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MEDITATION, SOME THOUGHTS

The decision to meditate, or to seek to intensify and intentionalize that process, comes from the conviction that there is something that you are missing--something here in my experience that I am failing to notice, and that that something is, perhaps, very important, or even the most important thing.

So, in the first instance, meditation has nothing to do with sitting somewhere alone or in a group looking like you are in a trance or any other way. It has to do with tuning your awareness--with noticing, if you will, the transparency of the immediate moment and then, finally, coming more and more to live in that awareness.

And you can say a lot more about that awareness, such as, it has been referred to as cosmic consciousness and enlightenment and samadhi, or it has been talked about as the realization of your true Self, and the capital S refers to something like, "your true Self is the Ultimate Self," or, in traditional Hindu terms, it is the Atman which is the same as the Brahman.

A second thing, now, about this awareness is that it is very difficult to achieve. That is, meditation is hard. This awareness is subtle. It doesn't hit you over the head like getting run into by a freight train, or it's only when you notice it that it hits you, but for some reason noticing it is hard. Everything seems to be a distraction from this. In particular, thoughts and so-called desires have this distracting ability. You are trying to focus your mind and along come lots of thoughts about everything, or special thoughts about things you have lots of feelings invested in, and immediately there you go, completely lost in your thoughts. What you are attempting to do in meditation is to get to a state of being able to observe this happening to you, it's sometimes called becoming aware of the Witness, who is your self that is intimately related to the ongoing "ground" that is the steady reality behind the changing thoughts. This is where you become aware of the background behind the individual boxcars as they pass by. You notice your thoughts and watch them go and don't get attached to any of them. And that is saying quite a lot because some of your thoughts are pretty serious--relationships you are involved in, your vocation, the demands of your job,--these thoughts cannot be ignored. But in as much as they consume your mind and attention you cannot discover that something, that most important thing, that you are missing.

There are three things that are offered for how to resolve this. The first one is perhaps the most important, and I so far don't see it at least formally discussed in the literature on meditation. It is simply, and not so simply, pronouncing absolution on your thoughts. Getting it said that it is ok to stop thinking about these serious concerns, or that it is ok to let your thoughts go. It is something like recognizing that this particular worry or concern will get handled, or if it doesn't get handled it is ok. And, this gets you into this, some of these concerns are really life and death--maybe they're all finally that--so it's almost that you have to get it said to yourself that death is ok in order to meditate. And the literature does talk about this--that approaching the ultimate states of consciousness is like dying--dying of your small self, your ego, the self you have identified as your self--so that meditation, like living, involves trust, a kind of ultimate trust that all this is in good hands. You can cover a lot of ground if you can really get this one clear. Usually it seems to come in little bursts. I get to a certain point and then I forget that I can trust what is happening. I can only "take so much". Anyway, that is the first one, if we could live in a pure state of absolution a meditative

state of consciousness would be our natural state.

Now, another aid to this process is what the literature calls the "primary object". Usually what is meant by this is the practice of focusing on your breath. This is a very traditional thing--it is called Anapana-sati Yoga and was invented by Buddha. It is used in Zen where you count your breaths, one-to-ten, and then start over, or if you get distracted, stop and start over. But the idea is that you concentrate on your breath, just watch it. In some forms of yoga you try to control it, but that is an advanced thing. But just keep focusing on the breath and when you find that you are doing something else, like thinking, come back to your breath. Back to your primary object. Now I think there are some reasons why the breath is the best, or one of the best, things to use as the primary object, but there are others. A very good one is sounds. Listen to whatever you hear. This gets into listening to the gaps between sound and to the sound "within you". Listening is a good way to experience many things and the one thing behind them. Another one is to focus on your own physical sensations, such as your pain. Another one is to focus on your own face; it's like focusing on "who you really are", not the idea of who you really are, but just your face. Perhaps it's more like who you actually are. But the point in all of this is to have something that you keep coming back to, or as an objective, something that you can focus on that would be continuous, something that you can ride on. One way of coming at paying attention to the breath is to think of it as moving on a continuum from the center of your being to the cosmic center--each breath, from the end of an inhalation to the end of an exhalation, goes this entire journey and your conscious awareness can attach itself to that journey because you are already making that journey since your breath is you. Having a primary object in meditation is, I think, like having a way to identify, and identify with, the void. Another reason focusing on the breath is helpful is that it literally connects your awareness to what it is that sustains you. You begin to notice the larger you that keeps you breathing when you aren't thinking about it.

The third way to come at this is the substitution of one thought for another. That's oversimplifying it, but it goes something like this. You are trying to concentrate or focus your mind, bring it to a single point, let it settle into just observing, a state of satisfaction with everything, where there is a kind of final serenity--but your mind keeps hopping around (the monkey mind), or it gets utterly caught up in something that it wants or is upset about or worried about or angry about or excited about. So what you do is you pick a thought, a bigger thought, to come back to. This is like Progoff's process meditation where he gets you to think bigger and bigger thoughts, history-long, ontological, deep, follow-your-intuition and-path-of-insight thoughts. The other one that operates on this basis is doing a mantra. The idea with all of this is that if your mind is going to be busy, let it be busy with something closer to what you are interested in than your worried jumpy thoughts of "normal" consciousness. Mantras are very interesting. Traditional ones, famous ones that have been used for centuries and others that may be known only within some particular school of yoga or whatever, are said to have originally been experienced by someone and "brought back" from that place and shared with others and that the reason these mantras have such power is because they are the sound that the universe is actually making. You can hear it if you are aware. If you repeat the sound it can bring you to the awareness. But the mantra is "further down the river" toward unity or toward the ultimate breakthrough, and when you use a mantra it is like taking a big leap ahead to the point in consciousness where the mantra is. One other thing about mantras where you can see why they are so effective is that they embody all three of these dynamics I'm talking about. They are like "the word of absolution",

for example, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me," or Om Mani Padme Hum," (God sits in my heart like a jewel unfolding like a lotus)--that's absolute. And they are like the primary object of breath or sound, the rhythm of doing a mantra is like the rhythm of your breath, and they give you an alternate set of thoughts to occupy your mind with.

So the question is, and the reason I am writing this at all, is something like, when you sit down to do meditation what do you do? What is the point? what are you out to accomplish? and once you decide that, how do you do it? In a way I think you're always in the dark about why you're doing this until it becomes clear to you. In doing Zen or zazen, sitting in Zen meditation, they say it's "just sitting". If you have some motive like "becoming enlightened" it keeps you from getting anywhere. But where is anywhere? Why do this at all? And more, why do we as the order need to do this, which is perhaps, the most important question of the lot. And a quick answer might be that it is necessary for us to inject a contemplative dynamic into our life. It has to do with the being mode, and with sensitizing ourselves again to the happening of the planet.

We need to work on this context. There is a corporate one and each person has to have a personal one. The following are some quotes that point in the direction of these contexts.

Some form of meditation is practiced in each of the great religious traditions of the world...meditation is a universal experimental discipline for the development of one's consciousness...(to) transform the mind from a state of unrest, confusion and disharmony to a state of equilibrium and joyfulness...

The tendency to be drawn away from your center by illusory attractions constitutes the greatest obstacle to meditation and to peace of mind. Working with this tendency is the central task of meditation. 1

Very early in my zen practice I had taken a vow to save all sentient beings...one of the four great vows handed down from Buddha to his followers...But in my case...I felt possessed by it. It was as if I had taken the vow in some other life...

I had no idea what saving sentient beings meant. I was quite sure that salvation in Buddhism was different from what Christians understood it to be. I left that problem to be solved later. The only thing I could do at that time was to throw myself into the practice of zen. When I did this the vow sank into the background; but suddenly it had come back to haunt me. And I realized that I didn't have all the time in the world. In order to save (even) one hundred sentient beings I would first have to speed up the process of saving myself.2

The meditation that I do is called vipassana meditation. It's from the Southern Buddhists and it's a very simple exercise.. It's the exercise of bringing your mind to one point.

1. Swami Ajaya, PhD. Yoga Psychology, A Practical Guide to Meditation.
2. Marian Mountain, The Zen Environment.

They use the analogy in India that it's like trying to take an elephant that has been wild in the jungle and putting one of those iron bands around its leg and then sticking a post in the ground to tame it. When the elephant suddenly realizes that you are trying to tame it, it gets wilder than it ever was at its wildest in the jungle, and it pulls at its leg and it can hurt its leg. It could break its leg, it starts to bleed, it does all kinds of things before it finally gives in and becomes tame. And this roughly is the tradition of meditation.³

Sometimes, I've found, knowing what to do can allay a bit the question of why I am doing this. If I know, well what I am doing in this meditation thing is sitting down and getting more or less comfortable and then after a bit focusing my attention on my breath, and when my attention strays bringing it back to my breath, that's all. Well ok, no big deal. I can do that. It might even be relaxing or something. And after a few tries, and it does take some tries, you begin to think of reasons why you might be doing this that nobody else could have told you. So it helps a lot to know what to do, in a very simple form.

Noone can really give you a way to do this, unless he or she is a genuine guru and knows you well. But it is my sense that everybody really knows already how to meditate. It is, like the art form, a life method. If you didn't already know about it you would be an utterly "attached" person, an immediate man, but totally distracted from anything effective by your worries. So the issue is really deciding how you are going to do it. And this would naturally take some experimenting. I have discovered I like to combine paying attention to my breath and listening. Both of these are also recommended a lot in what I read. I also like to keep my eyes open and connect what I am seeing with what I hear. But there's something important, especially for us, in doing it your own way--even if your way turns out to be like one that people have been using for centuries. If somebody says, well I do it this way, that almost rules that way out for somebody else, because they're going to say, well I'm not going to do it somebody else's way. There is just something about the image of a whole group of people sitting in a big room meditating that turns me off. Maybe it is necessary, but still. Last summer somebody started taking pictures of us when we were trying to do a group meditation. I really had to restrain myself from doing something foolish like get up and shout, "No photographs, this is a private party."

Although this experiment in the solitary spirit practices is very individual and solitary and private we need to find ways to talk about it and about our private experience of it. Reflection after a group session, talking papers, informal conversations. It seems to me that our research in this arena has largely to do with this talking to each other about it. It would be great, for example, if this cluster working on consciousness process began to get letters. Our corporate experience of this this year could be quite shocking.

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3. Ram Dass (Richard Alpert), The Only Dance There Is.