

MEDITATION: CONCENTRATION AND INSIGHT

How many people here meditate regularly or have learned to meditate at one time? How many would like to try? We will then in the course of my presentation.

My interest in meditation really was a side effect of my training in clinical psychology. At about the same time as I was doing my therapy practicums I started to meet people who had been meditating for some time. I also was rather dismayed to notice that the people who were supervising my therapy at the best hospitals—Harvard Medical School and so on—and were highly thought of in their own profession, psycho-analysis particularly, were not as (I do not know quite how to put it) “finished beings” as I wished them to be. They were just human beings like everyone else, although I had been somehow led into the expectation that they would be something more than that. However, people who had been meditating, although they were also human beings, seemed in the course of the meditation experience, especially if they were long-term practitioners, Yogis and so on, to have gone through and somewhat beyond the goals of therapy. I was very intrigued by this. It seemed to me that meditation might have some usefulness as an adjunct to therapy. For that reason I became very interested in meditation and, finally, went to India to study it. Because my background is in psychology and my interest is in both meditation as an applied psychological technique and in religion, in its root or esoteric forms, my psychological training influences my approach to our discussion of meditation.

I interpret meditation in terms of the framework of cognitive psychology; my initial attraction was because meditation seemed to be quite therapeutic and I wanted to know why. It seemed to me that every major religious tradition as I studied it, was speak-

ing about a single, universal transformation of being. I could see the universality only because I approached it as a psychologist, and in order to get to that universal level, I had to strip away the peculiarities and idiosyncrasies of belief systems I was not interested in cosmology, I was not interested in theology; I was interested in the specifics of technique, in what people said was the nature of the mind, how it worked and what they did with the mind and to what end. My interest was in what meditators said they did *only insofar* as they were giving me a pure—or as pure a phenomenological statement of that as I could get, seeing through the disparate vocabularies and conceptual systems of each religion. What I would like to do is describe to you what I see going on in meditation as I see it within various religions. Frankly, I do not see, from the point of view of meditation and of psychology, much difference between Zen Buddhism and Catholicism; between Judaism and Hinduism. Hopefully, why that is so will become more clear to you.

I, first of all, understand meditation to be a cognitive retraining. No matter how it is put, no matter what the specifics of technique, what meditation is at base is a retraining of our faculty of attention. One may be encouraged to meditate upon Christ, upon Krishna, upon a *bodhisattva*—it does not matter to me. I do not care what the object of meditation is. What interests me is the fact that one is retraining attention. Luckily for me—since it gets rather confusion when you try to put all this together from different traditions—I discovered in the southern Buddhist tradition a very clear, concise, almost obsessively complete manual of the mind called the *Visuddhimmagga*¹ of Buddhaghosa. But the *Visuddhimmagga* appealed to me because it does for the mind what a manual that might come with a new car does for the car. It says exactly how the mind works from a phenomenological point of view; where we go wrong; where the normal person needs to retrain his mind; what to do about it; what will happen if you do *this* meditation versus *that* meditation; what sequence of events will happen, where you will come out, and where you will be when you come out. The *Visuddhimmagga* delineates two very clear and different, distinct patterns or paths of meditation. I will describe them for you briefly.

1. *Visuddhimmagga* of Buddhaghosa, ed. C.A.F. Rhys Davids, 2 Vols. London: PTS, 1920-1921; tr. Bhikkhu Nānamoli, *Path of Purification*, Colombo: Semaage, 1964.

The first is the path of concentration. The technique of Transcendental Meditation—although the TM people may dispute it—actually fits this path. It is a path of one-pointedness. It is the path of the Hesychast, the path of the Sufi who does Zikar. It is what Zen meditation on breath is about. So that you may know what I am talking about I would like us all to try it for just a minute. Just sit up straight, breath, and if you were practising in a monastery in—you would do that for three days—all during your waking hours, just to be mindful of your breath—if you are really serious. What that does is to train you in something that we in the West are extremely naive about, that is, the training the faculty of attention which in classical philosophy and psychology has been called the “will”. What that allows you to do is to loosen your clinging to normal patterns of thought, because it is our normal patterns of thought, say the esoteric psychologies in religion, that bind us to this world, that form the web of illusion that constitutes *Māyā*. It is our normal process of thought, our normal perceptions of the world, our normal reactions to the world, all the things that preoccupy our mind, all the things that come up as distractions when you meditate: bills unpaid: what you are going to do after this; how you feel; or remember the time when...; what will I do when all of those things, those normal little bits of stuff which go through the mind—these are the realities or illusions which bind us to this world. In order to contact God, a transcendent sensibility, whatever it may be, however it is spoken of, *the process is always the same*—it is the goal of our compulsive clinging to that mode of thought, to the discursive universe, to everything that we can think about anything. And to go beyond that. Now, if you were to follow your breath for a number of days or years you might go through what the *Visuddhimagga* outlines as the path of concentration. There would finally come a point when, for a sustained period of time, may be just a moment, there did not arise in your awareness of breath. This first moment of clear concentration is called access concentration, and what it is an access to is an altered state of consciousness, a very clear awareness of the breath, which is uninterrupted by any other thought. It is the first moment of transcendence in this Path called “*Jhāna*” in Pali. It is called “*Samādhi*” in the Yoga tradition and it is called “*Fanah*” in Sufism. It has different names in different traditions, but the state itself is the same. The avenue to this state is the same and it is this pure one-pointedness of the mind. Now, if you adopt the one-pointedness of the mind to the point where you are so focused that the breath itself is too unwieldy and gross

an object, you let go of the breath, and you enter into what is called the second “*Jhāna*”, where there is in your mind only what are called “mental factors”, which include bliss, rapture, one-pointedness, and two or three others. But there is no longer even awareness of your breath. This is a state of just pure “awareness.” Now, if you get to the point where that level seems gross itself, you let go of the rapture and you have only bliss, concentration and so on, until you get to increasingly subtle states of mind, which finally have only concentration and equanimity in them. There is no other thought in the mind; the ultimate end of this progression is a sphere so subtle that it is described as a sphere of neither perception nor non-perception. This is the end point of the Path of *Jhana* in the *Visuddhimmagga*. Augustine describes this very same progression. He says: “When you can pray without distraction, then abandoning the many and the varied we shall unite with the One, the single, the unifying, directly in a union which transcends reason.” (That is the hallmark of this state.) “Then the heart is filled with radiance by the penetration of the Holy Spirit. This is the necessary *preparation* for grace,”... for returning. Look at the brain as a returning mechanism. The messages you pick up from the universe have to do with your current state of consciousness. When you are in a pure, refined state of consciousness you are not filled with lust, anger, or greed; you are not filled with any of the thoughts which keep us on this plane, and so you are open to grace. That same progression is described in many different religious traditions in exactly the same way.

This experience of pure transcendence in *Jhana* or in *Samadhi* is not the end of the path. Transcendence is well and good and extremely important, but from a psychological point of view and also in these traditions, it really does not matter if you cannot bring that divine down into this world. So the person comes out of the *Samadhi* state, out of *Jhana*, but comes out in such a way that he no longer clings to what is seen in the *Visuddhimmagga*, for example, as negative states of mind; or in psychology, states such as anxiety, lust, of whatever it is that blinds us or limits our vision. The person fills his being, his consciousness with this higher awareness. This is the Path of concentration.

I think Maimonides in “*The Guide to the Perplexed*” describes the same path. You see it in most major religious traditions. The other path, is the one called in the *Visuddhimmagga* the Path of Insight. Insight does not try to transcend this world immedi-

ately, but it tries to go through this world to a higher awareness without abandoning it. And the way you do this is to be totally attuned to the moment as it is occurring right now, without being distracted. You see things just as they are. The name of the meditative tradition is *Vepasbna*, which translated into English means, "seeing things just as they are." This path begins with mindful meditation, where, for example, if I were to drink this glass of water mindfully I would let go any thought other than drinking this glass of water. I would tune into my perception the sensation of drinking this glass of water so that, as my hand started to reach for the glass of water, I would notice my intention to move my hand—the slow pull of the muscles as my arm extended toward the glass—the shift in my body as I lean forward to reach the glass—my hand opening to grasp the glass—the touch of the glass—the coolness of it—the stretching of my hand, my arm—the leaning of my body—the weight of the glass as I started to lift—the movement of the arm coming toward my mouth—the anticipation in my mind of the glass reaching my mouth—note the feeling of the muscles as they pull my arm toward my mouth—at the moment of contact, I would note the glass upon my lips... and so on, through the whole progression. This is "mindfulness". The reason that you slow down in the initial stages of mindfulness is that our minds function at such a rapid pace normally, that we need to stop the world a little in order to get off. But as you progress in this teaching, in this technique, finally you are able to be that mindful at our normal speedy pace. But, again this mindfulness is not the goal. The goal is to bring the mind to such a fine and subtle state of self-observation, that you begin to see each discrete unit of thought, until, finally, you see the smallest units of thought which are called mind-moments, this is the atom of thought, the least unit. And you see the way these individual units are linked to form the stream of consciousness. You reach a stage where you see the beginning of each mind-moment and then, finally, you get to the stage where each mind-moment as you see it disappears. On the way to that, by the way, you have gone through a stage called "*pseudo-nirvana*", where you are filled with bliss, rapture; you see lights, you feel that you have reached the end of the path and you tell everybody that you have and you encourage them to follow you. This is what is called the stage of defilement in this journey; it is one of the traps along the way. But, if you keep going and see all of those experiences of bliss, simply as mind-stuff arising, and if you let go of them too, then you proceed to the stage where you see each mind-moment dis-

appearing; now you are filled with horror and dread that the world is disappearing around you...your world as you understand it. You go through this stage of dread and terror until you become so disenchanted with any thought you could think, including the most exquisite bliss; just nothing pulls you, you see it all as hopeless, and when you reach that point, then you are able to enter a state of consciousness where you abandon the entire phenomenological field...absolutely nothing is in your mind whatsoever. This is a state of *Nirvana*. It is state of absolute cessation of awareness. You give up even the *Jhanas*, which are filled with only exquisite bliss. You go beyond that. And once you enter this state and emerge then—at least in this tradition—you are totally transformed; the being which emerges is on the path to sainthood (*arhatship*). With each emergence as you enter *Nirvana* in successively deeper levels of realization, you are brought closer and closer to a state of sainthood... and the psychology of sainthood is spelled out in great detail in this particular tradition. There are even names for the kinds of thoughts which *never* arise in the mind of a saint and which impede full awareness. And then, finally, at the ultimate end of this progression, you are totally freed from every single impure thought in your head... they simply do not arise any more. This is the psychology of the saint according to the *Visuddhimmagga*.

I like Thomas Merton's explanation of what this state is like. In his translation of *Chuang-tsu*, he writes; "No drives, no compulsions, no needs, no attractions. Then your affairs are under control. You are a free man." Now, my own sense of religious traditions is that they differ apparently in cosmology, belief system, idiosyncrasies of time and place. But at their very roots—if you look at what the Desert Fathers are doing in Skeet, and what goes on in a Zen Buddhist monastery, or what was going on in Lhasa among the Tibetan monks, and what goes on in a Sufi circle, or again, what the Kabulist is doing or what the Hesychast is doing—all are really engaged in this same universal transformation of being. The differences come when you get into the politics of religions, when you get into the theology, into the cosmology, and so on. That does not concern me. What intrigues me is the universal transformation that all of these beings are experiencing. For example, we can begin to see if we look at the *Bhakti* system and the Sufis, the Hesychasts, Rāja yoga, trans-

cendental meditation, *Kundalini yogis*, that all of these people are following concentration techniques. Their object of concentration may be very different... "*Kyrie eleison*" for the Hesychast, or a certain mantra in TM ... When I reached India, I found out "*I ying*"...which is a seed *mantra* to the Divine Mother and is used by Bengali devotees of Kali, for example. It does not matter that I did not know what it was I was meditating upon. From the point of view of a psychologist, what I was doing was bringing my mind to one point, however, passively. If you look at a Tibetan Buddhist doing the *Pashna*, a Zen monk doing *shikantaza* in Zazen, a devotee of Krishnamurti or the southern Buddhist monk doing *Pashna*, you would see that they are all following the path of mindfulness, of insight. Although accidental details may be different—these experiences at their root foundation, as viewed by cognitive psychology, are one and the same. The stages they describe, in fact, are identical. Now for the outcome: as a psychologist, my interest is not really in the transcendental states or in the altered states, but in the significance of those altered states for personality change. What you find is that in all of these paths the being who has gone through the whole process is described in the same way, with the same sorts of purity, with the same sorts of special abilities; and although the name of the state is very different, all seek to describe an awakened state. In *Bhakti*, in Raja yoga, and in many of the yoga traditions they speak of "*Samādhi*". In sufism it is *Kaka*; in Hesychasm they might speak of "purity of the heart"; in transcendental meditation "cosmic consciousness" of God Consciousness... all terms translated for the westerner. In Tibetan Buddhism or Mahāyāna Buddhism, generally, the *bodhisattva* is the same paradigm as the "saint" in Christianity. Goji speaks of an "objective consciousness," Krishnamurti of selected "awareness," the Theravada tradition the "*arhat*." I would say that at base each person, from the point of view of psychology, has the identical features of personality or of non-personality, if you will. This is a person who has given up selfishness, who has renounced this world. He has renounced his ego-centred personality. I would say that he does not need defence systems, he is beyond that.

Our Western psychology has no provision in its framework to describe such a person; it is simply inadequate. We have to

turn to these esoteric traditions to begin to understand such a being. But I think that no matter what the being is called, anyone from any of these traditions—if we met such a man on the street—we would recognize as a special sort of person, saying, here is a “saint” or here is a *bodhisattva*. Zen puts it very well: here is a couplet composed after an experience of “*satori*”:

“from of old there were
not two paths,
Those who have arrived all
walk the same road.”