

## MEDITATIONS ON MEDITATION

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A little over ten years ago, in the summer of 1970, I was sitting in the meditation room of a Zen monastery, Daitoku-ji, in Kyoto, Japan. The master has raised a large stick over his head, and was about to give me a KWAT! on my shoulder. I watched his diaphonous white robe quiver, noted the soft movement of the candle flame, and then felt the blow. He bowed, I bowed. My sagging, tired body, my drowsy, thought-filled mind had returned abruptly to the on-going present:

Why was I there? As my mother so fondly asked twelve years ago, "Why would a nice Jewish boy from Kansas City, who had just gotten into Harvard Law School, go off to the Orient?"


The fifteen months that I lived in the Orient represented for me a "search for the miraculous," to borrow Ouspensky's phrase. Having done all the societally "right" things--college preparatory school, Phi Beta Kappa graduate from Stanford University--, I still seemed somehow incomplete. I felt as though I were on a treadmill, and to pursue the next step on the treadmill--a combined law and business degree--would still leave a major part of me unfulfilled.


So I turned first to my own Judeo-Christian heritage. I learned Hebrew and Greek to study the Old and New Testament; and went to Israel to trace Jesus's path through the Holy Land. I was on a quest for personal meaning, seeking some existential/religious sense of who I was, and how I was to fit in the world. After my study in Israel, I then traveled to the Orient.

### The "Mysterious" Orient

What did I find?

I had two major realizations during my time in the Orient. The first was how accurate the "treadmill" feeling had been. I had been strongly socialized, and it was only by leaving the society and culture where I had been raised that I could look back and begin to appreciate how deep and pervasive

that conditioning had been. I was incredibly ambitious, highly motivated, individualistic. I judged my worth by my accomplishments. The more accomplishments, the more I was worth. Unfortunately, if there were lean times, with few external rewards, I felt crushed. Further, to work cooperatively with someone else was certainly out of the question because that would diminish my share of the "limelight." 

In the Orient I became exposed to an ethic of cooperation and simplicity. Competition, striving for possessions and achievements, were considered obstacles to true personal growth, obstacles which took us away from, rather than closer to, our true self. This true self, sometimes called "Buddha nature," was a delicate, egoless, sensitive, and loving core. Meditation was training to let go of our "external" greed and competition, and turn inward to find that core. The Chinese word for self-nature consists of three characters: sun, rising (which together mean sound), and heart. When we can be quiet and sensitive enough to hear the sun rising in our heart, the sound of our heart, we know our "self."  I found this to be a beautiful image, and a compelling belief system. It provided a goal not of external striving and competition, where others are seen as obstacles to be overcome; but a goal of seeking an internal harmony, both with myself and with others.

Thus, my first lesson was the realization of a different value system than the one to which I had been conditioned.

The second lesson was that the method for achieving this harmony required a different style than the one I normally used. I had been educated, as was then and still is predominately true in Western schools, in the use of my rational mind. I had successfully developed good intellectual, analytical, and verbal skills. However, the practice of meditation was one which tried to teach me how to let go of thoughts, how to calm my mind. For beginning meditators, thoughts are seen as traps, not solutions. Over and over again,

I would find myself, during meditation, caught up in trivial thoughts, important thoughts, grand thoughts, small thoughts, but thoughts nonetheless. I became aware of how filled my mind was with constant chatter. To slow down the thoughts, must less to "stop" them, required enormous effort, exhausting discipline.

And yet, sometimes, it seemed almost at random, the thoughts would cease. While in the Orient, in addition to struggles with my chattering mind, I had some beautiful and powerful "thought-free" experiences. These "altered state" experiences filled me with a sense of harmony and connectedness, both with myself, with others, and with the world of nature. As I wrote in one journal entry in 1970,

All was still in the meditation hall except for the sound of raindrops striking the roof. Before my closed eyes I saw the white sand of the rock garden which lay outside the meditation hall, the sands so carefully raked to appear like the ocean. The rain mixed with the ocean of sand, and out of the union of the two bodies of water, an embryo was formed.

#### Toward a New Vision

That embryo became the start of a new path for me. I knew then that I wanted to live a life which emphasized the values that I had been learning. I wanted to be able to relate to other human beings, in Martin Buber's terms, in I-thou relationships; and I wanted to be able to share these new, compassionate values with others.

Upon returning to America, I was, initially, excited to see that many people were also expressing similar values. Throughout the early and mid 1970's, more and more people were learning to practice meditation, and a Gallup poll in 1976 noted that eight percent of the American population (sixteen million people) were involved in some way with Eastern disciplines and Eastern techniques such as meditation and yoga.

It seemed that meditation gained in popularity so quickly because there were many other individuals, like myself, who were dissatisfied with the

overreliance in our culture on rationality and intellectual analysis, the competitive, individualistic ethic. It seemed that our Western preoccupation with the intellectual basics, with technological progress, scientific advancement, getting "ahead," had at times been at the price of individual loneliness, a sense of a loss of personal values, a lack of poetic wonder and enthusiasm in often routinized lives.

We were seeking something more. We were seeking to break free from the shackles of a tyranny of the rational mind, our intellectual heritage which, from Socrates to Descartes, has stated that true reality and true understanding are only possible through rational discourse and precise, analytical thinking.

The attraction of meditation, and altered states of consciousness, then, is that it offers ways of developing a more intuitive and holistic understanding of reality. Further, the Eastern traditions provide a framework which emphasizes cooperation, personal harmony, non-competitiveness. Given the rather convincing literature on how excessive stress can cause and/or exacerbate disease; realizing that "Type A" individuals who are competitive, time pressured, hostile, always rushing, are also making themselves much more prone to heart attacks, it was again natural that a self-regulation technique, such as meditation, which can help individuals reduce stress, would be quite attractive to Americans.

#### Some Concerns

And yet I have some concerns about how meditation is viewed in the West. First, I am afraid that in recognizing the limitations of our rational and scientific tradition, some individuals may categorically dismiss it. I feel this would be a serious mistake. I believe that to live only in a "non-analytical," "holistic" state of altered consciousness can be just as limiting as living only in a rational state of consciousness. I believe that those who would

renounce their intellectual heritage, their rational skepticism, open themselves up to a dangerous gullibility--a following of leader's, "guru's" paths, on blind faith. This allows leaders to demand allegiance to one "right" way, and can lead to the atrocities of a Jonestown experience.

Second, I am concerned about meditation's oversell. Slick, Madison Avenue promotions are sometimes used to tout meditation as a grand and simple panacea. Unfortunately, this plays into the desire of many people in our culture who seem to want a quick and magical cure for their ills. Therefore, many who were attracted to meditation as "sugar coated tofu" will be disappointed. Just as technological and scientific progress demands enormous effort, so too internal progress requires as demanding an exacting an effort. I fear that there may soon be a meditation backlash in this country. Once it is seen that meditation is not "magic," many may decide that there is nothing there, and categorically dismiss it, too.

Just as I believe that our rational, scientific heritage should not be categorically dismissed, I also believe that methods for understanding reality in an intuitive, holistic way should likewise not be dismissed. At best, the two modes can complement each other, can balance each other, and provide for us a better vision, than either alone, of what it means to be fully human.