

1 / The Domain of Meditation



The word “meditation” has been used to designate a variety of practices that differ enough from one another so that we may find trouble in defining what *meditation* is.

Is there a commonality among the diverse disciplines alluded to by this same word? Something that makes them only different forms of a common endeavor? Or are these various practices only superficially related by their being individual spiritual exercises? The latter, apparently, is the point of view of those who have chosen to equate meditation with only a certain type of practice, ignoring all the others that do not fit their description or definition. It is thus that in the Christian tradition meditation is most often understood as a dwelling upon certain ideas, or engaging in a directed intellectual course of activity; while some of those who are more familiar with Eastern methods of meditation equate the matter with a dwelling on anything *but* ideas, and with the attainment of an aconceptual state of mind that excludes intellectual activity. Richard of St. Victor, the influential theorist of meditation of the Christian Middle Ages, drew a distinction between meditation and contemplation according to purposefulness and the part played by reason:

Meditation with great mental industry plods along the steep and laborious road keeping the end in view. Contemplation on a free wing circles around with great nimbleness wherever the impulse takes it. . . . Meditation investigates, contemplation wonders.'

Other authors distinguish concentration from meditation, regarding the former as a mere drill for the latter. An interesting case of restriction of the term appears in Kapleau's *The Three Pillars of Zen*.² He insists that Za-Zen is not to be confused with meditation. This is a paradoxical proposition, since the very word *zen*, from the Chinese *ch'an*, ultimately derives from the concept of dhyana, meditation. Zen Buddhism is, therefore, meditation Buddhism in a real and practical sense. Yet the distinction is understandable in view of the apparent diversity of forms that meditation has taken, even within Buddhism.

The distinction between ideational versus non-ideational is only one of the many contrasting interpretations of the practices called meditation. Thus, while certain techniques (like those in the Tibetan Tantra) emphasize mental images, others discourage paying attention to any imagery; some involve sense organs and use visual forms (mandalas) or music, and others emphasize a complete withdrawal from the senses; some call for complete inaction, and others involve action (mantra), gestures (mudra), walking, or other activities. Again, some forms of meditation require the summoning up of specific feeling states, while others encourage an indifference beyond the identification with any particular illusion.

The very diversity of practices given the name of "meditation" by the followers of this or that particular approach is an invitation to search for the answer of what meditation is *beyond its forms*. And if we are not content just to trace the boundaries of a particular group of related techniques, but instead search for a unity within the diversity, we may indeed recognize such a unity in an *attitude*. We may find that, *regardless of the medium* in which meditation is carried out—whether images, physical experiences,

verbal utterances, etc.-the task of the meditator is essentially the same, as if the many forms of practice were nothing more than different occasions for the same basic exercise.

If we take this step beyond a behavioral definition of meditation in terms of a *procedure*, external or even internal, we may be able to see that meditation cannot be equated with thinking or non-thinking, with sitting still or dancing, with withdrawing from the senses or waking up the senses: meditation is concerned with the development of a *presence*, a modality of being, which may be expressed or developed in whatever situation the individual may be involved.

This presence or mode of being transforms whatever it touches. If its medium is movement, it will turn into dance; if stillness, into living sculpture; if thinking, into the higher reaches of intuition; if sensing, into a merging with the miracle of being; if feeling, into love; if singing, into sacred utterance; if speaking, into prayer or poetry; if doing the things of ordinary life, into a ritual in the name of God or a celebration of existence. Just as the spirit of our times is technique-oriented in its dealings with the external world, it is technique-oriented in its approach to psychological or spiritual reality. Yet, while numerous schools propound this or that method as a solution of human problems, we know that it is not merely the method but *the way in which it is employed* that determines its effectiveness, whether in psychotherapy, art, or education. The application of techniques or tools in an interpersonal situation depends upon an almost intangible "human factor" in the teacher, guide, or psychotherapist. When the case is that of the intrapersonal method of meditation, the human factor beyond the method becomes even more elusive. **Still**, as with other techniques, it is the *how* that counts more than the *what*. The question of the right attitude on the part of the meditator is the hardest for meditation teachers to transmit, and though it is the object of most supervision, may be apprehended only through practice.

It might be said that the attitude, or "inner posture," of the meditator is both his path and his goal. For the subtle, invisible how is not merely a *how to meditate* but a *how to be*, which in meditation is exercised in a simplified situation. And precisely because of its elusive quality beyond the domain of an instrumentality that may be described, the attitude that is the heart of meditation is generally sought after in the most simple external or "technical" situations: in stillness, silence, monotony, "just sitting." Just as we do not see the stars in daylight, but only in the absence of the sun, we may never taste the subtle essence of meditation in the daylight of ordinary activity in all its complexity. That essence may be revealed when we have suspended everything else but us, our presence, our attitude, beyond any activity or the lack of it. Whatever the outer situation, the inner task is simplified, so that nothing remains to do but gaze at a candle, listen to the hum in our own ears, or "do nothing." We may then discover that there are innumerable ways of gazing, listening, doing nothing; or, conversely, innumerable ways of *not* just gazing, not just listening, not just sitting. Against the background of the simplicity required by the exercise, we may become aware of ourselves and all that we bring to the situation, and we may begin to grasp experientially the question of attitude.

While practice in most activities implies the development of habits and the establishment of conditioning, the practice of meditation can be better understood as quite the opposite: a persistent effort to detect and become free from all conditioning, compulsive functioning of mind and body, habitual emotional responses that may contaminate the utterly simple situation required by the participant. This is why it may be said that the attitude of the meditator is both his path and his goal: the unconditioned state is the freedom of attainment and also the target of every single effort. What the meditator realizes in his practice is to a large extent how he is failing to meditate properly, and by becoming aware of his failings he gains understanding and the ability to let

go of his wrong way. The right way, the desired attitude, is what remains when we have, so to say, stepped out of the way.

If meditation is above all the pursuit of a certain state of mind, the practice of a certain attitude toward experience that transcends the qualities of this or that particular experience, a mental process rather than a mental content, let us then attempt to say what cannot be said, and speak of what this common core of meditation is.

A trait that all types of meditation have in common, even at the procedural level, gives us a clue to the attitude we are trying to describe: all meditation is a *dwelling upon* something.

While in most of one's daily life the mind flits from one subject or thought to another, and the body moves from one posture to another, meditation practices generally involve an effort to stop this merry-go-round of mental or other activity and to set our attention upon a single object, sensation, utterance, issue, mental state, or activity.

"Yoga," says Patanjali in his second aphorism, "is the inhibition of the modifications of the mind." As you may gather from this statement, the importance of dwelling upon something is not so much in the *something* but in the *dwelling upon*. It is this concentrated attitude that is being cultivated, and, with it, attention itself. Though all meditation leads to a stilling of the mind as described by Patanjali, it does not always consist in a voluntary attempt to stop all thinking or other mental activity. As an alternative, the very interruptions to meditation may be taken as a temporary meditation object, by dwelling upon them. There is, for example, a Theravadan practice that consists in watching the rising and falling of the abdomen during the breathing cycle. While acknowledging these movements, the meditator also acknowledges anything else that may enter his field of consciousness, whether sensations, emotions, or thoughts. He does it by mentally naming three times that of which he has become aware ("noise, noise, noise," "itching, itching, itching") and returning

to the rising and falling. As one meditation instructor put it: "There is no disturbance because any disturbance can be taken as a meditation object. Anger, worry, anxiety, fear, etc., when appearing should not be suppressed but should be accepted and acknowledged with awareness and comprehension. This meditation is for dwelling in clarity of consciousness and full awareness."

The practice described above is a compromise of freedom and constraint in the direction of attention, in that the meditator periodically returns to the "fixation point" of visual awareness of his respiratory movements. If we should take one further step toward freedom from a pre-established structure, we would have a form of meditation in which the task would be merely to be aware of the contents of consciousness at the moment. Though this openness to the present might appear to be the opposite of the concentrated type of attention required by gazing at a candle flame, it is not so. Even the flame as an object of concentration is an ever-changing object that requires, because of its very changeability, that the meditator be in touch with it moment after moment, in sustained openness to the present. But closer still is a comparison between the observation of the stream of consciousness and concentration on music. In the latter instance, we can clearly recognize that a focusing of attention is not only compatible with, but indispensable to, a full grasp of the inflections of sound.

Our normal state of mind is one that might be compared to an inattentive exposure to music. The mind is active, but only intermittently are we aware of the present. A real awakening to the unfolding of our psychic activity requires an effort of attention greater and not lesser than that demanded by attending to a fixed "object" like an image, verbal repetition, or a region of the body. In fact, it is because attention to the spontaneous flow of psychological events is so difficult that concentrative meditation *sensu stricto* is necessary either as an alternative or a preliminary.

Attending to one's breath, for instance, by counting and re-

maining undistracted by the sensations caused by the air in one's nose, is a much more "tangible" object of consciousness than feeling-states and thoughts, and by persisting we may discover the difference between true awareness and the fragmentary awareness that we ordinarily take to be complete. After acquiring a taste of "concentrated state" in this situation and some insight into the difficulties that it entails, we may be more prepared for the observation of "inner states."

Such a "taste" can be regarded as a foretaste, or, rather, a diluted form of the taste the knowledge of which might be the end result of meditation. In the terminology of Yoga, that ultimate state is called *samadhi*, and it is regarded as the natural development of *dhyana*, the meditative state, itself the result of an enhancement or development of *dharana*, concentration. Dharana, in turn, is regarded as a step following *pranayama*, the technique of breathing control particular to Yoga, which entails just such a concentrative effort as the spontaneous breathing of Buddhist meditation.

The process leading from simple concentration to the goal of meditation (*samadhi*, *kensho*, or whatever we may want to call it) is thus one of progressive refinement. By practicing attention we understand better and better what attention is; by concentrating or condensing the taste of meditation known to us we come closer and closer to its essence. Through this process of enhancing that *attitude* which is the gist of the practice, we enter states of mind that we may regard as unusual and, at the same time, as the very ground or core of what we consider our ordinary experience. We would have no such "ordinary" experience without awareness, for instance, but the intensification of awareness leads us to a perspective as unfamiliar as that of the world which intensified scientific knowledge reveals to us—a world without any of the properties evident to our senses, materiality itself included.

Awareness, though, is only a facet of that meditative state into

whose nature we are inquiring. Or, at least, it is only a facet if we understand the term as we usually do. The meditator who sets out to sharpen his awareness of awareness soon realizes that awareness is inseparable from other aspects of experience for which we have altogether different words, and so intertwined with them that it could be regarded as only conceptually independent from them.

Let us take the classical triad *sat-chit-ananda* according to the formulations of *Vedanta*, for instance. On the basis of the experiential realizations in which we are interested here, these three are our true nature and that of everything else, and the three are inseparable aspects of a unity: *sat* means being; *chit*, consciousness of mind; *ananda*, bliss.

From our ordinary point of view, these three seem quite distinct: we can conceive of being without bliss or awareness, of awareness without bliss. From the point of view of what to us is an unusual or "altered" state of consciousness, on the other hand, the individual sees his very identity in another light, so that he *is* consciousness. His very being is his act of awareness, and this act of awareness is not blissful but consists *in* bliss. While we ordinarily speak of pleasure as a reaction in *us* to *things*, the meditator in samadhi experiences no distinction between himself, the world, and the quality of his experience because he *is* his experience, and experience is of the nature of bliss. From his point of view, the ordinary state of consciousness is one of not truly experiencing, of not being in contact with the world or self, and, to that extent, not only deprived of bliss but comparable to a non-being.

Special states of consciousness are not more expressible than states of consciousness in general, and are bound to the same limitation that we can only understand what we have already experienced. Since the goal of meditation is precisely something beyond the bounds of our customary experience, anything that we might understand would probably be something that it is not,

and an attachment to the understanding could only prevent our progress. This is why many traditions have discouraged descriptions, avoided images or positive formulations of man's perfected state or of the deity, and stressed either practice or *negative* formulations:

It is named Invisible, Infinite, and Unbounded, in such terms as may indicate not what It is, but what It is not: for this, in my judgment, is more in accord with its nature, since, as the capital mysteries and the priestly traditions suggested, we are right in saying that It is not in the likeness of any created thing, and we cannot comprehend Its super-essential, invisible, and ineffable infinity. If, therefore, the negations in the descriptions of the divine are true, and the affirmations are inconsistent with It. . . .

-Dionysius the Areopagite

The teacher (Gautama) has taught that a "becoming" and a "non-becoming" are destroyed; therefore it obtains that: nirvana is neither an existent thing nor an unexistent thing."

-Nagarjuna

Never, never teach virtue . . . you will walk in danger, beware! beware!

Every man knows how useful it is to be useful.

No one seems to know how useful it is to be useless.

-Chuang-Tzu

Yet positive formulations of what existence looks or feels like in peak states of consciousness abound. When these are conceptual (as in terms of sat-chit-ananda or other trinities), they constitute the experiential core of theologies, theistic or non-theistic. When symbolic, they constitute true religious art, and some great art that we do not conventionally consider "religious." Both types of expression are important to consider in any attempt like ours, which is not properly one of "expressing" but of determining the psychological characteristics of the meditative state. Moreover, the symbols of the meditative state are part of the practice of

meditation itself in some of its forms, and we could not bypass their significance in any account of such disciplines.

Though, theoretically, any meditation object could suffice and be equivalent to any other, particular objects of meditation serve (especially for one not far advanced in the practice) the double function of a target of attention and a reminder of that right attitude which is both the path and the goal of meditation.

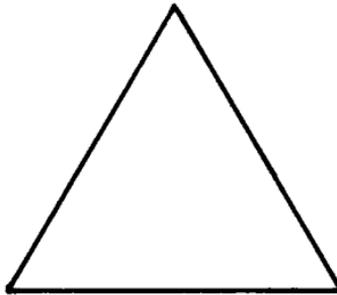
Just as our experience shows that certain poems, musical works, or paintings can hold our interest without being exhausted while others soon enter the category of the obvious, typical meditation objects partake of the quality of becoming more rather than less after repeated contemplations. A Buddhist sutra or a Christian litany, the symbol of the cross or the Star of David, the rose or the lotus, have not persisted as objects of meditation on the basis of tradition alone but on the grounds of a special virtue, a built-in appropriateness and richness, which meditators have discovered again and again throughout the centuries. Being symbols created by a higher state of consciousness, they evoke their source and always lead the meditator beyond his ordinary state of mind, a beyondness that is the meditator's deepest self, and the presence of which is the very heart of meditation.

We must not forget, however, that symbols, meditation objects, or "seeds" (bija) for meditation are only a technique. In contrast to the directive approach to meditation, in which the individual places himself under the influence of a symbol, we find a non-directive approach in which the person lets himself be guided by the promptings of his own deeper nature. Instead of letting a symbol shape his experience, he attends to his experience as given to his awareness, and by persisting in the attempt he finds that his perceptions undergo a progressive refinement. Instead of holding on to a rigid form handed down by tradition, he dwells upon the form that springs from his own spontaneity, until he may eventually find that in his own soul lies hidden the source of all traditions.

Still another alternative to the guiding influence of the symbol may be found in a purely negative approach, which is directive too, but only in a restrictive sense: instead of taking an object to dwell upon and identify with, the meditator here puts his effort in *moving away* from all objects, in *not* identifying with anything that he perceives. By departing from the known he thus allows for the unknown, by excluding the irrelevant he opens himself up to the relevant, and by dis-identifying from his current self concept, he may go into the aconceptual awakening of his true nature.

The three types of meditation may be represented as the three points of a triangle (as in Figure 1). At one end of the base (line)

The Negative Way: elimination,
detachment, emptiness, centered,
the "middle way"



The Way of Forms: concenua-
tion, absorption, union, outer-
directed, Apollonian

The Expressive Way: freedom,
transparence, surrender, inner-
directed, Dionysian

Figure 1

is represented meditation upon externally given symbolic objects, and at the other end is the contrasting alternative of meditation upon spontaneously arising contents of the mind. In the former, the person confronts an *other* (idea of God, etc.) upon which

he concentrates, in which he sees his own center, with which he identifies, and to which he seems receptive. In the latter, the meditator seeks to become receptive to, and to identify, with *himself*, without the mirror device of the symbol.

In the former approach the individual attempts to interiorize an externally given form, or projects his experience onto it, until his subjectivity is absorbed by the object. In the latter, the individual seeks attunement to an inner form or a formless depth out of which a personal form emerges—in imagery, thoughts, gestures, feelings, or, above all, as an attitude toward the situation at the moment. The former is an assimilative, introjective, or projective process. The latter, a process of expression. One is a formal approach that involves relinquishing of spontaneity, insofar as it keeps the meditator on the path worked by the symbol. The other approach not only does not involve extrinsically given forms, but could be seen as a pursuit of formlessness: the meditator seeks to relinquish expectations, preconceptions, predetermined courses of action, so as to make himself receptive to the promptings of his unprogrammed spontaneity. Just as the former is of a hieratic style, the latter is orgiastic; the former entails obedience to a pattern, the latter, freedom from the known; the former is Apollonian, the latter Dionysian.

Different as these two may seem, they converge upon a common end state, for, after all, the forms and symbols that the traditions of mankind offer as starting points for meditation have originated in spontaneity. And, conversely, a surrender to spontaneity leads not to chaos but to the expression of a definite structure that all men share. As Jung showed in the domain of visual fantasy, the images become more "collective"—and therefore similar to the universal patterns of myth—the more the subject explores his presumably individual depth.

In contrast with these two orientations in the task of meditation—one outer-directed and the other inner-directed—the third point in our triangle stands for a purely *negative* approach: not a

reaching out or a reaching in but a self-emptying. In this approach the effort is to attain a stillness of the mind's conceptualizing activity, a withdrawal from external perceptions and internal experience alike, to cultivate a detachment toward psychological acting in general. This method is based upon the experiential finding that the state we call wakefulness is in large measure of an inhibiting nature, so that our ordinary mental operations actively preclude or limit the occurrence of states such as those pursued in meditation. If we are able to accomplish nothing more than a stilling of the mind, bringing the goal-directed activity of our ordinary state of consciousness to a standstill, separating temporarily from our ego functions (and still retain consciousness), we may enter an altogether unfamiliar domain of experience without ever having sought it *positively* (*i.e.*, approached it as a goal known through symbolical or conceptual formulations).