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January, 1973

Meditation and Modern Life

In his concluding remarks on the year 1972, Rev. Richard Norsworthy noted that at any given moment in history many highly visible people and events seem overwhelmingly important yet soon fade away with passage of time. On the other hand, it is often the subtle, almost unnoticed occurrences or developments which history will record as having deep and lasting significance for man.

I wish to briefly discuss a development which is just beginning, at least in the West--a development which is subtle but transforming, mysterious yet obvious, and capable of evolving individuals to deeper and more profound planes of existence. What I refer to is the practice of meditation--to put it a bit more broadly, the practice of meditative living.

Rightly or wrongly, the cultural forms which have satisfied Western man's emotional, social and materialistic yearnings for the past few centuries have undergone profound shock and deterioration in the middle third of this, the twentieth century. The crisis of culture about which Edmund Husserl spoke so eloquently is upon us. The social, political and economic forms which man has invented have divided man against man, even fractured the integrity of the individual man himself. Science is lost in the world. And so many of the offspring of science have grown to monsterhood and threaten to annihilate their own creator, man. In Carl Jung's phrase, "modern man has lost his soul".

With the triumph of scientism and the eclipse of faith, modern western man can see the indices of his despair rise as surely as he sees the stock market barometer lurch painfully onward and upward. These indices:

suicide, alcoholism, divorce, delinquency, drug addiction, emotional breakdown and chronic and increasing loneliness advance yearly. Yes, this is the dark side of our days with which we are so familiar we can almost ignore it.

On the positive side, we are in the midst of an emerging cultural openness and totalness of communication undreamed of just a few decades ago. And this cultural intermix and openness is just beginning.

One of the themes of this emerging cultural openness is a spiritual awakening on the part of Western man--a yearning to rediscover and reunify the soul which he has "lost". This thirst cannot be quenched by religious institutions and practices of the past--especially not by those whose truth rests upon the faith in a remote deity to whom one must pay homage and before whom one must stand in fear and trembling. Modern man now "knows" too much to seek and endure a spiritual relationship based on fear and obedience to an authority apart from himself.

In our search for spiritual renewal we have begun to open our individual minds and our collective culture to spiritual disciplines from the East. Ever-increasing numbers of spiritual teachers from India, China, Japan, Ceylon, Burma, Tibet and the middle east are making their way to Europe and North America. Eastern spiritual systems such as Yoga, Zen, Theravada Buddhism, Subud, Taoism, and Sufism are migrating to the West. A rich flood of esoteric literature is being made available to the Western reader, centers for spiritual study and practice are being established through the Western culture, and growing numbers of Western seekers find their way to the East yearly.

For the typical uninformed Westerner most of the Eastern practices seem complicated, ancient, and ineffable. What is not generally recognized

is that many of the Eastern spiritual disciplines have a rigor and discipline which is not less than scientific. For the most part, they may be described as philosophical, psychological and practical--practical in the sense that they are rooted in experience, are developed through behavioral practice, and can be related to every facet of an individual's daily life.

One major difference they exhibit from Western spiritual practices is that they seldom depend upon an outside savior. The various disciplines utilize teachers such as Buddha, Lao Tzu, and Rumi the Persian, among others. Such figures are, however, merely teachers and are not mediators between individual persons and a deity. The function of the teacher is to point to the path for spiritual development. Some of the practices which have been developed for this clearly surpass, in psychological sophistication, any Western procedures yet invented. The path itself must be followed by the individual himself.

Most Eastern spiritual advocates would likely agree with St. Augustine's formula: "Noli foras ire, in te redi, in interiore, homine habitat veritas". ("Do not wish to go out; go back into yourself. Truth dwells in the inner man.") Thus the individual is encouraged to take the necessary path to knowledge which can be ultimately justified in the highest sense--universal self-knowledge. This is knowledge which at once is spiritual, philosophical and psychological. Universal self-knowledge is the source to which one must turn for true spiritual evolution and is the foundation upon which all other forms of knowledge rest.

To my knowledge, all Eastern spiritual teachings use the practice of meditation as a basic psychological tool for the development of self-knowledge. At first glance there seems to be an unending variety of meditation forms

and practices. In his study on the psychology of meditation Claudio Naranjo has suggested three main types of meditation: the way of forms or absorption, the way of surrender or attunement, and the way of emptiness or void. In an attempt to grasp the essence of meditation it is well to bear in mind that if we succeed we shall also have found the essence of everything else: religion, art, philosophy, education, love and life.

In meditation through absorption, the concept of centering or centrality is important. Common meditative symbols are the lotus, the cross, the heart, the sun, the rose, the mandala. As the meditator dwells on symbolic objects, he is able to detach himself from peripheral distractions and slowly discover, identify and confirm the center of his own being --first through absorption in forms and then through the indwelling experience of his own body, emotions and mind. Centeredness, balance and growth emanating from the center are key images in absorptive meditation. Forms may be sound, visual or even movement. Mantra meditations like the sacred syllable AUM issue from the center of being and symbolize beginning and end--open mouth and closed mouth. Meditation upon the breath symbolizes the diastolic ebb and flow of the life force. In absorptive meditation the meditator places himself under the influence of symbols and experiences the effects of these on his emotions, body and states of mind.

In the way of surrender, the meditator "lets go" or "gives" himself to his inward experiences. Common Western examples of this are "speaking in tongues" or "automatic writing". The latihan familiar to Subud seekers is precisely a practice in the surrender of control. In the latihan a person gives himself to inward mental and bodily experiences as they naturally occur. Without the use of mental or psychological forcing, the practitioner of latihan achieves attunement (or becomes aware of its lack)

of body, mind and emotion at that precise moment and more generally in ordinary living.

The emptying way is exemplified by Zazen (just sitting) or the Theravadan practice of "bare attention". By learning to inwardly observe thoughts, moods, feelings and body states as they rise, remain and pass away, the meditator realizes the impermanence of everything thus preparing himself for the state of "no-mind". Through realizing the three basic dimensions of existence: impermanence, suffering and impersonality, the meditator empties his mind of clutter and discovers a paradoxical state of attentive detachment. Through cutting off desires, habits and feelings of resentment, hatred and doubt, the meditator seeks a purely receptive state of mind and thus be enabled to see things as they really are--undistorted by desire, fear, doubt and dislike.

Successful meditation may indeed require, depending upon the personality of the individual, practice in each of the three modes: absorption, surrender and emptying. An example of a specific meditative practice which entails all three is the Chinese practice of wu-hsin. In this practice the meditator observes his own stream of consciousness and refrains from interfering. This is an exercise of action-in-inaction. The mind becomes like a mirror--it projects nothing, it clings to nothing. Your mind becomes like space. Being like space, you are nothing. You are, therefore, purely receptive and may be filled with everything. This is an ultimate exercise in spontaneity and freedom. The river of the mind flows on its own course. Your spacious, empty mind accepts its course. You listen to the river, to the dharma. You follow the calling. Now you can let each and everything be, as it is, in itself. In wu-hsin, the object of meditation is the stream of consciousness itself. The meditator surrenders himself to it. In so doing he must also empty his mind of clinging, suffering, wanting--absorbed,

surrendered, in space, he lets be.

The meditation which has made the greatest advances in North America in the last decade is Transcendental Meditation (TM). TM is an uncomplicated practice of meditation on sound. This simple practice leads to an amazing variety of practical results including reductions in tension, moodiness, anxiety and increases in health, vitality, clarity of mind, productivity, self-confidence and creativity. According to the major proponent of TM, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the main limits to human realization, productivity and growth are in the mind itself. If one, through meditation, begins to unlock the reaches and boundless energies of the mind, then to quote the Maharishi, "Anything is possible, and anything means anything".

Beyond the specific claims made for TM what can be said about the results of meditative practice? For some persons the result is a genuine and profound transformation of their life. For some beginning meditators there are no results--one could hardly expect otherwise. Many Western minds are so conditioned in skepticism, materialism and resistant to inner experiencing or anything which can be labeled spiritual or mystical that there is little openness for meditation. Keeping in mind that both the practice and the results of meditation (in all of its varying forms) are individually experienced, we can list ten commonly reported results:

- 1) reduction of fatigue and insomnia,
- 2) attainment of a sense of stability, both mental and physical,
- 3) enrichment of spiritual life,
- 4) increase in patience and tolerance,
- 5) improved work efficiency and creativity,
- 6) reduction of alcohol, drug and nicotine use,
- 7) increased self-confidence and sense of self-responsibility,
- 8) decrease of aimless and superficial talk,
- 9) ability to concentrate is increased,
- 10) more frequent and deeper state of serenity is achieved.

If even one of these ten results were attained through meditation, then the effort of meditation would seem eminently worthwhile. For those individuals who are able to give themselves deeply to meditative practice, the result may well be no less than a quantum leap in the quality of their life--not later, but now.