


Epilogue:

A Personal Essay

 I END THIS BOOK with feelings of respect, humility, and acceptance. I have a great and renewed respect for our scientific tradition, and for those researchers who are pushing the frontier of our knowledge by investigating meditation practices. I have a similar respect for those involved in the personal quest on the meditation path. My humility is rooted in the goals I set at the start of the book, a mission of trying to bring these two traditions together. While writing I heard voices criticizing me. The "Western" voices said, "Shapiro is getting soft and anti-scientific; we always knew he was a bit of a flake anyway." The "Eastern" voices said: "Shapiro is corrupting our tradition; he's become too scientific, rigid and analytical; and does not know what he is talking about." I imagine both voices have a certain truth in them. I am not sure I can clearly bridge these two traditions. I feel somewhat humbled at the very idea of it, and, in retrospect, somewhat surprised at the "hubris" that allowed me to try to undertake it.

I have come up against many personal limitations in writing this book, and in my own meditation practice. With regard to the book, I am a clinical psychologist by training and experience. The farther afield I got in pursuing meditation research, the less competent I felt, and the harder I had to try in order to under-

stand others' writing. Therefore, the task of pulling together such a large, diverse literature on a theory, research, and clinical level has also been humbling.

This book is subtitled "A Scientific/Personal Exploration." I wanted it, in addition to being a scientific presentation, to reflect my own personal experience: fifteen months study in the Orient, nearly ten years of meditation practice, my attempt to integrate personal, often ineffable experiences with an intellectual, rational, inquiring "mind." This "personal" side is most evident in Chapter Two, in terms of my therapeutic orientation, and in Chapter Three, in the discussion of my meditation experiences. In this epilogue I would like to make explicit some additional issues I have been wrestling with, both in writing this book and in my practice of meditation.

There is a risk in this sharing. Partly it is the vulnerability of openness about my personal feelings. Partly it is the fear that this epilogue may be nothing more than a self-indulgent "true confession." My hope, of course, is that discussion such as this can contribute to a more total understanding of meditation, grounded both in scientific literature and personal experience.

Whether by nature or training, I am a curious, inquiring person. Until ten years ago, my main response to a new situation was, in general, to cope by intellectual means. More often than not that is still the case. Over the past ten years, through flute playing, meditation, poetry writing, and Sumi-e (brush stroke painting), I have worked on cultivating a style different from my rational, intellectual one: a more yielding, non-analytical, delicate mode. However, writing this book in general and the content analysis article in particular (Chapter Three) have made me confront some strong barriers I have to writing about my own meditation experiences. I feared that analyzing that new mode in the service of professional career could destroy the very thing I was trying to create.

Let me give an example. One morning while meditating on the beach at Laguna, I had a glowing, warm feeling which was, in many ways, overpowering. Images of friends, colleagues, loved ones and enemies came pouring forth. Each person's face had a vivid detail to it. Further, each person's face had a certain pose of delicacy and graciousness. Even when the face of a person whom I did not like appeared, it was in a friendly, kind posture, showing them in their best light. This posture was one which I

had in fact seen them in at some point in our relationship. I saw and I experienced an essence of tenderness and gentleness in each person. I could feel and think no evil thoughts; they were transformed into a positive glow.

Now from a scientific standpoint, one could argue quite justifiably that 1) a cognitive reframing, or restructuring was occurring, or 2) a respondent conditioning of negative images paired with a lovely ocean setting was occurring. We could also discuss the role of images and cognitions in shaping behavior.

But this was my peak experience. I did not want this personal experience to be reduced to conform to a scientific model. How to resolve this? On the one hand, I believe that scientific analysis can and should occur regarding altered states. I thought Walter and Harriet Mischel's (1958) experimental analysis of trances was a seminal article. Yet, from a subjective viewpoint, I did not want *my* experience to be reduced to "cognitive restructuring." That is not a rational, but a gut response.

This duality is one I wrestle with frequently. The East says do not research meditation, and do not analyze it. The West says, it is not real unless you can come up with some kind of concrete, valid, replicable study.

That contradiction became particularly acute when, during the September 1977 content-analysis research project, I went to Tassajara, a Zen retreat in Carmel Valley, for a few days. Not only was the above an unresolved issue for me, but there were strong anti-scientific demand characteristics at the monastery. For example, I asked if, when no one else was in the meditation room, I could meditate and conduct my experiment, which involved the use of a tape recorder. I was told absolutely not. Electricity was not allowed in the meditation room—even vacuum cleaners were anathema, they cleaned the room by whisk brooms. I felt very scientific, precise, and awkward to be recording and writing down thoughts of meditation. While at Tassajara I gave up my attempt to analyze meditation.

Creative words

flow down stream

with the current.

Yet, if we look closely, we can see that the Eastern traditions do have elaborate hierarchies and charts of attention and

consciousness that must necessarily have been made from the analysis of meditation (see the texts of the Mahā mudra, the *Visuddhimagga*).

Thoughts themselves are not *a priori* wrong. Analysis is not wrong—if it is seen as a tool, a paradigm with which to understand reality. If it is seen as the only tool, then it becomes a blinder separating us from some important and powerful human experiences and ways of interacting with each other (cf. Martin Buber, 1958, 1961). However, by eschewing analysis, I believe we are faced with an equally limiting blinder, an accepting with blind faith all things “esoteric” and mysterious. This can easily lead to dangerous cultism. The issue seems one of balance.

My first experiences of meditation occurred prior to any formal training in psychology in general and psychotherapy in particular. Therefore, I do not have any base-line comparison. It is nearly impossible for me to assess the ways meditation has affected me from a clinical standpoint. In terms of my personal development, I think this has strong advantages. I did not have any preconceived framework in which to place meditation. I had not yet developed good analytical skills with which to analyze why meditation was working or not working, and I had no intention of researching meditation when I first began to learn it.

However, from a research standpoint, there may have been certain disadvantages to this sequence. I may have been more caught up in my belief systems about what meditation might or might not do and less observant about what actually was happening from an experimental standpoint. Meditation may have sharpened my powers of observation, but it may have sharpened a type of observation different from the analytical Western research skills I have since developed. I had a strong reluctance to actually analyze my own meditation experience once I had been trained in Western behavioral sciences. Meditation traditions are clear that analysis, logic and reason get in the way of meditation experience. Therefore, for a long time, I kept the two areas separate: 1) studying the effects of meditation on other individuals, analyzing their experiences and, 2) other than a journal which I have kept daily, doing very little formal analysis of my own meditation experiences. I might add, having completed the content analysis project, that the Eastern traditions are right! Doing this kind of research on meditation does affect the qualitative experience while meditating. I hope, however, that

even though short-term meditation experience was more onerous, less enjoyable, eventually it will give us some understanding of meditation that will facilitate other individuals' practice of meditation. A small price to pay for progress?!

Another issue for me relates to my own ego. Meditation traditions are quite clear about the importance of humbleness, honesty, purity and integrity, as important preparatory virtues for facilitating meditation practice. I strongly believe in these virtues and work toward attaining them. Several times during my meditation experiences, I have felt that “inner peace,” and, as Mickey Stunkard once jested about his own experience, I too felt, if they gave certificates for enlightenment, I was ready. But my daily existence is filled with ego-oriented events: first and second authorship: annoyance at seeing “my” meditation tape passed over for another's, etc. During my “content-analysis” experiment, I was surprised and not a little disturbed at the number of ego-related competitive thoughts I had. So the vision remains tantalizing; sometimes reached and experienced but lost again; sometimes a self-acceptance, even with the imperfections of the struggle; often not. Again, the goal seems clear; the path difficult.

Breath soaring
a seagull's meditation
yielding to the wind.

Another issue for me, and others with similar “goal-orientation,” is the problem of approaching meditation in a “Western way”—looking for the end product, rather than at the process. This has two ramifications. First, there are a lot of “shoulds” associated with reaching the goal, and doing so “perfectly.” For example, during the initial years of practice, I felt I “should” practice a certain length of time. If I did not, I felt I was failing not only myself but also “The Great Meditation Teacher in the Sky.” There is a discipline involved in learning to still one's mind and body; however doing it with a compulsive “I had better succeed” attitude, and trying to compete, if only with myself for “longer times” was not helpful. Rather, as in the case study in Chapter Two, it was just another opportunity for me to be critical about myself. What do I do, for example, when I am trying to meditate for a half hour, and my two and four-year old children come home, rush in, and say “Hi, Daddy.” Of course the

true Zen master makes them part of his meditation. Sometimes I could, but for me, formal meditation is an important time to clean out, to reduce inputs, and get away from stimulations. I wanted to "finish" and so I would brace as I heard them, try to breathe, hug them, and ask them to give me a few more minutes alone. Then I would continue with meditation, and try to learn to accept "guilty feelings." How discrepant were my visions of whom I wanted to be with how I live each moment, leaving me to wonder if that gap would ever be closed.

Also, once having felt peak experiences, in which I was suffused with a lovely inner peace, I wanted them every time I meditated. Sometimes it would occur so easily. Other times I could try hard, I could try not trying, I could not try, but could not find the "entrance" into that special place. This still remains a frustration to me.

WHAT TASKS ARE LEFT: PERSONALLY/PROFESSIONALLY

How do I integrate a belief in an egoless, cooperative ethic with my individualistic, ambitious style? A belief in graceful, giving simplicity and social commitment with a lifestyle that involves possessions—two homes, two cars, flying at least a thousand miles a week. An inquiring intellectualism with my peaceful inner core experience?

At best I perform these actions sequentially. For me, that is the best compromise I have arrived at. I cannot both be analytical *and* in my peaceful space. It is also hard for me to gear up for a task without being on edge. My sense is I need to try to perfect both styles, and work on integrating them.

I believe the meditation field might benefit from similar advice. We need to 1) become *more visionary* in our attempt for a complete understanding of meditation and its potential for helping us expand our human potential; 2) we need to become *more precise* in our study of that task; and 3) we need to make sure that the two tasks do not lose sight of each other. Otherwise we have vision without grounding; or precision without important substance.

I would like to see each clinician, researcher, and meditation practitioner go more in depth. Our research needs to be more methodologically sophisticated and innovative, as suggested in

Chapters Five, Seven, and Ten. Clinically, we need more in-depth case studies, presenting how in fact meditation might be useful in therapy and health-related fields (Chapters Two and Three). On a practice level, it is hard to understand what you do not know about. We can only teach well what we truly know and understand. Therefore, a greater depth of experiential knowledge is necessary to push the frontiers on a personal level, to share in a precise way the problems, pitfalls, *and* possibilities that we might attain. We also need the theoreticians, with an overview, to give us models. Each of the four parts would require "lifetimes" of work for several individuals. The task for any one individual even to take a beginning, small first step toward accomplishing all four is enormous and, as I noted at the start of this epilogue, teaches humility.

So, the book ends, with respect for two traditions, humility at the size of the task and a recognition of the limitations of our humanness. The challenge remains: to struggle to push the limits of the self, personally, professionally, while remembering to temper the struggle with acceptance.

In peace.
DHS
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Laguna Beach, CA.