

Nonduality: Twenty-Five Years of Looking for What Isn't There

Steve Mays – as seen through his own blog, 2002–2026

The Question That Wouldn't Go Away

It started with a book review. Or maybe it was a quote from a novel. Steve's blog doesn't announce its philosophical arc with fanfare – it accumulates, the way awareness itself does: slowly, without permission, through thousands of small moments of reading and noticing.

By 2006, he was already writing about the Western concept of self as "a ramshackle collection of coincidences held together by a desperate and irrational clinging." He liked that description enough to post it. That's how Steve works: he reads something that lands, highlights it, and puts it on the blog so he can find it again later. But the pattern is unmistakable in retrospect – every highlighted passage from every book review points toward the same question: *who or

what is actually experiencing all of this?

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He didn't know it at the time, but he was already circling nonduality. He just called it whatever phrase caught his attention that week.

The Backpack That Became a Steamer Trunk

Steve's own voice on selfhood is remarkably direct. In 2013, after years of reading about the subject, he wrote what is perhaps his most personal post on the topic. He posed a simple thought experiment: if someone paid you to write "Who Am I?" every five years from age fifteen to sixty-five, which version would be the real you? All of them? Then the essence changes constantly – year by year, month by month, hourly.

He needed a visual metaphor to think about this, because that's how his mind works. Not abstract philosophy, but concrete images. So he gave himself a backpack at birth, graduating to a duffle bag in his teens (packed, messy, soaked with hormones), then a steamer trunk as an adult – "adding more stuff every day." The

answer to "who am I?" is whatever's on top of the trunk right now.

"After dragging that fucker around for 60+ years," he writes, "I'm ready to leave it behind."

Then the pivot: "Turns out, a lot of the stuff in that trunk was put there by someone else. Family, friends, strangers, you name it. After dragging it around for ten or fifteen years, it became 'mine/me.' "

The ego, he concludes, is just a character – like Willy Loman. Different makeup every time he walks onstage. Not real. "For most of my life, I didn't know it was a play. I thought I was Willy Loman. Now I'm sort of watching from the wings."

That's Steve's version of awakening. Not enlightenment with capital letters, but the gradual realization that the performance has been running without your consent and you can see it now. He doesn't claim to have solved anything. He says he's "becoming aware" – which is honest, because that process never really finishes.

What Am I? The Process, Not the Thing

Three years later, in his most concise post on selfhood, he answered the question with seven words: "I am neither Ship A nor Ship B, nor any of the parts thereof." He is, instead, "the process – the activity – of A becoming B." What is more accurate than who.

This is the Ship of Theseus applied to himself, and it's as close as Steve gets to a personal statement of nonduality. He doesn't land on an essence or a core. He lands on *activity* – the verb, not the noun. The happening, not the thing happening. This echoes through everything he reads: Alan Watts saying "there is no being, only becoming"; Nisargadatta saying you are "nothing perceivable, or imaginable"; Robert Wolfe describing the human as "merely part of the landscape" with no agenda and no intent.

Steve keeps coming back to process over substance because it's the one formulation that survives actual examination. You can't find a self if what you're looking for is a thing – because there isn't one. But you can notice the activity of noticing. That's where meditation comes in.

The Best Half Hour of His Day

Steve's meditation practice is unpretentious to the point of stubbornness: "I sit on a cushion for 30 minutes (sometimes as long as an hour) and concentrate on my breathing. That's it." He tracks his streaks obsessively – 371 days, then 271, aiming to beat the first one. He broke the first streak with pneumonia. The second with his high school reunion. Human details in a practice that's supposed to transcend the human.

He can't control the quality of his sessions, only whether he shows up. Which is important to him. That distinction – between controlling the outcome and controlling the showing up – is itself a nondual insight dressed as practical advice. You don't meditate to achieve awareness; you meditate because meditation *is* awareness. The title quote from Steve Hagen says it directly: "Meditation is awareness."

His longest streak of uninterrupted practice runs over a year. He doesn't describe transcendent experiences or visions during those sessions. He describes sitting on a cushion and

concentrating on breathing. The profundity is in the persistence, not the peak moments.

Thoughts Think Themselves

By 2017, he'd hit what he called a breakthrough with Robert Wright's **Why Buddhism Is True**. Not because he suddenly understood everything – "There is so much within and about Buddhism that are really hard for me to grasp" – but because Wright gave him "a tiny, brief glimpse" of emptiness and non-self. The humility in that phrasing is characteristic. Steve never claims mastery over these ideas. He collects glimpses.

The passages he highlights reveal his specific fascination: the way natural selection designed our brains to mislead us; the way thoughts think themselves; the way we "think you're directing the movie, but you're actually just watching it." His favorite image from the book is the cinema metaphor – we get caught up in the drama of our thoughts, forgetting they're essentially pixels on a screen. Ins substantial. Passing.

He marks particular passages with a hash symbol (#) – his notation for "this one

really lands." The ones he marks cluster around a single insight: the conscious self doesn't create thoughts; it receives them. Modules in the brain generate thoughts outside of consciousness, and whichever is strong enough wrests control of awareness. "You're not the king of the jungle," Wright writes, and Steve highlights it.

Gary Weber gets one highlight too: "If you're nothing, if you disappear, you can then be everything. But you can't be everything unless you are nothing." That's the nondual turn – the dissolution of the separate self isn't loss but expansion. You don't become void; you become the space in which everything appears.

The Tao Is Just a Name for Whatever Happens

Steve's engagement with Taoism runs parallel to his Buddhist reading, and he treats them as two descriptions of the same thing – which is exactly what Ray Grigg argues in **The Tao of Zen**. But Steve's Taoist posts are where his personal voice gets strongest.

In 2016, looking back over his life, he decides it was "mostly random. Luck. Being

at the right place at the right time." He lists specific forks: driving to Missouri for a law school test he didn't care about, which accidentally kept him out of Vietnam; not getting hired by the Memphis police department, which led him to the radio station where he met the person who changed his life; showing up at a honky-tonk on a night when Barb happened to be there. "I'm only here because I was there."

He calls this randomness "horrifying" – unless things work out well, I guess. Then it's wisdom. Or grace. Or Tao. The title says it all: "Tao is just a name for whatever happens." Not a plan or a purpose, but the pattern of whatever unfolds. You can't diverge from it because everything, anything, and nothing is Tao.

Four years later, during the pandemic, he finds William Gibson writing that someone is "exactly where, exactly what, exactly when he is meant to be. It is the Tao." Steve had read *All Tomorrow's Parties* countless times before, but this line didn't hit him until 2021 – "American democracy on the ropes. Millions dead/dying from a global pandemic. The planet gasping for breath." And in that moment of

collective crisis: "this is the most peaceful I've felt in months."

That's not intellectual acceptance. That's the Tao hitting differently when there's nowhere else to go.

You Are Alive

During the same period, he posts a meditation from David Cain about pretending your life is already over and you've been sent back to this one random moment – an office chair, a Home Depot line, a bowl of cereal on a Formica table. The exercise reframes everything as gift. "It's just so damn interesting to be alive and experiencing things."

Steve highlights the whole thing. Every paragraph. This is his measure of good nonfiction – the highlighter test – and this passage gets highlighted because it captures what he's been circling toward for two decades: the sheer inexplicability of being here at all. The "cold open" of birth, emerging from unconsciousness into light and color and sensation with no context or explanation. The fact that we can learn to see that mysteriousness again on purpose, by looking at the world as an

infant might – textures and feelings with no real names.

Schrödinger's Whole Shebang

In 2025, Steve posts about Schrödinger's theory of consciousness – Atman equals Brahman, the identity of individual consciousness with universal consciousness. He prefaces it with a self-deprecating aside: "Given how poor I was at math and science, my interest in quantum theory is surprising." But he's been drawn to this intersection for years. The video he links explores the convergence of quantum physics, Zen, and Buddhism, and Steve declares: "If you're looking for an explanation of how The Whole Shebang works, this is it for me."

Note the phrasing: "this is it *for me*." Not "this is the truth," but "this is the formulation that resonates with everything I've noticed over twenty-five years of reading and sitting on a cushion." He's not claiming to have solved consciousness. He's claiming to have found a map that matches his territory.

The Steady Accumulation

Steve's blog never announces an awakening

event. There's no capital-A Awakening, no moment where the sky opens and everything becomes clear. Instead, there's accumulation – post after post, year after year, each one another data point in the same investigation.

He reads Nisargadatta in 2012 and highlights "memory creates the illusion of continuity" and "time, space, causation are mental categories." He reads Ramana Maharshi and marks "there is no such thing as the 'I'. There is only the Self." He reads Sam Harris on free will and writes: "It sure feels as though I have free will. But the more I read about the subject... and think about it... the less certain I am."

The pattern of his engagement is itself a practice. Not the formal meditation practice – he keeps that separate, tracked in an app, measured in streaks – but the reading practice. The highlighter practice. Every book review is a way of asking the same question with different vocabulary: what is this? who is experiencing it? is there really a "who"?

He's not writing philosophy. He's keeping field notes from a very long experiment. The experiment is his own life, observed

through whatever lens he's currently holding – Buddhism one month, Taoism the next, neuroscience after that, Cormac McCarthy on the unconscious mind when that catches his attention. The lenses change but the question doesn't.

What Remains

By 2025, he can look back and say: "I've long been interested in the spiritual traditions of nondual awareness and have posted here half a dozen times." He's understating it – there are closer to fifty posts that touch these themes across twenty-five years. But the understatement is itself characteristic. Steve doesn't grandstand about his spiritual practice. He reports facts: he sits on a cushion, he reads books, he highlights passages, he occasionally stops and looks back down the path.

The essay that emerges from all of it – if you're willing to read it as one long continuous post spanning decades – is simple:

There is no permanent self, only a process of becoming. The thoughts you think don't come from you; they arrive in awareness like scenery passing a train window. You

are not the scenery and you are not the passenger watching it. You are the looking itself – the awareness that notices both the thought and the thinker as appearances within it. This awareness has no content, no story, no history. It's the zero point around which everything coalesces and dissolves.

The universe doesn't have a plan for you, but it also doesn't exclude you. Everything that happens is the Tao – not because there's a divine intelligence directing it, but because "Tao" is just the name we give to whatever unfolds when nothing is trying to control it. Your life was shaped by forks in the road you didn't see coming and decisions made by unconscious processes you never chose. And yet here you are, exactly where you're meant to be, because there's nowhere else you could possibly be.

You can sit on a cushion for thirty minutes every day and watch your breath. You can notice thoughts arriving without claiming them as yours. You can stack stones in a pile – not balancing them perfectly, just making a little pile – and find the process meditative. You can look at the world as an infant might, seeing textures and feelings with no real names.

And you can recognize that this moment of being alive, right now, is the most interesting thing that has ever happened or will ever happen, because it's the only one that actually exists.

The rest is just a story you tell yourself about it.