“We are what we think... With our thoughts, we make our world.”

— Buddha
I didn’t want to leave Bali without meeting him. I don’t know why. I wasn’t sick; in fact, I’ve always been in excellent health. I made inquiries about his fees because, with my vacation coming to an end, my wallet was virtually empty. I didn’t even dare check my bank account anymore. People who knew him had told me, “You give what you want; you slip it in a little box on a shelf.” Right, that calmed me down, even if I was somewhat nervous at the idea of leaving a really small sum for someone who had, it was said, treated the prime minister of Japan.

It was difficult to find his house, which was hidden in a small village a few kilometers from Ubud, in the center of the island. I don’t know why, but there are practically no road signs in this country. Reading a map is possible when you have reference points; otherwise, it’s as useless as a cell phone in an area without a signal. There remained, of course, the easy solution: ask
passersby. Although I’m a man, that’s never been a problem. It seems to me that some men feel they are losing their virility if they stoop to that. They prefer to retreat into a silence that means “I know,” pretending to get their bearings, until they are completely lost and their wives say, “I told you we should have asked.”

The trouble in Bali is that people are so nice that they always say yes. Really. If you say to a girl, “I think you’re very pretty,” she will look at you with a beautiful smile and reply, “Yes.” And when you ask your way, they are so anxious to help that it is unbearable for them to admit that they are unable to. So they point in a certain direction, no doubt randomly.

I was a little on edge when I found myself outside the entrance to the garden.

I don’t know why, but I had imagined a fairly luxurious house of the sort you see sometimes in Bali—pools covered with lotus flowers under the kindly shade of frangipani trees displaying great big white blossoms so intoxicatingly perfumed that it’s almost indecent. Instead, it was a series of campans, a sort of small house, without any walls, interconnected with each other. Like the garden, they were of great simplicity, quite spare, yet without giving an impression of poverty.

A young woman came to meet me, wrapped in a sarong, her black hair done up in a chignon.

“Hello, what do you want?” she asked me, speaking straightaway in heavily accented English.

My 6’3” frame and blue eyes left little doubt as to my Western origins.

“I’ve come to see Mr. . . . er . . . Master . . . Samtyang.”
“He will come,” she told me before disappearing between the bushes and the series of little columns that supported the roofs of the campans.

I remained standing there, slightly stupidly, waiting for His Excellency to deign to come and welcome the humble visitor that I was. After five minutes, which was long enough to make me question why I was here, I saw coming toward me a man of at least 70, perhaps even 80 years of age. The first thing that came to my mind was that I would probably have given him 50 rupiahs if I had seen him begging in the street. I tend to give only to old people: I tell myself that if they are begging at their age, it’s because they really don’t have a choice. The man walking slowly in my direction was not in rags, granted, but his clothes were disarmingly simple, minimalist, and ageless.

I’m ashamed to admit that my reflex was to think that it was the wrong person. He couldn’t be the healer whose reputation had reached overseas. Or else his gift went hand in hand with his lack of good judgment and he charged the prime minister of Japan peanuts. He might also have been a marketing genius, aiming at a clientele of credulous Westerners avid for a cliché such as the healer living an ascetic life perfectly detached from material things, but accepting a generous remuneration at the end of the session.

He greeted me and welcomed me simply, expressing himself with great gentleness in very good English. The luminosity of his gaze contrasted with the wrinkles in his tanned skin. His right ear was misshapen, as though the lobe had been partly cut off.

He invited me to follow him into the first campan: a roof supported by four small columns, against an old
wall, the famous shelf along the wall, a chest in camphor wood and, on the floor, a rush mat. The chest was open and overflowing with documents, among which were plates representing the inside of the human body. These, in another context, would have made me want to scream with laughter, so far were the drawings from present-day medical knowledge.

I took my shoes off before entering the room, as is the tradition in Bali.

The old man asked what was wrong with me, which rudely brought me back to the reason for my visit. What was I looking for exactly, since I wasn’t ill? I was about to waste the time of a man whose honesty, not to say integrity, I was beginning to perceive, even if I had as yet no proof of his competence. Did I simply want someone to look into my case, take an interest in me, talk about little old me, and, who knows, discover if there was a way for me to feel better? Perhaps I was obeying a sort of intuition. After all, I had been told he was a great man, which made me curious to meet him.

“I’ve come for a checkup,” I confided, blushing at the idea that this wasn’t an annual doctor’s exam and my request was out of order.

“Lie down there,” he said, pointing to the mat and showing no reaction to the strangeness of my request.
Thus began the first torture session I’ve experienced in my life—and, I hope, the last. Everything started normally: lying on my back, relaxed, confident, and half amused, I felt him gently palpate different areas of my body. My head, to begin with, then the back of my neck. My arms, all the way down to the last joints of my fingers. Followed by apparently very precise areas on my chest, then my stomach. I was relieved to notice that he passed directly from my stomach to the tops of my legs. My knees, my calves, my heels, the soles of my feet: he touched nearly everything, and it was not particularly unpleasant.

Then, he reached the toes.
I didn’t know it was possible to make a man suffer to that extent just by holding the little toe of his left foot between thumb and index finger. I screamed and writhed in every direction on my mat. Seen from afar, it must have looked like a fisherman trying to bait his hook with a 6’3” maggot. I agree that I am a bit of a softy, but what I was experiencing was far more painful than anything I had felt before.

“You are in pain,” he said.

No kidding. I stifled a yes between two groans. I no longer even had the strength to shout. He didn’t seem affected by my sufferings; he kept a sort of benevolent neutrality. His face even expressed a sort of goodness that was at odds with the treatment he was inflicting on me.

“You are an unhappy person,” he said, as if giving his diagnosis.
At that precise moment, yes. Very. I no longer knew whether to laugh or cry at the situation I had put myself in. I may have been doing both at the same time. And to think I could have spent my day on the beach, talking with the fishermen and looking at the pretty Balinese women!

“Your pain in this precise point is the symptom of a more general malaise. If I put the same pressure at the same point on somebody else, he wouldn’t feel pain,” he said.

Whereupon, he at last let go of my foot, and all at once, I was the happiest of men.

“What do you do?” he asked.

“I am a teacher.”

He looked at me for a moment and then walked away, thoughtfully, as if concerned. I felt a little bit as if I’d said something I shouldn’t have, or I’d done something stupid. He was looking vaguely in the direction of a bougainvillea in flower a few feet away. He seemed lost in his thoughts. What was I supposed to do? Leave? Cough to remind him of my presence? He extricated me from my confusion by coming back toward me. He sat down on the floor and looked me in the eyes as he spoke.

“What’s wrong in your life? Your health is very good. So what is it? Work? Your love life? Your family?”

His questions were direct, and he was looking straight at me, leaving me no way of escape, even though his voice and eyes were kindly. I felt obliged to reply, laying myself bare to a man who was a stranger an hour before.

“I don’t know—yes, I could be happier, like everybody, I suppose.”

“I’m not asking you to reply for the others, but for you,” he calmly replied.
This guy is beginning to annoy me. I do what I want, and it’s none of his business, I thought, feeling a mounting anger.

“Let’s say I would be happier if I were with someone.”

Why did I say that? I felt my anger turning against me. I am really incapable of resisting a question. It’s pathetic.

“In that case, why aren’t you?”

Right. Now I’ve got to make a decision, even if that’s not my strong point: either I interrupt him and leave, or I play the game to the end.

I heard myself replying: “I wish I were, but for that, some woman would have to be attracted to me.”

“What’s preventing that?”

“Well, I’m far too thin,” I blurted out, red with shame and anger at the same time.
Talk ing slowly, almost quietly, and making each word stand out, he said, “Your problem is not in your body but in your head.”

“No, it’s not in my head. It’s an objective, concrete fact! You just need to put me on the scales, or measure my pecs or my biceps. You’ll see for yourself, and neither the tape measure nor the scales are biased. I can’t influence them with my twisted, neurotic mind.”

“That’s not the question,” he replied patiently, keeping his great calm.

“Easily said—”

“Your problem is not your physique, but how you believe women perceive it. Actually, the success that one does or doesn’t have with the opposite sex has little to do with physical appearance. Have you never seen people whose looks are a very long way from the standards of beauty but who live with someone rather good-looking?”
“Yes, of course.”

“Anyway, most of the people who have your problem have a ‘normal’ physique, with little defects that they concentrate on. A mouth too narrow, ears too long, a little cellulite, a slight double chin, a nose too big or too small. They think they are a little too short, too tall, too fat, or too thin. When they meet a person who could love them, they have only one obsession: their defect. They are convinced they can’t be attractive because of that. And you know what?”

“What?”

“They are right! When you see yourself as ugly, other people see you as ugly. I’m sure women do find you too thin.”

“That’s right.”

“Other people see us as we see ourselves. Who is your favorite actress?”

“Nicole Kidman.”

“What do you think of her?”

“An excellent actress, one of the best of her generation. I adore her.”

“No, I mean physically.”

“Superb, magnificent—she’s a bombshell.”

“You must have seen Eyes Wide Shut by Stanley Kubrick?”

“You watch American films? Have you got a satellite receiver in your campan?”

“If my memory is right, there is a scene where we see Nicole Kidman completely naked, in the company of Tom Cruise.”

“Your memory is good.”

“Go to the video club in Kuta and have Eyes Wide Shut shown. They’ve got booths for people who don’t
own a video player. When you get to that scene, freeze the frame and look carefully.”

“That shouldn’t be too difficult.”

“Forget for a few moments that it is Nicole Kidman. Imagine it’s someone you don’t know and look at her body objectively.”

“Yes . . . ?”

“You will observe that she is good-looking; she has a fine body—but not perfect, even so. Her bottom is pretty but could be more rounded, more well formed. Her breasts are not bad, but they could have been bigger, have a prettier curve, and be a little higher, more erect. You will see too that the features of her face are regular, fine, but not of exceptional beauty.”

“What are you getting at?”

“There are tens of thousands of women as beautiful as Nicole Kidman. You walk past them in the street every day, and you don’t even notice them. Her true force is elsewhere.”

“Yes?”

“Nicole Kidman is probably convinced she is superb. She must think that every man desires her and that every woman admires or envies her. She probably sees herself as one of the most beautiful women in the world. She believes it so strongly that other people see her like this.”

“In 2006, the British magazine Eve voted her one of the five most beautiful women in the world.”

“There you are.”

“And how do you explain that?”

“That others tend to see us as we see ourselves?”

“Yes.”

“Now that you understand this, you’re going to do an experiment. For a moment, you are going to imagine
something. It doesn’t matter whether it’s true or not. Just convince yourself that it is true. Are you ready?”


“Yes, now. You can close your eyes if it makes it easier for you.”

“Okay, I’m ready.”

“Imagine that you believe you are very handsome. You are convinced you have a huge impact on women. You’re walking on the beach, at Kuta Beach, among all the Australian women on holiday. How do you feel?”

“Really great. Really happy.”

“Describe your walk, your posture. Let me remind you that you think you are very handsome.”

“My walk . . . how should I describe it? Rather confident but at the same time relaxed.”

“Describe your face.”

“I’m holding my head up straight; I’m looking in front of me, a slight natural smile on my lips. I am cool and sure of myself at the same time.”

“Right. Now imagine how women see you.”

“Yes, it’s clear; I’m—how shall I put it?—I’m making a certain impact.”

“What do they think of your pecs and your biceps?”

“Er . . . they’re not really looking at those.”

“You can open your eyes. What women find attractive is what emanates from your body, that’s all. And that derives directly from the image you have of yourself. When you believe something about yourself, positive or negative, you behave in a way that reflects that thing. You show it to others all the time, and even if it was originally a creation of your mind, it becomes reality for other people, then for you.”

“That’s possible, even if it’s still a little abstract.”
“It will become progressively clearer and clearer. I propose to make you discover, through different examples, that practically everything you live has as its origin what you believe.”

I was beginning to wonder what I’d walked into. I was a long way then from imagining that our conversation and the exchanges that would follow were going to turn my whole life upside down.

“Imagine,” he went on, “that you are convinced you are somebody uninteresting, who bores others when you speak.”

“I preferred the other game—”

“This will only last a couple minutes. Imagine it’s quite obvious to you: people are bored in your company. Really try to feel what it means to believe that. Are you doing it?”

“Yes. It’s awful.”

“Remain in that state, keep that in your mind, and now imagine you are having lunch with colleagues or friends. Describe the meal.”

“My colleagues are talking a lot. They are talking about their holidays, and I’m not saying very much.”

“Stay in that state, but now make an effort and tell them a story about something that happened during your holidays.”

“Give me a moment. I’m imagining the scene. All right: it doesn’t have much of an effect. They’re not really listening to me.”

“That’s natural. Being convinced you’re not interesting, you’re going to speak in a way that no one finds riveting.”

“Yes.”
Laurent Gounelle

“For example, since you are unconsciously afraid of boring your colleagues, you will perhaps, without realizing it, speak quickly, garble what you say, so as not to take too much of their time and bore them. As a result, you make no impact, and your story loses all interest. You feel this, and you tell yourself *I’m terrible at telling stories*. Consequently, you get worse and worse and, without fail, one of your colleagues will start speaking again and change the subject. At the end of the meal, everyone will have forgotten that you spoke.”

“That’s tough.”

“When we’re convinced of something, it becomes reality, our reality.”

I was quite disconcerted by his demonstration.

“Right, okay, but why would anyone be convinced of such a thing?”

“It is probably not your problem, but it is some people’s. Everyone believes things about themselves that are special to them. It was just an example.

“To stay with this case, imagine you are convinced of the opposite: you are sure of capturing people’s interest, of making an impact on them when you speak. When you start to speak at your lunch with colleagues, you are persuaded that your story will hit the mark. You’re going to make them laugh; you’ll surprise them or just captivate their attention. Carried along by this conviction, imagine how you speak. Anticipating the expected outcome, you give yourself time to lead up to the subject, to play with your voice. You allow yourself a few well-placed silences to increase the suspense. You know what? They’ll be drinking in every word.”

“Okay, I understand that what you think becomes reality, but I still have one question.”
“Yes?”

“How is it that we begin to believe things about ourselves, positive or negative?”

“Several explanations are possible. First of all, there is what other people say about us. If, for one reason or another, those people are credible in our eyes, then we may believe what they say about us.”

“Our parents, for example?”

“Generally it begins, of course, with our parents and the people who bring us up. A young child learns an enormous amount from his or her parents, and, at least up to a certain age, tends to accept everything they say. It’s engraved in the child. He or she assimilates it.”

“Do you have an example?”

“If parents are convinced their child is beautiful and intelligent, and repeat this constantly, then there is every chance that the child will see herself this way and become very self-confident. That being the case, there won’t just be positive effects. Perhaps the child will also be a little arrogant—”

“So it’s my parents’ fault if I have doubts about my appearance?”

“No, not necessarily. As you will see, there are a number of possible origins for what we believe about ourselves. And, as far as other people’s influence is concerned, there aren’t just the parents. For example, teachers also sometimes have a great influence.”

“That reminds me of something: I was really good in math at school until ninth grade, straight A’s. Then in tenth grade, I had a teacher who told us in every class that we were all useless. I remember she used to shout all the time, and you could see the veins in her neck
swelling up as she bawled us out. I finished the year with straight F’s.”

“You probably believed what she was saying.”

“Perhaps. But, to be honest, not everyone in the class got straight F’s like me.”

“They were probably less sensitive than you to the teacher’s opinion.”

“I don’t know.”

“An experiment was carried out, in the seventies, by some scientists at an American university. They began by choosing a group of pupils of the same age with the same results in IQ tests: so these children had the same level of intelligence, according to the test. They then divided the group in two. They gave the first subgroup to a teacher who was told, ‘Do the same curriculum as usual, but, just to inform you, you should know that these children are more intelligent than average.’ The teacher to whom the second group was given was told, ‘Do the same curriculum as usual, but, just to inform you, you should know that these children are less intelligent than average.’ After a year’s worth of classes, the scientists had all the children retake the IQ test. Those in the first subgroup had an average IQ that was distinctly above that of the children in the second group.”

“That’s crazy.”

“It is indeed rather impressive.”

“It’s incredible! All you have to do is lead a teacher to believe his pupils are intelligent in order for him to make them intelligent; if he’s convinced they’re stupid, he makes them stupid?!”

“It’s a scientific experiment.”

“Even so, it’s sick to do experiments like that on children.”
“Indeed, it is questionable.”
“But, by the way, how is it possible? I mean, how can a teacher believing his pupils are idiots result in him making them idiots?”
“There are two possible explanations. First of all, when you talk to someone stupid, how do you express yourself?”
“With super-simple words, very short sentences, and easily understandable ideas.”
“There you are. And if you talk like this to children whose brains need stimulating to develop, they will stagnate instead of evolving. That’s the first explanation. There’s another one, which is more harmful.”
“Yes?”
“If you have to deal with a child whom you believe to be stupid, everything about you permanently implies that he is stupid. Not just your vocabulary, as we said a moment ago, but also the way you speak, your facial expressions, your eyes. You’re slightly sorry for him or, on the contrary, slightly annoyed, and he notices this. He feels stupid in your presence. And if you’re somebody important to him, if your status, your age, and your role mean that you are credible in his eyes, then there is every chance that he will not challenge this feeling. So he will start to believe that he is stupid. You know the rest.”
“It’s frightening.”
“Indeed, it’s rather dreadful.”
I was very troubled by what I was learning. All these ideas remained as though hanging in the air. We stayed for a few moments without saying anything. A slight wind brought me the subtle scents of the tropical plants...
that grew freely near the campan. In the distance, a gecko was sounding its characteristic cry.

“There is something that surprises me.”

“Yes?”

“I don’t want to annoy you, but how do you have access to this sort of information—I mean scientific experiments carried out in the United States?”

“You must allow me to leave certain things a mystery.”

I was not going to insist, but I would have liked to know. I found it really hard to imagine an Internet connection in the campan next door. I wasn’t even sure the village had a phone line. And, I absolutely could not imagine my healer connecting to scientific forums. I could more readily see him meditating for hours, in the lotus position, in the shade of mangroves.

“You said there were other origins for what we believe about ourselves?”

“Yes, there are the conclusions we draw without realizing it from certain of our life experiences.”

“I’d like examples.”

“Right, a slightly simplistic example to illustrate the point: imagine a baby whose parents react only very little to what he does. He cries? His parents don’t move. He shouts? Not a word. He laughs? No reaction. You can suppose that there will gradually develop in him the feeling that he has no impact on the world around him, that he can obtain nothing from others. He won’t consciously say it to himself, of course, especially at his age. It’s just a feeling, a sensation, something in which he is immersed. Now, to simplify the process in the extreme, particularly by supposing that he doesn’t have experiences going in the opposite direction, you can imagine
that once he becomes an adult, he will become fatalistic,
will never go toward others to get what he wants, will
not try to change things. If one of his friends sees him at
a dead end one day at work, for example, the friend will
just have to accept this passivity. There will be no point
in trying to convince him to react, to go and knock on
doors, to take control of the situation, to contact peo-
ple—nothing will work. What’s more, this friend will
perhaps judge him harshly, and yet his attitude is simply
the result of the profound conviction, buried deep inside
him, that he has no effect on the world around him and
can obtain nothing from other people. He won’t even be
conscious of believing this. For him, that’s the way it is;
that’s reality, his reality.”

“Reassure me: parents like that don’t exist, do they?”

“It was just an example. Besides, you can imagine the
opposite: parents who are very reactive to their child’s
slightest expression. If he cries, they come running; if he
smiles, they are ecstatic. The child will no doubt develop
the feeling that he has an impact on his surroundings,
and, again cutting a long story short, you can suppose
that as an adult he will become someone proactive, or
else seductive, who will be convinced of the effect he
has on others and will never hesitate to go toward them
to get what he wants. But he won’t be conscious of what
he believes, either. For him, it’s just obvious: he has an
effect on people. That’s the way it is. He doesn’t know
that a belief has become established in his mind as a
result of what he experienced as a child.”

The young woman who had welcomed me glided
into the campan and left tea and cakes, if that’s what
you can call that sort of wet, sugary, and sticky paste
that you have to eat with your fingers if you respect Balinese
tradition. A Balinese proverb says that eating with knife and fork is like making love through an interpreter. You are meant to take the food in your hand, and then slide it into your mouth, pushing it in with your thumb. It takes a little getting used to; otherwise, you’ll end up like a baby without a bib.

“So, you begin to believe things about yourself on the basis of what others say to you or what you conclude unconsciously from certain lived experiences. Is that it?”

“Yes.”

“And only during childhood?”

“No, let’s say it is especially during childhood that most of the beliefs we have about ourselves are formed, but you can also develop them later on, even as an adult. But, in that case, they will generally be the result of very strong emotional experiences.”

“For example?”

“Imagine that the first time you speak in public, you make an awful mess of it. You stammer and can’t find your words, your voice is stuck in your throat, and your mouth is dry, as if you’d spent three days without drink in the middle of the desert. In the hall, you can hear a pin drop. You can see that people feel sorry for you. Some have a slightly mocking smile. You would give all your savings, and even next year’s salary, to be somewhere else and not going through this. You are ashamed just to think back to it. In that case, it’s quite possible that you will begin to think you are not made for public speaking. In fact, you have just failed once, that day, in front of those people, talking on that subject. But your brain has generalized the experience by drawing a definitive conclusion from it.”
I had finished my cake, and my fingers were now very sticky. I was hesitating between sucking them and wiping them on the mat. Unable to decide, I left my fingers hovering in the air. I was probably developing the belief that I was not made to eat Balinese food.

“When you come back tomorrow, we will discover together other beliefs which are stopping you from being happy,” he said to me kindly.

“I didn’t know I was coming back tomorrow.”

“You don’t expect me to believe that your problems are limited to your doubts about your physical appearance? You certainly have other, much more serious problems, and we will tackle them together.”

“You’re harsh.”

“It’s not by telling people what they want to hear that you help them change,” he replied with a smile.

“You know, I thought you were a healer, that you only concerned yourself with illnesses and pains.”

“In the West, you are used to separating the body and the mind. Here, we think the two are closely linked and form a coherent whole. Perhaps we’ll have the opportunity to talk more about this.”

“Just one final question. I am more comfortable if these things are clear, even if it embarrasses me to talk about them: how much will I owe you for your help, for the time you give me?”

He looked at me closely, then said, “I know your profession leads you, too, to transmit things to others. It’s enough for me if you undertake not to keep what you discover to yourself.”

“You have my word.”
As I left, I nonetheless slipped a bill into the little box on the shelf.
“It’s for your work on my toes.”
Laurent Gounelle is a personal development specialist who trained in humanities at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Besides lecturing at the Université of Clermont-Ferrand, he is now a consultant and takes part in international seminars. His two books have sold more than a million copies worldwide. They are based on the principles of neuro-linguistic programming (NLP).
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I WON’T LEAVE WITHOUT TELLING YOU WHERE I’M GOING

LAURENT GOUNELLE

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