

MEDITATION

There is a common image that meditation is for the few - people who are terribly religious and ascetic and who have weird experiences that can only be termed mystical. In the past, perhaps these people would disappear and live in the heat of the desert alone, meditating. Even today those who want to meditate may think it is better to leave everything and disappear to the Himalayas and find a remote mountain peak on which to meditate. In the future, when there is no place left on earth, people may well turn to the isolation of a spaceship and space to meditate. Is this isolation really necessary and is meditation an esoteric practice reserved only for the few? Or perhaps those teachers are right who say that meditation is really something anybody can do to help them to relax and get masses of energy and live a conflict-free life. Such a simple word, meditation, and yet it generates all kinds of thoughts and images and feelings, even contradictory ones.

Meditation is as old as humanity. It is as natural a process as breathing, which starts life off in a human being. With that first breath, the baby comes into a new world. Simultaneously, with that first awareness of being, the human steps into a conscious world, and as the baby grows so does its consciousness. The domain of consciousness is the domain of meditation: we are already conscious beings, but the purpose of meditation is so that we can *realize* that we are conscious beings.

What do I mean by saying that meditation is a natural process? Partly, I mean that people have always done it. But also, all meditation *techniques* involve training the attention. Meditation requires placing your attention on an object, which might be a set of sounds or something visualized, to help you to direct your attention and keep you from being distracted. The field of meditation is attention; and attention is a perfectly natural human faculty. Everything you notice, however slightly, has by definition caught your attention; all experience can only be called experience in the first place because your attention has been involved. I remember how at school the greatest sin was not to pay attention to a lesson: the teachers are trying to get you to train your attention and even increase your attention span. I'm sure everyone has noticed how attention can be fickle: it can be grabbed by something, but then something else comes along which seems more interesting, so you stay with that for a few minutes, until the next thing comes along - and so on. On the other hand, I'm sure you have also noticed that you can pay attention to a thrilling book or film even for hours at a time! In a sense, meditation is continuing what your school teachers were up to - trying to train your attention!

So it is natural to pay attention, it is natural to have attention, to be attending creatures, to have consciousness to this extent. But to *realize* that we are conscious beings, we have to start a process that goes against the grain of nature. What is perfectly natural is that we are conscious beings, with the ability to become aware of ourselves. But the degree to which we become self-aware seems to be a matter of choice. The direction of meditation is inwards. It goes to the source of attention rather than to its effects and results. For example, if I turn my attention to the door, the result is that I can identify it as a door. I can say, 'I am looking at a door.' That is how we operate in our normal, everyday life. But in meditation we are not content with this natural process and we turn our attention in the opposite direction. In this respect, it *is* a withdrawal. It goes against the natural flow of activities. I said a short while ago that meditation directs your attention away from external distractions; but what does it direct attention *towards*? In meditation we pay attention to the *source* of all our external activities, and all our internal activities too. Like the desert fathers, the hermits and anchorites, monks and nuns, we have to isolate ourselves and be willing to enter a very private and secret world - here you are alone. This inner world is always present, but we seem to turn our backs on it and choose to ignore its reality, so that we live half a life.

A popular misconception about mystics and people who meditate is that they too live half a life by paying too much attention to the inner world and not enough to the outer: everyone knows the connotations of the phrase 'contemplating one's navel'! However, if you read accounts of their lives

you will find that the great meditators' lives were in fact characterized by plenty of activity, but, unlike the active lives we lead, their activity was of such an extraordinary character that the effects of their works can still be felt today. For example, St Teresa of Avila, a Christian Spanish nun who lived in the 16th century, led a life of prayer, meditation and contemplation. She also found time to initiate the reform of the Carmelite order and founded about seventeen new abbeys (and remember travelling was not easy or quick in those days) and wrote several books, and still had time to give to each of the nuns in her charge. Or take someone like Socrates - a great meditator who liked to question everything; not only did he talk a lot, but he inspired people like Plato and Aristotle to found such schools of thought that they have affected the way we still think. It would be easy to give other examples (such as the Devotio Moderna) but the point is that all these people lived a life where the inner and outer realms held little contradiction. But more than that, their lives were lived in such a way as to realize a greater human potential - not just to be conscious, but to be conscious that you are conscious - and so they act as standards, to remind us that this potential is a real possibility, not just reserved for a few but the common inheritance of every human being.

So, what is meditation? This is a very difficult question to answer. I have already implied that meditation has to do with the very basis of our existence, i.e. consciousness, and that it is a process which is, from different viewpoints, both natural and unnatural to human beings. It is a process which can be started and that, once started, its direction lies within to the source of being.

However, the difficulty surrounding the question of what meditation is, is not so much generated by the nature of meditation *per se*, but because mystery surrounds anything you seek to know the essence of. What is a chair? You might well answer, 'Something to sit on.' So are you saying that the function of anything determines what it is? In India people sit on a low platform of wood. Is that a chair? Then you might say that it is something you sit on which has a particular shape. So does the shape make it a chair? We could carry on in this vein for quite some time and all we would be doing was describing different attributes that go to make up this entity called 'chair'. We might end up being more familiar with all the parts of the chair, but is the chair the bits and pieces that go to make up the chair, or is the chair greater than the sum of its parts? In the final analysis how do we know the essence of the chair? In seeking to go to the very heart and essence of anything, we must be willing to enter into its mysteries and *know* it apart from all the images and forms that surround it. So it is with meditation - one can describe its function, describe its effects, describe its techniques and all the bits and pieces by which we might recognize it - but in the end we can only *know* it apart from all that.

That brings me to another mystifying aspect of meditation. We are beings who experience and who also have the capacity to learn and change from our experience. But the reality of any experience cannot be communicated to someone who has not experienced it. Let me take a simple example. Can I really communicate the delights of mango and sticky rice? I doubt that this Thai dish is within the experience of many readers. I can tell you that such a dish exists, and that once eaten it can never be forgotten. In fact most of you have probably eaten mangoes. To that add rice, which has been cooked in a special way to make it sticky; add to that a sauce made from coconut milk. It is bliss. It is the greatest delight my taste buds have encountered. I could go on and on. These descriptions, however, do not add a jot to *your* experience of mango and sticky rice; they do not help you to know it at all. Only direct experience of it may allow you to know it, and even that is conditional.

Why is experience conditional? As I said earlier, we can do all sorts of things - live life, eat mango and sticky rice, and so on - and all of this is called experience and is experience of a kind. But we can also be aware of what we are doing, and even beyond that we can know that we are aware of what we are doing. Each of these two extensions of normal, natural, everyday consciousness will condition what we call experience. For instance, if you are aware of what you are doing - and this is something everyone has done from time to time - then experience is much richer. Ultimately, however, it is only if you can also know that you are aware of what you are doing that there is a merging between you the

experiencer and the object. Only then is the object fully known - this is the only way to put it in English, but of course there is in this instance no such thing really as an object 'out there' or an experiencer 'in here', and therefore only this fully deserves to be called 'experience'. So it is with meditation: the mystique surrounding it is not so much because of the nature of meditation but because of the nature of experience itself.

However, it has also been said that unless knowledge can be communicated and passed on it is pretty useless. So how can we do that given the constraints of knowledge and experience themselves? Let us go back to that chair. I am sure you have all seen the famous painting by Van Gogh of a chair. Does Van Gogh manage to communicate to us the essence of the chair? Having known the essence, having the skills in painting, could he then capture the essence of chair by giving it a new form so that when somebody looked at it they too were aware of the essence of chair? Three things are necessary here: Van Gogh has to know the essence of the chair; he has to have the relevant skills to give form to that essence so that it is identifiable by others; and the person looking at the picture must be in a state that will allow something previously unknown to enter.

There is a further difficulty inherent in what I've been saying. Experience in the sense I described it can be seen as rather rarefied. In fact, it is quite common to have flashes of knowledge and experience of this kind. But what good does that do if it is not accompanied by a change in being - a total, radical change in what you are? Let's remember St Teresa. She beautifully illustrates the fact that meditation is not confined to rarefied, inner changes; it is also essential to lead an active life, to meditate not just for oneself but for others too, to put meditation into action. Such a person lives a life which shines with a light that acts as a beacon for successive generations.

What I've been outlining so far is, if you like, the state of being a complete meditator - I say this, rather than using a term like enlightenment, because there should be no end to the process of meditation. What I want to do next is quickly run through the stages of the process. For obvious reasons, I cannot hope to tell you what the inner process is like for you: it will vary from individual to individual. Each meditator's sense of himself or herself and the world at each stage of the meditative journey is unique. But each stage is governed by particular factors, which are recognizable and describable, but more importantly are the basic faculties which all human beings have in common. What it is to be a human being is to have faculties which rocks and angels do not have: since we are talking about human meditation, then these faculties will each have a part to play.

Meditation is a skill that has to be learned. To acquire any skill you have to first take on the discipline of practice. Once you get the hang of it, it becomes an art. Yet, unlike other skills, the process of meditation begins as soon as you start; it is not like typing which at one point you cannot do, and then you can.

Broadly speaking, meditation organizes your being by extending your conscious awareness. When we first start meditating we begin to recognize a seemingly stable point that we refer to as 'I' - to which belong my thoughts, my feelings, etc. This sense of 'I' has been built up since birth. As a baby grows, it learns to use its human faculties to handle the world around it. The baby learns through repetition and develops behaviour patterns which allow it to control its world. As it begins to associate one set of behaviour patterns with another, this 'I' begins to cohere. In time this crystallizes and we soon become creatures of habit. I am sure everyone is aware of how we constantly find ourselves in the same old situations, how we always respond to the same things in the same way, how our mind chatters along the same old grooves, how we fantasize about 'if only' situations. The 'I' is a crucial tool of consciousness which helps us to order and operate in the external world - but left to itself it also begins to lose itself in the very externals it is trying to control and begins to depend on them for its sense of self-worth.

With the practice of meditation you begin to recognize the `I' for what it is. In fact, in the early stages of meditation, there is usually an enormous battle between your intention to meditate and the `I' which does not wish to lose its hold. The way meditation brings the `I' into control is by tricking it. The object of meditation, whether it be a mantra, an action or an image, is repeated internally. This repetition wears the `I' down with boredom. By constantly paying attention to the source of the object's arising, you deflect the energy bound up in the internal chatter and divert it to the meditation.

Slowly the `I' becomes less identified with what it is not, and the scope of its consciousness widens to include the significance attached to what is happening. Because there is a degree of detachment from the external world, the `I' now has greater control of the external world and a sense of its own worth; it searches beyond externals to the underlying significance. The world begins to look rosy and is accompanied by more energy. Though the scope of the `I' has widened, it is still at the centre of the whole being, so that everything is viewed in terms of what is relevant to me and mine. However, as the force of identification to habitual patterns weakens, there is more awareness of impressions that are being received, because impressions are allowed to enter as new and fresh, and are not immediately locked into a familiar, habitual complex.

This conscious attention changes the nature of the impressions which are observed. We receive impressions through our senses and our breath. Without breath we would not be connected to life. So in fully observing impressions, we become conscious of life. There is, therefore, access to powerful instinctive energies at this stage. Old values are shaken - we begin to reappraise our lives. For example, we might for no apparent reason discard a job that we have done for years. Having access to these instinctive drives, which are very powerful, can be dangerous and can give rise to fear. If your foundation is weak - that is, if your `I' is not well organized - they can threaten your stability.

In the meditative process this stage is characterized by the ability to pay attention to the object of meditation for longer periods so that attention is not caught by this and that. One is aware of what one is doing and so life becomes richer and more meaningful. Because you are not entirely at the mercy of your own habits or external events, you begin to acquire some control over your life. But to progress further one has to give up this sense of `being in control'; this giving up arouses some fear. The personal is the most cherished, and why should one stand back from this? Why should we let our world crumble and come tumbling down?

Fortunately nature is kind. There are always limits. We never find ourselves in situations we can't cope with. There is an internal `monitor' that does not allow us to be overwhelmed. This monitoring mechanism could be called the Sentinel and as the name implies it is very much a guard, alert to every situation. Normally, we are not aware of it, but it is always present. Unlike the `I' which coheres as the baby grows, the Sentinel is always there. Let us just reconsider for a moment. As you become more aware of the `I' and what you are doing, what is aware? That locus of consciousness is the Sentinel.

This is a very enticing place to stop and rest in our meditative journey. In our everyday life we are in control and can lead purposeful lives. We can achieve what we want; we are relatively calm and unruffled. Internally, we are powered by our emotions and we may have all kinds of `experiences' that are out of the ordinary - but remember that in meditation we pay attention to the source of our being and not to effects, and these are effects and results of faculties that we possess. They are still disturbances. It is very often the case that we mistake the goal of meditation with one of its fruits, and it is when we eat of the fruit that we take a false turning.

At such a point it is necessary to re-commit oneself to meditation by acknowledging something bigger than oneself. It is the point when we honestly begin to realize that we don't know. This allows us to shift our centre of gravity, so to speak, from the personal to something more impersonal and we begin

to create a new foundation. If we are religious, we might well place our activities within the context of the divine, so that each action is done with remembrance of the divine. By realizing that we don't know, we make a greater effort to know, and what we could happily ignore before, we cannot any more. This is the beginning of real meditation - we almost have to re-learn the skills of paying attention, detaching ourselves from results and going to the source, because we are entering the unknown, going into silence and darkness. Here we touch on faith (i.e. evidence of things unseen). The terrain of consciousness is dark and formless; and we must enter it carrying with us none of our normal baggage - here no images, meanings and sense of 'I' are relevant. In fact, a sense of what is really relevant and important grows. It is the Sentinel within that wakes us up to that, and a different dimension comes into focus. This is the moral dimension.

For example, you can't quite ignore your slightly suspect motivations which were unconscious before - they are 'suspect' because they are I-based. You are beginning to get the strength to face them. What you might before have explained as justice when confronting somebody else's 'mote' is, you slowly realize, actually the beam of jealousy in your own heart. Little instances like this strengthen your will to go deeper and yet it is not a gloomy discovery because the basis of your understanding is different. Familiar desires begin to wane and don't sway you so easily. You can laugh at yourself. Here are the beginnings of discrimination and insight.

How are these developed at this stage? The Sentinel has the qualities of an alert guard who must notice every single thing and act appropriately - i.e. appropriately to the given moment, not a moment before and not a moment after. To act in the moment means you must discriminate what is necessary and go to the heart of it (which is insight). Faith, discrimination and insight are the tools of the Sentinel which develop meditation. By realizing that you don't know, you have started on the path of self-knowledge. This ignorance is the darkness that must be encountered.

As your meditation deepens - as you become even more detached - this silent darkness becomes more familiar, until you are conscious of it all the time. The place of your meditation and the place where you stand when dealing with the world are one. The change here is marked by a sense of how everything is as it should be - everything is quite ordinary and in its rightful place. But an understanding of *how* everything is as it should be grows, and the laws that govern it are known, and the desire grows to act from these laws.

As we delve deeper into the simple formlessness of meditation, we come closer to the sense of our individuality. In a way, this sense of individuality is comparable to the sense of 'I' I was talking about earlier, because it is a foundation, a place to stand and live from; but the first, crucial difference is that it is unshakeable by the whims and events of everyday life. It is your particular psyche - the whole of you, whatever you are doing. It encompasses you - your breath, your sense of 'I' and your Sentinel - and guides you: it is your will, but not your willfulness. It was always operative, but was previously a stranger; or when you were in a good mood, you described it as an external agent like a 'guardian angel'. But now it is no stranger. An awareness of the psyche again changes how we become conscious of ourselves and the world. The psyche seems to encompass all the bits and pieces of our being. We look to it to give us direction. By its very simplicity it keeps together the complexities of our particular being. It is like the conductor of a great orchestra who keeps the whole symphony together.

Being psyche-centred allows you to organize and become conscious of even the deepest and most formless strivings of your individuality. These strivings have created, shaped and moulded the pattern of your life, and though they can be known directly, up till now they have been known, if at all, indirectly, by what you have done. These strivings have such power that they have organized the growth and development of an individual. The psyche, conscious of these formless strivings, now directs them to gaze upon their source. Slowly, the last vestiges of all that stands between the knower

and the source drop away. Here we are talking about the minutest speck of dust that can come between this and that, and what was known 'in a glass darkly' before is now known 'face to face'. To gaze on the source with nothing between is to allow the psyche to come into its full power and glory.

But what is the full power and glory of psyche? Is it that it is *your* psyche? Look up at the stars on a clear night: in the immensity of that space, are *you* that important? What constitutes the power and the glory of the psyche, in the last resort, is that it is the tiniest fragment of humanity. But no fragment of humanity is in essence the slightest bit different from any other fragment of humanity. The common experience that the great mystics and sages share is that they have known that in the human essence there is divinity; and that because human essence is by definition what all humans share, they have known that this divinity is our common inheritance. This is what they have handed down to successive generations: that we can know the source and cause of our being; and that the source of our being is the source of all. The source of all is the One, God, or whatever you conceive the Highest to be. To realize this we have to give up even our image of our 'God' and die to ourselves utterly, so that we are totally new beings.

Being psyche-centred allows you to step into the divine world and in the presence of the divine where do you stand? And this is where meditation - the work - really begins.

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