

Calm-Abiding Meditation and the Ox-herding Pictures

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What is the clinical value of meditation? There have been many studies over the past thirty years which point to positive results, but a word of caution is probably good at the outset: certain borderline cases are too disturbed to be ready, as yet, to meditate, which may increase their sense of groundlessness. Such persons, when they arrive at a meditation centre may be filtered out and invited to help with practical tasks such as tea-making instead.

Where I have witnessed the benign effects of meditation is in psychotherapy, to which it is kin. There are therapists who, knowledgeable about meditation, invite their clients to practice it and also therapists who report finding it clinically useful themselves: the therapist is able to go deeper, to relax in difficult sessions, to handle the counter-transference with greater skill.

A recent article in *New Scientist*, widely quoted in the British press, 'proved' that the left prefrontal lobe of the brain, 'associated with positive emotions, good moods, foresight, planning and self-control' is unusually active among committed Buddhists. A Professor at Duke University called these results tantalising¹. He added: 'We can now hypothesise with some confidence that those apparently happy, calm Buddhist souls really are happy'. There was a time when His Holiness the Dalai Lama - I get the impression - was often being wired up to an EEG, to which he willingly consented, to try to discover more about his famous calm and happiness. Since he has no 'anxieties at all about empirical, scientific investigation of the effects of meditation, we might share his curiosity.

Page 109 of Ervin Laszlo's *The Whispering Pond: A Personal Guide to the Emerging Vision of Science* (1996), shows four different diagrams, each of which offers a slightly different view to that of *New Scientist*. In one set, the left (language-orientated, linear-thinking, rational) and right (gestalt-perceiving, intuitive) hemispheric EEG patterns of meditators are shown to be both synchronised and harmonic. An EEG of a non-meditator shows that neither of these conditions (synchronisation/harmony) obtain outside the state of meditation. Next, the EEG patterns of two subjects meditating together but without sensory contact, mysteriously converge. And finally, the EEG of twelve people in 'deep meditation' shows over 81% synchronisation of brain-wave patterns. (What significance should be given to the fact that all twelve are Italians, the author leaves it to us to guess).

These results are indeed curious, and I can vouchsafe to having witnessed what might be called group-*moods* on many month long retreats, but put no special value or emphasis upon them. I have always thought of such things as a by-product, or epiphenomenon. These scientists represent one kind of witness. I shall take the line that, in order truly to find out about meditation, it is necessary to practice it, as well as good to investigate it.

Buddhist meditation has often been seen as at best a harmless mystical preoccupation, at worst as a socially irresponsible self-indulgence. In the USA today 5 million are Buddhist; in Europe one million plus. The UK has

around 100 Tibetan centres, as well as ninety Theravada, and then some forty Zen, and lastly a further hundred or so other groups including Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. An audience for the Dalai Lama's teaching recently filled Wembley Conference Centre for three days. Celebrities such as Richard Gere, Tina Turner, John Cleese, and Steven Seagal have been claimed for it. And another scientist, Albert Einstein, wrote that it has the characteristics of what would be expected in a cosmic religion for the future ¹ : transcending a personal God, avoiding dogma and theology, covering both natural and spiritual and based on the experience of all things as a meaningful unity.

What is the purpose of meditation? I recently wrote a book entitled *Going Buddhist: Panic and Emptiness, the Buddha and Me* (2004) to try to find out why I have been both meditating by myself and also leading group-retreats, for the last twenty years. The book tries to explore relations between the panic attacks to which I've long been prone, and the Buddhist view of 'Emptiness'. To my surprise and pleasure, the book has been well-received.

Not infrequently people imagine that meditation implies going into a trance, levitating out of the realm of the here-and-now, going elsewhere. Freud famously misunderstood it. Though the commonest form of meditation has a name meaning 'Calm Abiding', meditation is not at first calm at all. Like therapy, it is often stormy at first - probably *necessarily* so. And, like therapy, it is a path, not a quick fix or a one-shot deal.

It is said to appeal to those hurt by the speed and aggression of the modern world, willing to look within to moderate their own speed and aggression. An early Dalai Lama spoke of two ways of dealing with the world's intractability. The commonest strategy was, he saw, equivalent to demanding that in order to facilitate our life-journey, the entire planet be covered forthwith with leather. The meditator's response he compared to someone by contrast willing instead to re-cover his own shoes. The meditator starts with himself. It may be specially relevant now to Westerners, perishing from the knowingness, nihilism, cynicism of the age as from lack of oxygen.

More particularly, what is the nature of the 'altered states' in which meditation invests? We could say that the meditator is struggling to open up what some philosophers call the 'specious present': that needle-thin moment in which the future gets constantly turned into the past. Why? So that we experience the freedom to choose how to respond to situations. Ordinarily we react rather than responding. Reaction would mean behaving habitually, in ways that are reflex, not fully willed, and stale. Responding would mean meeting challenges in ways that are, by contrast, fresh (albeit alarming) and appropriate.

The method of Shamatha-Vipassyana, or Calm-Abiding-leading-to-Insight-Awareness, entails sitting in good posture with a straight back, an expressive posture combining opposites, (courage and gentleness; relaxation and wakefulness). All thinking is labelled non-evaluatively, no matter how depraved or how pious the thought appears to be, simply as 'Thinking'. Then you return to the outbreath, which is to say to the here-and-now.

We might also say that meditation involves creating inner space, in order to experience outer space. Not so much thinking before we speak or act - which might be harder than this truism suggests - as developing the *courage to look before we leap*. Buddhism takes the view that non-meditators do not inhabit the here-and-now, but are 'elsewhere'; while what meditators are

struggling to do is to return to the present and, according to the title of a famous book, to 'be here now'.

This entails un-doing, or by-passing, or short-circuiting 'ego'. The Buddhist ego is not the same as the Freudian ego, though my mentor Iris Murdoch, due to whom I first got interested in Buddhism (and whose authorised biography I published in 2001) never quite addressed this. The Freudian ego, as I understand this, is relatively benign mediator between the twin and opposing forces of Id - the powers of instinct - and Superego - the powers of repression. The valiant little Freudian ego must arbitrate between these terrible powers. The Buddhist ego, to which I shall shortly return, is different. This Buddhist ego is a factitious entity paradoxically involved in trying to convince itself that it really exists. Its babble to itself is what the meditator cuts.

Some say that they are *uniquely* unable to meditate, being too restless, too impatient, too physically unfit. But restless impatience, rightly understood, is less an impediment than a proper fuel. Hot boredom (restless, impatient, angry) transmutes through meditation into cool boredom (patient, grounded, dispassionate), within which inner and outer space can eventually be discovered.

It is possible to meditate without being Buddhist, of course: there is a path entitled Shambhala Training, a ladder of five weekends of secular but intensive meditation which inculcate courage or fearlessness and gentleness together (see Reading-List at the end).

But Buddhism can offer a convincing explanation of the power and magic of the technique of Calm Abiding. The Buddha in his first teachings is seen as a doctor, prescribing a radical remedy for a definable complaint, a raft to cross the river of suffering. His first sermon the Fire Sermon (alluded to in *The Waste Land* by T.S.Eliot, who was briefly attracted to Buddhism) concerned the Four Noble Truths: suffering, its cause, its cessation and the path to that cessation.

Unsatisfactoriness, impermanence, incompleteness, frustration, clinging, grasping and the fear of change are built into all. When one is invaded by the reality of suffering, seeing its all-pervasiveness, and feeling the pain of others (including unsympathetic others) the spiritual life, it seems, can begin. Iris Murdoch, too, wrote 'Man is a suffering animal, subject to ceaseless anxiety and pain and fear, subject to the rule of what the Buddhists call *dukkha*, the endless unsatisfied anguish of a being who passionately desires only illusory goods'. It is no accident that the Buddha first preached that the world is on fire with suffering. One's own suffering is where to start.

Hearing this First Noble Truth proclaimed is oddly liberating. If on the one hand anxiety isolates, discovering Arnold's turbid ebb and flow of human misery¹ to be the common fate - on the other - is like re-joining the human race, finding community. When we become aware of the inescapable reality of pain we begin to feel fully alive, the opposite of gloomy: *seeing how things are* is a pre-requisite for happiness, even joy, since, from apprehending the mysterious transience of the world, its preciousness and sacredness become clearer too. Iris Murdoch again: Suffering is no scandal. All nature suffers. It suffers from being cut off from God, if for nothing else' (*The Unicorn*).

The second Noble Truth concerns the Cause of Suffering: belief in a solid, enduring 'self' or Soul. Although Hinduism and Buddhism are shelved

together as a single subject in Heathrow airport bookshops, the Buddha rejected Hindu belief in a soul. Unlike Christians too, for that matter, with their doctrine of the resurrection-of-the-body or essential self. For Buddhists the self is not a fixed or changeless product but a dynamic process always seeking an illusory resting-place where it might finally become 'solid'. The tramp-clowns who monologue in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* are universal symbols, speaking for us all : the lonely individual struggling to talk into permanent existence, maintain and freeze something essentially fluid and contingent. Neither Godot nor a solid self will come to save us.

This self (ego) spends much time trying to establish personal territory, a nest or cocoon, to defend. It generally imagines itself as vulnerable, rather than robust. It files damage done to its vanity, and periodically audits the files. It re-heats the past, making 'a mile out of an inch': a small perceived wound becomes cause for war. It is subject to incessant hope and fear. It goes on interesting forays into the future. It builds itself up and its main activity is daydreaming. Ego constantly fears boredom and so cooks up entertainments and obscurations¹ (Kleshas) - passion, aggression, ignorance, which can also be seen as deformations of space: means by which we either foreshorten the distance between ourselves and others (passion) or extend it. Neurosis, unreality and confusion are not special subjects, but the ordinary human condition.

These first two Noble Truths describe the condition of Samsara, the *snake-pit or whirlpool* of ordinary consciousness, a distaste or revulsion for which brings us to the path. If Buddhism is escapist¹ it is precisely the discomfort of this egoistic anxiety that the practitioner longs to escape; and which may be worth transcending, a point worth returning to.

The third Noble Truth is cessation, respite, Enlightenment. Nirvana has been conceived in various ways: a permanent bliss outside the conditioned elements of the world, a mind free from the illusion generated by desire, a realization of ultimate unity with the Absolute, a state of omniscience and compassion. It is described most mysteriously as the extinction of a candle-flame, and, most comprehensibly, as a *cooling of the ego*. It is said that we glimpse this cooling through the 'gap' that appears in Calm-Abiding meditation, which shows our thinking to be other than wall-to-wall. When the mind exhausts its struggle with itself, a gap occurs. This gap appears to threaten our idea of ourselves as solid; or, from a different perspective ventilates an otherwise stuffy room.

The third Truth - cessation - precedes the fourth - the Truth of the *Path* to the Cessation of Suffering, as if the practitioner might be encouraged by flashes of his destination long before arriving there. First of all the mind must (as Plato also wanted) be 'turned around'; the method is the Noble Eight-fold Path: right speech, right action and right livelihood (which constitute *Shila* or Morality); right effort, mindfulness, and concentration (constituting Samadhi or Meditation) and right understanding and resolve (Prajna or Wisdom). The aspirant trains to behave gently and kindly; cultivating thoughts of loving-kindness is an antidote to ill-will. Practice of mindfulness and awareness lead to calm and stability. Many world religions centre on sacrifice and on a God who may be bribed by prayer to rescue us. Buddhism centres on meditation instead. No one to save you except yourself.

Integrating such teachings takes time, energy, patience. In principle one understands each successive stage first with one's head, later with one's heart, finally through what the Book of Common Prayer calls inward digestion¹ so that teachings - ideally - become part of you and you no longer need to remember that you know them. The peace and alertness of the accomplished ones, manifesting Eliot's 'condition of complete simplicity (costing not less than everything)', are said to be good to behold.

There is in China and Japan a traditional series of humorous cartoon-like pictures depicting this entire Buddhist path of self-transformation. The so-called ox-herding¹ drawings run like this:

1. A boy - i.e. an immature being - rope-in-hand, lost and confused, seeks his ox, which has escaped, is nowhere to be seen, and is out-of-control. This ox, here representing the habitual or stereotypical patterns of behaviour which enslave the boy, is outside the field of his understanding.

2. The boy finds the first traces of the vanished ox, (neurotic mind, grossly disturbed or inappropriate behaviour) and starts his journey home.

3. The ox is sighted but elusive and declines to work for the boy, defying him : .in a world in which he should be at home, his fragile mental economy can be plunged into neurotic anxiety, fear, hatred, depression and apathy.

4. The boy has lassoed the ox and tries to turn it around. He has to 'break in' his karmic bondage or habitual self-pre-occupation. He forms the novel intent to reverse the runaway ox. First of all the mind must be 'turned around'; the Noble Eight-fold Path: right speech, right action and right livelihood (*Shila* or Morality); right effort, mindfulness, and concentration (Samadhi or Meditation) and right understanding and resolve (Prajna or Wisdom).

5. The ox has consented to belong to the boy, a significant reversal and the start of self-transformation, reshaping personality, motivation, through discipline, values and proper choice.

6. Boy rides ox while nonchalantly and confidently playing a flute. The full force of the ox is at his command. Now both trusting and therefore ignoring it, he can give birth to playfulness.

7. Once again the ox is invisible, but this second phase of invisibility follows because it is trained or tamed, never rushing out-of-control. Self-forgetful and un-self-preoccupied, the boy can see the world. The sun floats in the sky and the boy enters Samadhi (meditative absorption).

8. An empty circle. Ecstasy, nirvana, extinction of fear and hope.

9. Plum blossom, rock, bamboo, a gently flowing stream. Both ox and boy forgotten, the beauty of the world is all.

10. Laughing Buddha (also called: Entering the market-place with Gift-bestowing hands¹).

To sum up: it is said that Calm-Abiding meditation enables one to exchange a fixed or fixated mind for a flexible one. Slowing down every impulse is said to be a good way to begin. And developing the ability to watch such impulses seed, blossom, bloom and die, without having compulsively to act each one out, is one source of power. The 'altered state' that results is no more - *and also no less* - than a high degree of mindfulness and awareness.

For a fuller (albeit elementary) explication of these pictures, and of the path to which they allude, the reader is referred to my *Going Buddhist*. A tiny selection of other relevant books is also listed below.

There is, incidentally, another technique related to Calm-Abiding but different from it, known as 'Sending and Taking' or 'Exchanging Self and Other' which seems particularly appropriate to therapeutic sessions. In this technique the meditator - or therapist - relaxes by deliberately, consciously taking on the pain of a given situation on the in-breath, which is experienced as 'black, hot and heavy' while giving away sanity on the outbreath, which is imagined to be 'white, cool, light'. It is not a magical but a highly pragmatic way of negotiating - and owning one's own share of - the pain and poverty of others, by relating this to what one has experienced of these, and of their obverses, 'oneself. The technique is well-described in the books of Ane Pema Chodron.

Reading List

Michael Eigen : *Damaged Bonds* Karnac, 2001

Mark Epstein : *Thoughts without a Thinker* Duckworth, 1996

Chogyam Trungpa: *The Wisdom of the Sanity Within* Shambhala publications, 2005

Sakyong Mipham: *Turning the Mind into an Ally* Riverside, 2003

Peter J Conradi : *Going Buddhist: Panic and Emptiness, the Buddha and Me* Short Books, 2004

Ervin Laszlo *The Whispering Pond: A Personal Guide to the Emerging Vision of Science* Element Books, 1996

See also Shambhala Training, a ladder of five weekends of secular but intensive meditation which inculcate courage or fearlessness and gentleness together. Further information: 0207-720-3207