

MEDITATION: A DISCRIMINATING REALIZATION

Meditation has arrived at the right time. At the height of scientific and technological progress and material affluence, man still feels the need to take stock of himself and to ask which way lies real progress. Maharshi Mahesh Yogi's TM and various yoga techniques and psychological relaxation methods have pointed out that man has an infinite vista of exploration within himself. Most methods of meditation have been goal-oriented, focusing attention on the one, infinite reality that is the ultimate end of man. Ancient Yoga proposed to arrest the dissipating outward movement of the mind and its faculties rooted in *Prakriti*, to bring it to a certain balance of functions and to subordinate it to the subjectivity of *Purusha* that stands isolated from this process as a pure witness. Theistic Hinduism of Ramanuja, Madhava and others, proposed a method for collecting all one's psychological powers through concentration and subordinating them through devotion to the one Lord, who is the immutable, infinite consciousness. Psychologists and psychiatrists describe meditation rather, "like coming home", a technique "to find, to recover, to come back to something of ourselves we once dimly and unknowingly had and have lost without knowing what it was", "an access to more of our human potential or being closer to ourselves and to reality"¹. Zen and TM have struck a compromise between these two extremes and fixed their attention on a formless, nameless area of objective silence. But Siddhartha Gautama Buddha's method of "right mindfulness" and *Samādhi*, and Sankara's "Advaita Vedānta" present a more meaningful religious synthesis of the two positions. Buddhism presents a practical approach while Advaita emphasizes a more philosophical method.

1. Lawrence LeShan. *How to Meditate* (New York: Bantam, 1973), p. 1.

Buddhacarita presents the story of Buddha's enlightenment through meditation. Siddhartha Gautama distressed by the sight of an old man, a sick man and a dead body, longed for silence and repaired to "a clean ground where the soft grass glittered like beryl" under the Jambu tree and "contemplating the birth and death of beings he undertook to steady his mind in meditation."² When philosophy and asceticism failed to provide an answer to the riddle of birth and death, he devoted himself to meditation and there he suddenly discovered that life is just suffering produced by a chain of causes—ignorance, karma formations, consciousness, name and form, the six senses, contact, sensation, craving, grasping, existence, birth, old age and death. This phenomenal world of things is not the world of reality, but simply a combination of parts that have to be separated, a sickness to be cured, a mask to be removed. The function of meditation is *not* to put together, synthesize and build up a new world of meanings, motivations and goals, but to concentrate attention on what exists, discover its identity as something unauthentic and alien, and detach oneself from it. The authentic cannot be conceived or affirmed; whatever can be conceived and affirmed will only strengthen the chain of our bondage. Fire, that is visible, is not authentic fire; it is burning oil or burning flax or something burning. Hence the authentic state is *nirvāna*, a blowing out of the visible fire. Humanity is wounded by the poisoned arrow of worldly existence. Instead of wasting time discussing the metaphysical reality of the world and the nature of the soul and the like, one should realize the whole complex of things as something alien to authenticity and should try to detach oneself from it.

Here Buddha's reaction to the theoretical and metaphysical approach prevalent in the Upanishads is understandable. For, the sixty two modes of argument ranging from nihilism (*ucchedavāda*) to eternalism (*sāsvatavada*) led only to the construction of conceptual systems and not to any direct realization of reality. Though the Vedic writings set forth beautiful systems of the ideas and interpretations of the world and of ultimate

2. cf. *Buddhacarita*, quoted W.T. de Bary, *The Buddhist Tradition, in India, China and Japan*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), pp. 64-65.

reality, none of the writers of these books claimed any direct realization of ultimate reality.³ Hence, abandoning theory, Buddha opted for the practical approach of self-discipline. His choice is a middle path between the extremes of rigid asceticism and a life of pleasure. For him, the world of reality is neither a mere shadow nor a participation from an absolute reality that can be grasped only through concepts and images. It is rather an aggregate, a psychosomatic process, deeply psychological and moral, that cannot be reduced to any abstract idea, such as substance or subject. It has only a reality of continuous transience (*anicca*), non-substantiality (*anatta*) and sorrow (*dubbkha*). Hence the primary need is to realize that these aggregates do not constitute the world of reality. This cannot be done by reducing them theoretically to an ideal world. The eight-fold path presents an alternative to the way of theoretical knowledge; it is a practical approach centred in meditation: Right views and right resolve define the sphere of *prajña* or knowledge; right speech, conduct and livelihood constitute *sila* or good behaviour, culminating in *samādhi* or meditation consisting of right effort, or attention, mindfulness or discrimination and, finally, concentration. The importance of this approach of meditation is that it does not superimpose on reality a scheme or structure from the outside but only discerns what is actually there as it discriminates between the authentic and the unauthentic.

This method of meditation is explained in detail in Buddha's reported instruction to his son Rahula on right mindfulness. Instead of looking on the body as something to be pampered by pleasures or purified by austerities, one should realize that it is a combination of solids like bone and flesh, liquids like blood and bile, various vapours and energies—all forms of the cosmic elements of earth, water, air and fire. This meditation should enable one to understand the unauthenticity of the world of experience on the one hand, and at the same time imitate the indifference and equanimity of earth, water, air etc. to all kinds of treatment pleasurable and painful, favourable as well as unfavourable.

Buddhism made use of the yoga techniques current at the time, such as, correct posture and correct breathing. Yet its goal was not to collect and integrate dissipated psychic powers but rather to get rid of one's psychological identification with the vital

3. cf. *Majjimanikaya* (M) II, 170; *Dighanik.* (D) I, 238; I, 239.

and cognitive processes: "While inhaling or exhaling the monk trains himself to be conscious of the whole of his body...to be fully conscious of the components of his mind...to realize the impermanence of all things...or to dwell on passionlessness or renunciation".⁴

The goal of this meditation, which may be described as emptiness or silence, is not purely negative but the most positive condition of ultimate authenticity. This is clearly indicated by Buddha's final instruction to his disciples:

So, Ananda, you must be your own lamps, be your own refuges. Take refuge in nothing outside yourselves. Hold firm to the truth as a lamp and a refuge, and do not look for refuge in anything besides yourselves. A monk becomes his own lamp and refuge by continually looking on his body, feelings, perceptions, moods and ideas in such a manner that he conquers the cravings and depressions of ordinary men and is always strenuous, self-possessed and collected in mind. Whoever among my monks does this, either now or when I am dead, if he is anxious to learn, will reach the Summit.⁵

Samādhi or concentration, the end of meditation, is defined as *cittas'ekaggata*, one-pointedness of the mind. It is a sort of self-possession,⁶ and is joined with not only the suppression of mental hindrances of lust, ill-will, torpor, restlessness and doubt, but also with a deep tranquillity,⁷ and contentment (*sentutti*). This contentment is the highest wealth.

The *Visuddhi Magga* of Buddhaghosa sets forth forty supports of meditation of which the four final sublime abodes are positive infinitudes or *brahmaviharass*, namely, love (*metta/maitri*), compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha*). But the final state of this *dhyana* or meditation is without any object or image, going through *appanahita*, *animitta* and *sunyata samādhi* to the final concentration beyond emptiness itself.

Mahayana Buddhism in its concern to make the religious goal more tangible and concrete and appealing to the common man substituted the ideal of buddhahood in the place of emptiness,

4. *M. I.*, 420.

5. *Dighanik II*, 991.

6. *Ibid.* I, 47.

7. *Majj. Nik.* I, 27. 181.

silence and the indefinable final condition. Here Buddha is not made an object of meditation, but rather the symbol and ideal of the final state to be achieved through meditation. Asvaghosa, the author of the *Mahāyāna Śradhotpāda Śāstra* calls this state "*tathata*", suchness, which is not a purely intellectual concept, but something to be realized through deep intuition. This is the condition of Tathagata, the one who comes and goes without being involved in the process. To make clear this transcendental aspect of Buddhahood, Asvaghosa distinguished three bodies of Buddha: the historical (*nirmānakāya*), the ideal (*sambhogakāya*), and the transcendental (*dharmakāya*). The historical and the ideal states are integral to the condition of *Bodhisattva*, while Buddha's final passing over to the unchangeable condition of *dharmakāya* is a *Paranirvāna*; *nirvāna* is integral to the *samsāric* existence of the *bodhisattva*. What is important here is not a transcendental objective reality to be contemplated and understood, but a transcendental condition to be realized in one's own personality through the discipline of meditation.

Sankara's Advaitic Meditation

Advaitic approach to reality makes use of the same meditative approach as that of Buddhism. The disciple in Sankara's *Upadesasahasri* is instructed to approach the teacher with some gloomy view of life and the world, illusory and deluding, in which man is confused by his own distorted impressions and tossed about from one situation to another through passions. To attain peace and tranquillity and to be ready for the liberating instruction of the teacher, he has to realize that the world is an illusion over against the absolute and ineffable Brahman that alone is the one reality. As Sankara himself states at the beginning of his *Atmabodha*, "The technique of *atmasākshātkāra* or 'self-realization' can be learned only by one who has destroyed his sins by penance, weakened his passions, attained an inner tranquillity and is intensely desirous of attaining liberation."

His commentary on the *catussutri*, the first four aphorisms of the *Vedantasutras* gives an adequate idea of the Advaitic method of meditation. In the introduction, Sankara states the basic problem: the radical and irreducible opposition between the areas of subject and object, I and thou, which cannot be equally real or true. It is doubtless that only the area of "I" should be taken

as real and authentic, and the other since it is opposed to the "I" in essence and properties should be judged as unreal and false. But man's ordinary mode of speaking imposes the properties of a subject on an object in statement like "This is my property", "this is my body" and superimposes the properties of the object on the subject such as "I am fat", and "I suffer". This illusion is deep-seated in us, since it is a necessary condition for the operation of our senses and even for our religious rituals like sacrifice. It cannot be removed by wishful thinking or by theoretical reasoning. It is not a question of someone having a few illusory ideas or impressions, but a total situation in which the pure light of the inmost authentic Self is hidden by the outer layers of existence. Each one of the outer layers has a certain inner consistency, appearing as though it were existing and shining by itself, though all its light and consciousness is only a reflection from the one light within. This situation can be altered only through discernment, realizing that the outer layers are not really authentic but rather something superimposed on the real self.

Here the principle of *adhikarbheda*—the distinction between individual according to their psychological competence—becomes applicable. To one on the level of the *annamayatan*—the self of food—the world of things and its laws of material transaction appear valid. For him, sacrifice and ritual that symbolize and sacralize material things will be useful and valid, though for one on a more advanced stage of spiritual competence these may not be valid or useful.

Hence, the fundamental principle of advaitic meditation is enunciated by the first sutra of Badarayana, *athātobrahmajī-jñāsa*: "then, therefore, inquiry into Brahman". Here "then" means that earnest inquiry into the nature of Brahman comes after the preliminary discipline of the observance of caste duties, ritual, and simple human morality. "Therefore" means that this stage of investigation of the ultimate self has no causal connection with the prior state, but simply follows upon the realization that all those earlier conceptions are illusory and cannot by themselves lead to the knowledge of the Real. Here lies a fundamental divergence of opinion between Sankara and the school of Ramanuja, for whom all the prior discipline *causally* leads to an integral experience of Brahman.

The method of procedure from this earlier conceptual state to the intuitive realization of Brahman is one of withdrawal and

transcendence by a sort of leap formulated in the second sutra, *janmādyasyayatah*, "that from which the origin etc." While, for the theistic approach, the origin and process of the world of beings leads to a synthetic conception and understanding of the ultimate and infinite cause, for Sankara these are *only* a sign that they are not real, that the real is beyond and totally different from them all. Sankara offers the commonplace example of discovering the real moon from its reflections on the waves of the sea; a theist will insist on discovering the light, shape, etc. of the moon from its reflections. For Sankara, on the other hand, the several shaky reflections only tell us that they are not the real moon and ask us to look away from them, to look up to the sky to perceive directly the real moon. The fundamental principle in this matter is enunciated by Sankara: "*aunbhavāvasānatvat bhūtavastu vish-ayatvācca brahma jñānasya*". Since Brahman is an existent reality, it cannot be grasped by personal opinions, conceptions or even Scriptural descriptions, but only through *anubhava*, direct experience. To truly assess a post seen from afar, it is not enough to assert that it may be a man or something else; one has to approach closer, open one's eyes, and realize that it is a post and nothing else. Similarly, the function of meditation on Brahman is to leave behind purely subjective opinions, to abandon descriptions in terms of finite things and images about God, and to arrive at a direct experience of God.

Here the scope and limitations of Scripture in religious meditation become clear. According to the third sutra, *sāstrayomitvāt*, Scripture is the only proper source of information regarding supra-sensuous realities, especially Brahman. But Scripture does not provide the experience itself. Whether they be considered revelations by a personal deity or statements by sages who realized the ultimate reality, still Scriptural statements are set forth in human words which challenge us to attain the original experience of the sages through personal realization. Through the great *mahavākya* like *neti; neti*—"not so, not so", *ekamevādviṭiyam*—"one alone without a second", "Brahman is consciousness", and Brahman is my Self", Scripture constantly points to Brahman as its primary and ultimate meaning, a meaning which can be attained only through real discernment and direct experience.

Hence, as the fourth sutra, *tattusamanvayāt* indicates true meditation is an "*anvaya*", a synthesis of the various means to realize that God is totally different from all things falling within our ordinary experience. According to the "*arundhatidarsananyāya*",

through the pedagogical device of pointing out the star *arundhati* to a student, things falling within experience point *away from* themselves, saying they are not God but only point to the transcendental Self.

Sankara finds justification for this approach in consciousness itself. As he explains in his *Commentary on Gita II, 16*, in man's experience we find two types of consciousness, one particularised and limited by objects like a pot or a cloth, subject to change, a consciousness of something; and the other, pure consciousness itself of which the former are simply limitations and modifications. This unchanging underlying consciousness is the *sadbuddhi*: it is identical with being and reality. When ultimate reality is grasped, it cannot be achieved by a "consciousness of", since it would make God an object among objects. It can be realized *only* in the underlying subjectivity of pure consciousness, which is a light shining by itself. All particular finite things should be realized as finite, imperfect manifestations of the one infinite, immutable consciousness, to which they add nothing, except name and form, individuality and specific nature. Infinite reality of the supreme Self is like the great ocean: in relation to it, particular beings are like bubbles and foam. When this dependent and finite character of things is realized through discrimination, the infinite consciousness of the supreme Self shines forth by itself.

Conclusion.

Both Buddhism and Advaita place emphasis on discrimination. While Buddhism is content to call the final state of realization "emptiness" (whether it be conceived as emptiness, suchness, or ideation store), Sankara and Advaita Vedanta call it infinite, immutable consciousness, Brahman. Both are deeply religious forms of meditation. The goal is *not* to objectify, contemplate and adore a god or supreme reality out there, a god to which man is related by a participation, but to eliminate the masks and veils put on the face of reality and to disclose the ground and meaning of one's self-consciousness. Objectification of God as something out there is a mode of thought that follows the pattern of sense experience and imagination; it is a rational abstraction consequent upon them. For those who still dwell on the level of imagination, both Buddhism and Sankara provide modes of popular devotion. The *bhakti-stotrani* or devotional hymns of Sankara are famous in this respect.

But on the higher realms of the spirit, such meditation is inadequate.

The various religious traditions of man have not given a uniform and univocal definition of religious faith and religious experience. This is also a reason for different patterns of meditation. Patterns of religious faith have generally followed the modes of philosophical thought germane to a particular tradition. The Hebrews looked up to God for a model of their own behaviour. Accordingly, their fundamental insight was that man was created in the image and likeness of God; their spiritual search was to discover the true image in God himself. Hence, for them, religion was a life of constant encounter and comparison between the image and its prototype, and man's task was to find perfection in living in fidelity to God's covenant and in his presence. Hence their meditation concentrated on the "*kabod*", the glory of the Lord. The Greeks placed emphasis on formal causality and sought God as the form of all forms. Hence, for them, the ideal of meditation was contemplation, viewing God as the source of all intelligibility, perfection, and movement. Their concept of God as the first and efficient cause of all things was just an extension of this formal causality. As Aristotle says in *The Metaphysics*, the immovable Mover moves all things by being known and loved by all.

Indian thought had a predilection for material causality, the ground of one's being, the maternal principle from which all things proceed as from a womb. Sankara and the Vedantins constantly affirm that Brahman is both the material and efficient cause of all things. They do not recognize a material principle of things distinct from or independent of God. Hence, the role of meditation for Advaita and Buddhism is not to enter into an I-Thou dialogue with a wholly Other, nor to contemplate a distant transcendental object, but to realize what one actually is, to experience the authentic ground of one's being. The role of religious faith in the Indian traditions is not primarily accepting obediently what the wholly Other is revealing, nor totally submitting oneself to the light from above, but taking one's whole being in hand and casting off all masks and illusions, realizing one's own individual emptiness, and yet the fulness of the absolute ground.