but what he thought was bordering on at least a couple minutes, he was able to miraculously reach and touch and fling open his bedroom door, letting the Lord's light in and ending the horrid visions.

Tomas hit the floor again, this time like a dead deer. His eyes, still wide open, took some time to adjust. The brightness was rapture-level. It was bliss, for a moment.

As he lay in the doorway between his bedroom and living room, it was a bit like sensory overload feeling the return of his brain functions. His senses returned with a sharp clarity. He could remember the experience he just had just gone through, but felt removed from it, as if it was something he had dreamed years ago. Curiously, he felt a renewed sense of space, and a feeling of tranquility.

Tomas slowly started to realize that it was extreme distraction, not devoted meditative attention, which might be his saving grace.

His experience in the dark room was so terrifying that it in fact *did* neutralize his scopaesthesia for the time throughout, a similar effect that he imagined Hell would bring.

Distraction, he thought to himself, could be the cure.

Aside from quick-blinking and sleep, Tomas had managed to make it through most of the past three years without ever closing his eyes for more than a second at a time. Every night, he would lay awake in bed, eyes glued open to the ceiling until he unknowingly dozed off. Due to his persecuting fear that people were constantly staring at him, shutting his eyes would only intensify this feeling. How could he confirm whether or not the lookers were actually there? Closing his eyes was a slippery slope he hadn't

dared to willingly go down before, but he was getting desperate.

Forget the curtains, it's time for the tape, he thought.

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Tomas figured he had always meditated wrong because he generally did most things wrong. It seemed like every two or so years he would look back on his life and decisions and could only think about how dumb he was two years ago, how cringe he was, how ridiculous he used to act, how did he even get by with his foolish ways. It hurt him a lot when he thought about how in two years from now, he would be feeling that exact same way about his current self, and that's when he realized he was just plain old stupid. Permanently unfixably stupid. Just because you're smarter than you were two years ago doesn't mean you're smart. He was surrendered to the fact that he was just dumb, and even if he learned some things here and there he'd never be a truly smart person, because smart people have usually been noticeably bright their entire lives.

Sitting on his bed with electrical tape covering his eyes, three pieces stuck in separate directions on either eye, Tomas couldn't see anything staring at him, he could only sense it, which admittedly was much scarier. He fought through the dread. With his ojos taped shut, there was zero chance of him hallucinating open-eyed in the pure darkness of the bedroom. He felt stupid again for not being able to meditate, but thought this possibly might work better.

What was needed next, what was most essential, was the distraction. His previous experience in the room had distracted him greatly, but with unwelcome, tormenting visions. Tomas knew that in order for this to be successful, he would need to distract himself somehow. He began by yodeling loudly.

His yodeling was more like chanting, or howling at times. The vocal and lung exertions helped take his mind off of his paranoia, but it was still there, and so were the people staring, he figured. While getting some noise out, he decided to start rocking his head back and forth, circling his neck. He flexed his shoulders. It all started to click.

Tomas wiggled his fingers and twisted his wrists, then continued by kicking his legs outward, extending them as far out in any direction they can go in. His hips thrust back and forth while he threw himself off of and on to the bed. He did this repeatedly, becoming more vigorous with each repetition. The

symphony of motion was so overwhelming that his screaming ceased and he became just a flailing figure on the bed, scrunching and twisting his face into every muscle variation achievable. It looked as if he was suffering from a severe, entirely new 21st-century-type-of epileptic seizure, like a mutated strain that has developed to be stronger over time.

His body movements became more electrified and random. His limbs swung and bent in ways they never had before. His torso concaved and convexed in perplexing and unfathomable motions. He was so distracted by the physicality of it all that if he possibly could think of anything right now, he'd be wondering how his spine and joints and organs would ever recover from this, but he couldn't think a single thought. Not one. The jolting movements quite literally took over him, and he had an incredibly hard time thinking of anything. He wasn't even sure if he *was* thinking, everything was so damn blank. There wasn't even an 'everything', rather nothing. It was like he was asleep, but even less lucid. It continued on, and on.

Tomas' movements ceased, eventually. When he came to, he itched to open his eyes but couldn't.

His brain felt like a blank slate, and he hoped that was a good thing. He wasn't sure of what just went down, but the whole process temporarily resolved all of his earthly issues, even those beyond his scopaesthesia. It made him completely forget about his lousy job, his deteriorating relationship with Amanda, his neurotic fears of death & public transportation. But of course, it all came rushing back once he stopped twisting. *Twisting*. That was the word. That's what he'd call this. An exercise so intense and uncontrollable that he simply could not think at all, and he fell trapped into a paralysis of facial tension and knotted limbs, deterring his brain from producing a single thought, feeling, or impression throughout.

Where's Amanda? he thought to himself, *Why is no one checking on me?*

It suddenly occurred to him that he had no idea how much time had passed during his twisting. It could have been hours, at least it felt like it to him. He had no way of telling if it was day or night, or tomorrow. When he thought about the word 'tomorrow', let alone the basic concept of 'tomorrow', he was intimidated by the looming seriousness of it.

Then the feeling returned. He knew there were people in the room, staring at him. Was it Amanda?

Could Amanda even spot him in this darkness? Could anybody?

Tomas felt hopeless. He wanted to rip the tape off his eyes, but that would only invite more mania in this chamber of ultradarkness. Out of both fear and desire, he began twisting again.

He wished to start off his twisting by thinking of something funny or joyful, childhood memories or favorite moments from *Family Guy*, but the ideas were shot down in his head before they could even reach completion. As soon as he began twisting, all of his perceptions began deteriorating promptly. Within seconds he was far beyond the effects of anesthesia, but somehow rapidly convulsing at the same time.

His twisting now seemed to be more effective than before.

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Tomas must have been hours or days into twisting when his perception started coming back to him, slightly. He sensed bursts of pain throughout his body, but barely felt them, as if they came from a numb distance. He figured it was these almost indiscernible body aches all over that had kicked his conscience back online, despite still twisting in an uncontrollable frenzy.

Tomas was no longer twisting on his bed. The spasms had thrown him from one side of the room to the other. Luckily, he and Amanda had high windows.

His knuckles were bleeding while his forearms and elbows and shins and thighs were already bruising heavily. He had a freshly broken pinky finger, a five-inch laceration on his hip, a dislocated knee, a broken nose and shattered metacarpal bones, but that meant nothing to him. In fact, everything meant nothing to him.

Tomas didn't really think much about the physical pain, whatever little he felt. One of the first fully developed thoughts that came to him was that it seemed like this experience probably was what true meditation felt like, being both hyper aware of every single body part while also having absolutely no control over those parts, in a way. The thought barely made sense in his brain but he knew it was somehow true. The more he tried to think about the logic of it, the more his stupefied brain short-circuited to an indescribable paralysis. Almost instantly, the distant pain he felt all throughout his body

felt much closer and much more real, and like a hundred times more concentrated, all the pain now funneling to one center point in his forehead.

His temples felt like they were being shoved down onto a fast, coarse treadmill, grating through his skin and flesh down to the bone, then through the bone, grinding his skull into a fine powder until the 260mph super-diamond-titanium-tungsten treadmill hits his brain directly, shredding down even harder into the pink matter, shaking his gentle nervous system far more than his twisting ever could, sending his limbs twitching in speeds and directions that Guinness World Records would be interested in taking a look at. The pain in his forehead felt more like a condensed ball of electricity than a 260mph treadmill of diamonds and sharp metals, but he was too disoriented to tell the difference. The more electric and painful things got, the more his body shook, yet the closer he felt to epiphany, or maybe nirvana. The speed seemed to ramp up even more and the treadmill-like force went on to disintegrate his whole tender brain down into a fine primordial paste, cerebral mush with small powdery chunks of skull; a cookies and cream milkshake of neurological anatomy.

The energy or electricity or machine or whatever powerful force it was that crushed his flesh and bones down to a pulpy mixture still kept going, at a seemingly stronger force now, and this is where shit got really weird...

The beam of energy proved to annihilate Tomas in more concentrated and deeper ways, finding smaller and smaller parts-within-parts of Tomas to obliterate on a molecular level. It seemed that every layer the energy beam ground down to nothing, every piece of him it destroyed, it revealed something much larger beneath the surface, like Mandelbrot fractals growing inwards, not outward.

Eventually, Tomas was crushed down to matter much smaller than atoms or molecules or quarks or any other tragic label that naive scientists could come up with or comprehend in our day and age. What confused and scared him the most was the fact that as he was being dissolved atomically, everything minuscule seemed to grow larger and larger while simultaneously everything on the cosmic scale looked like it was condensing. Trying to understand the basic universal mechanics of this made him physically uncomfortable, like his skull and his stomach were tied to two separate yo-yo's violently swinging in wildly different directions, but sadly he no longer had a skull nor a stomach.

There reached a point of equilibrium where the microscopic dust that he was powdered down into

exploded and imploded simultaneously. He literally exploded across his sofa and through his walls and windows and floors, out past the apartment parking lot even past the elementary school a couple blocks down where he always waited as a kid, alone and tormented until his parents arrived to pick him up, and was now accelerating much further past the city limits of Minneapolis and soon he was above and inside the Atlantic Ocean and now Morocco and then the Balkans, dispersing farther and farther away from any one central point and now getting stratospheric, closer to the moon and expanding into the solar system.

The uncertain and seemingly endless split/double-feeling/dichotomy between exploding & imploding/growing & shrinking at the same time would have reminded him all too much (if he was currently capable of thinking) of childhood sleepovers where he would uncomfortably spend the whole night failing to sleep under the rummage of a friend's family's extra blankets, itchy quilts kept in a closet for years until they dusted it off and handed it to him, it seemed. Sometimes it wasn't even the itchy fabrics of the blankets as much as it was the actual geometrics of them that were disturbing. If he was currently mentally capable, he would've remembered that one time his friend's mom handed him, without any sense of humor or irony, an entirely flat blanket, an unmoving plane, not heavy but sturdy rather, like a glass window. Then were also the thin sheets, comparable to cheesecloth or gauze. Or that one blanket the size of a box of cereal. Either he accepted the paper thin sheet or he'd get stuck with a large, unmovable cloud of a heavy down-filled blanket that would swallow him up in its shapeless form. A spiderweb-like bedcover, no matter which limb he tried to lift out from under the blanket, it still consumed him whole and weighed him down considerably. Not to mention, the room was always too hot or too cold, and rarely did he end up being allowed to sleep in the same comfy quarters as the host friend anyway, it was always some weird extra room that seemed 30 years older than the rest of the rooms in the house. So those big types of blankets really made him sweat a ton but it was really the only thing possible to sleep with. The thin glass plane of a blanket didn't cover him enough, and his paranoia required him to be visually sheltered at all costs. Although he was diagnosed much later in life, Tomas' scopaesthesia probably has its roots in his childhood. Since a toddler, every night, even with all of his bedroom lights on, he could never fall asleep unless he was fully covered by his sheets. It was the only way he felt protected.

The whole entire time he couldn't tell if this was actually happening or if he just *thought* it was happening, like a dream or a psychedelic trip. But that couldn't make any sense because he wasn't even sure if he was capable of thinking at the moment, so it couldn't be product of his imagination, it must

be a genuine experience that he's witnessing firsthand, just empty-brained.

He somehow understood that the larger he grew and inflated, the smaller he became ripped apart on a sub-atomic level, his body expanding and twisting and yet shrinking, all in every direction possible, both inward and outward. There was nothing fun or fantastical about it and at this point he was just pure, unadulterated fear. Molecularized fear covering the globe and galaxy and soon enough at this rate probably the whole observable universe, one omnipotent and abstract blanket of fear covering the universe, similar to how he covered every inch of his room with blackout curtains, but it wasn't entirely the same because not even his curtains could fully envelop him the way his current existence fully enveloped the universe, covering it both inside and out, a complete Möbius strip of Tomas James Mosley, 29, born in Maple Grove, Minnesota. He only had a simple understanding what black holes or anti-matter were, but if he could think right now, he'd probably figure that's what he was. The idea of limitation was inconceivable to him as he was pure stardust, in fact, the idea of "ideas" was incomprehensible; his brain no longer functioned in the traditional sense of intelligent human life, but more in the sense of a mold or fungi that just keeps spreading in every possible direction. If he could think, it would probably make this all a whole lot worse, trying to wrap his head around the whole inward-and-outward-at-the-same-time thing.

As he shot across the cosmos while also shrinking into the invisible infinity of the internal world, Tomas could still only sense or perceive one thing – fear. Instinctual, gut-shriveling fear. That feeling covered all of God's making; the Earth, the firmament, the interior and beyond. Tomas was now finally connected to everything as he touched all of creation, both inside and out. The only thing that provided Tomas with relief was squeezing Amanda's boobies one last time before becoming one with existence.