

The Unquiet Self And The Search For Peace

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*'Fear not that your life will come to an end.
Fear rather that it will never come to a beginning'.*

Cardinal Newman

Abstract

A personal perspective on meditation is offered. The interface of psychology and spirituality is explored. Meditation is not without its dangers and some pointers are given towards ensuring a beneficial experience.

Introduction

What is meditation? The origins of the word are obscure, coming from the Latin *meditare*, to measure, or from *mederi*, meaning 'to cure', or perhaps from both. Definitions include thinking carefully about something calmly and seriously, exercising the mind in religious contemplation, emptying the mind of thought, or, conversely, concentrating the mind on one thing, in order to develop the mind or spirit.

The problem with such definitions is that they all refer to an ordinary state of consciousness and meditation is an altered, some would say, an alternative state of consciousness. The Chinese are closer to the mark with *Mingxiang*, or trance thinking.

Unforeseen moments

I would like to start by describing my first experience of meditation, though at the time I had no idea what was going on. I think I was about three years old. It was a hot summer day and all the children in the day nursery I attended were in the garden, probably twenty or thirty of us. The garden seemed very big and was surrounded by trees. I know we had been given something to do, looking for grasshoppers I vaguely recollect. Everything was going on as usual. Then I looked up and saw the tree. The picture is absolutely clear in my mind. It must have been a big horse chestnut and it stood there motionless. There could not have been a breath of wind. The leaves were brilliant green in the sunlight and inside was deep, dark shade. My gaze was irresistibly drawn into the shade and then, suddenly, everything stopped and silence fell. Perhaps it was just for some seconds, but it seemed to be forever.

The unexpected and unbidden can be a rare gift. A good friend of mine underwent bypass surgery. What moved him profoundly was the following experience; coming round from the anaesthetic, he was aware of the most heavenly music he had ever heard in his life. As he returned to normal consciousness, the music faded. But he knew that it had been the music of the spheres, truly celestial, and surpassing anything on earth.

When some years later I found myself needing major surgery, I wondered if I might be blessed with such an experience, or even a visitation of

angels! Instead, I came out of the anaesthetic with the bizarre hallucination every time I closed my eyes that I was standing on my head. It was days before I could get myself down from this peculiar headstand - my world had been turned upside down!

Psychological considerations

While I make no claim to spiritual pre-eminence, I *am* interested in what can be called 'spiritual psychiatry', including the interface of the psychological and the spiritual with respect to meditation, why we are drawn to it and what we hope to achieve.

Psychiatry is a shadowy place, full of anger and despair. A good deal of the time, we endeavour to put people in touch with their emotions, for they often come in a state of disconnection, a mechanism ensuring survival but not much else. Other times, it is a matter of helping them learn how to stand back and make sense of their emotions instead of simply being flooded by them. *At the heart of all this misery, I have generally found a deep yearning for peace and happiness, so conspicuously absent from the relationships of daily life.*

Psychiatry in general, and psychotherapy in particular, call for us to reflect thoughtfully and honestly on our fears and desires. Above all, we have to reckon with suffering and what to do about it. If only patient and therapist alike were better able to follow the sage counsel of Anon:

*God grant me the courage to change what I can change,
The serenity to accept what cannot be changed
And the wisdom to know the difference.*

We get our first taste of suffering as babies. It is inevitable. The very survival of the baby depends on its relationship with mother. The psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott¹ remarked, 'there is no such thing as a baby', meaning there is always baby plus mother. When mother and baby are one, as when the baby is happily feeding, we can see that the baby is experiencing something akin to bliss. But this oceanic merging has to be disrupted periodically. The baby gets wind and cries; or mother gets up or goes out and what was unified becomes painfully broken. In small, manageable doses, such suffering is Nature's way of stimulating us into action; otherwise we would stay on our mothers' laps for life. But when the bond is damaged or even broken by premature, enforced separation or abuse, there are profound consequences. The child no longer can trust in the goodness of relationships.

As John Bowlby² showed, the more secure the attachment, the more the child can later let go of mother and develop healthy autonomy. On the other hand, a distraught mother may be seen shouting at her toddler that if he* doesn't shut up, she'll leave him right there! This threat will subdue him, because the idea is so terrifying but the internal cost will be to foster an anxious attachment. Relationships then become clinging in nature, with over-sensitivity to perceived rejection.

* 'He' is used for convenience to denote both male and female gender

The mind of the meditator

I raise these matters because it is important to take into account the mental state of the meditator. What are his hopes, fears and ambitions? Will the effect of meditation be to bring about integration and wholeness? Or is he in flight from emotions and challenges that need facing in daily life?

Imagine how secure and anxious personalities might compare when answering a question like 'how should life be lived?' The secure person answers with a smile, 'to work and play, to explore, to be challenged, to love and raise a family, to take care of others, to express yourself and to be fulfilled'. What might the anxious person say? 'To find shelter and safety, steer clear of danger, avoid unpleasantness, to try to keep well, to find someone to love you and look after you, and so on. There is a preoccupation with safe-guarding the insecure self, while a secure person is able to take the self for granted, and can turn his attention to other matters.

Here lies a great irony. As Jesus Christ pointed out in the parable of the talents ³, '...unto every one which hath shall be given; and from him that hath not, even that he hath shall be taken away...' In the sphere of adult human relationships, give love and it comes back in abundance. Go looking for it and you're certain to be disappointed. Only in the spiritual realm can we continue to ask for, and experience, unconditional love.

The spiritual realm and the phenomenal world

I am not attempting to reduce the vast body of knowledge about the human psyche to the one issue of emotional security versus anxiety. But the question is so basic that it is a good place to work from, not least because it can shape how we experience the spiritual realm, which I want to discuss next.

My own understanding is that we live in a universe in which consciousness is primary, and from which matter arises. For three hundred years, the Newtonian view of a mechanistic universe dominated scientific thinking, the outcome of which was to regard consciousness as nothing but the by-product of brain function. But during the 20th century, advances in quantum physics and transpersonal psychology have converged. Spirituality and science are engaged in a new dialogue, ^{4 5} one open to the age-old intuition that we not so much human beings on a spiritual path as spiritual beings on a human path.

It is also my belief that even while we are living out this incarnation, we remain connected with our source, the Godhead.⁶ Many people who have survived a near-death event tell of the profound realisation they have had that life on earth is 'just visiting'. They report with overwhelming conviction that the place to which they travelled when out-of-body is that place from whence we come and to which we return, the eternal dwelling place of the soul and our true spiritual 'home'.^{7 8}

I have described elsewhere ⁹ how the mind can take us to 'other worlds' unencumbered by the constraints of space-time, and how the 'new' physics provides us with a compelling paradigm for the interface of mind and matter. This perspective sees the material world as nested within the quantum domain of mind, in turn nested within the virtual domain, a subject that Deepak Chopra ¹⁰ explores in depth.

Consider the ancient Daoist symbol of the *Taiji*.



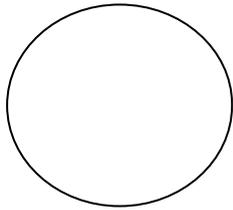
The symbol characterises both form and movement. Everything in Nature follows this law of opposites working together to create a perfect balance. *Yin* and *Yang* are expressed as complementary aspects, in both the physical and mental worlds.¹¹ Indeed, we *can* only construe these worlds by means of such polarities, for instance, cold/warm, light/dark, male/female, sadness/joy, right/wrong and good/evil. The *Taiji* is not the source, for it represents the phenomenal world. According to the Daoist view, it arises from the *Wuji*, which is beyond all form. Two and a half thousand years ago the sage Laozi meditated deeply on this mystery, leaving us these words:

*The Dao that can be told is not the eternal Dao.
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.
The named is the mother of ten thousand things.*
- Laozi, *The Daodejing*¹²

The relationship of the material, quantum and virtual domains can be mapped as follows, while bearing in mind that such maps are merely useful conceptual tools:

VIRTUAL DOMAIN / GODHEAD

SPIRIT



WUJI (NON-DUAL)

IS-NESS / ONENESS / WHOLENESS
BEYOND THOUGHT, TIME AND SPACE
VIBRATION OF THE ABSOLUTE AND INFINITE

**COLLECTIVE
TOTALITY**

-----*Dissolution*-----*of*-----*Ego*-----

QUANTUM DOMAIN



TAIJI (DUALITY OF MIND)

**ARCHETYPAL REALM
OF DUALITIES**

IMAGES OF GOD / LUCIFER
GOOD / EVIL
DISCARNATE SPIRITS
OTHER WORLDS
OTHER LIVES

CREATION

COMPASSION

INDIVIDUAL CONSCIOUSNESS
ARISES, SELF / OTHER
THOUGHTS / EMOTIONS
ESP / SUBTLE ENERGIES

LOVE

JOY

MATERIAL DOMAIN

**WORLD OF SENSE
PERCEPTION AND
NEWTONIAN PHYSICS**



SOUL MANIFESTING AS LIFE FORCE,
AS IN DNA, NEUROPEPTIDES AND
CELL PROCESSES

SOUL

Correspondences between Mind and the quantum domain

In the quantum and material domains of mind and matter, consciousness is mediated by the brain/mind, which bestows on us a wealth of perceptions, cognitions and emotions. No less important, we are given the freedom to act for good or ill.

What we unveil in the quantum domain depends on our own tendencies and desires. It was made clear two thousand years ago: 'Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you' ¹³. What we find must, of necessity, be coloured by human projections, for this domain is still one of 'self' and 'other'. But these are no mere fantasies; a connection is being established with what corresponds (in potentium) within the quantum domain. A subject-object complex arises, (equivalent in the language of quantum physics to the collapse of the probability wave) which is constellated as an archetypal form. *The emanation of love calls forth a loving presence, while anger or fear will be reflected in visages of persecution.*

The contents of the quantum domain mirrors the material world of sense perception, as therapists who works with spirit release are well aware.^{14 15 16} (The problem is not so much the release of what are called negative entities or energies as confronting the negative aspect of self that linked with such entities/energies in the first place). The negative is all the more powerful when it has not been recognised and owned and since 'like attracts like', playing about with the occult or indulging in 'psychism' is a highly dangerous game. On the other hand, the quantum domain has the power to inspire us with boundless images of divine love, as recorded by the visionary Swedenborg, for example.¹⁷ Here is just one glimpse, by Minnie Louise Haskins, whose little poem has been a comfort to many a child!

*I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year,
Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.
And he replied, 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of
God.
That shall be to you better than a light and safer than a known way.*

Coming back to the map, another feature of the quantum domain will be self-evident; it lies between the material world and the Godhead, the source of all creation. The quantum domain provides the opportunity for endless learning on the journey of the soul, for having the gift of free will is an extraordinary challenge. If we get locked into the cycle of fear, anger and retaliation, we stay in school a long time. Indeed, the teachings of Buddhism, Hinduism, Daoism and Spiritism, to name but a few, hold that the educational programme provides for as many incarnations as it takes to learn the lesson.

Nonetheless, there is a path homewards and we have an instinct deep in the soul that shows us the way. In meditation, prayer and contemplation, we stand at the threshold of the Godhead, and only our egos hold us back.

In the diagram, I have represented the soul not as something separate but as very much part of the embodied self, in Carl Jung's words, '*the living thing in Man, that which lives of itself and causes life*'.¹⁸ It is the diaspora of the Godhead, intrinsic to the act of Creation and now a scintilla within each human

being. How it is experienced and expressed depends on the 'level' it is working on. At its most basic and physiological, the soul is busy ensuring the coherency of cellular processes. At the psychological level it vitalises us with a consciousness of selfhood. At the spiritual level, we sense the divine, for through its action, we are made aware of the soul qualities of peace, purity and love.

In the incarnate state, the soul is individual in nature. (I should like to add that it is not a question of *having* a soul, but of *being* a soul). When ego dissolves, however, this preoccupation with what is mine and yours, what is self and other, gives way to a collective consciousness, the species mind of humanity,¹⁹ and beyond that, to an all-embracing is-ness / oneness / wholeness. This is really beyond words, as the Dao indicates, but to put a name to it, I have called it 'spirit'.

A surprise revelation

I would like to mention another experience of my own, forty years on from that inexplicable childhood reverie. Between times, I had tried yoga, and various kinds of meditation but there had never been that profound shift of consciousness. Then it happened again, on the third day of a Zen Enlightenment Intensive.

In this retreat, my assignment was to spend every waking minute focussed on the koan 'What is life?' We were a group of about twelve, working non-stop in pairs. Each person would take it in turn, speaking for half an hour and then listening for half an hour in silence to the other. The bell would ring, it would be all change and everyone would start off again in a new pair. It went on hour after hour. By the end of the first day, I was running out of all the imaginable descriptions of 'What is life'.

During the second day, time started slowing down, and I found myself uttering strange half-familiar words as the unconscious disgorged itself. As my intellect ran out of steam, the cracks in my mind grew wider and wider. Then on day three, and with the same vividness that I remember the tree from childhood, suddenly and without warning everything stopped. I was contemplating an apple, which I was holding in my left hand, when my mind did a kind of somersault. I was looking at the apple but I was everywhere, which also meant there was no me. All was unity, all in its right place, timeless and bursting with is-ness. There was absolute peace, not as an emotion but as nothing needing to be done, no action, forever. Later, I remember watching a thought unfold like a piece of tickertape. It 'said' to me 'Now, for the first time, you know what it is to be conscious without anxiety'.

Then the whole thing passed, perhaps after a few minutes; I am not sure how long. Tears sprang to my eyes and I felt a rush of great emotion – of love and gratitude. I was back in the domain of mind. The experience had been abrupt and very powerful. There was no worship, no imago dei, and no spiritual path to climb. It was more like falling off a mountain! This would seem fairly characteristic of Zen.

Although I was very glad to have had this 'direct experience', in my own case I have been sustained by the Christ image when the going gets tough. Here is the shortest and most memorable dream I have ever had.

I was walking beside a handsome young man, probably about thirty years old. I turned to him and caught a wonderful smile. His eyes were sparkling with liveliness and good humour. No words were needed. The power of his encouragement was immense, and yet delivered with extraordinary tenderness. I immediately awoke and had absolutely no doubt who my companion was.

Emotional resources and the spiritual search

As I outlined earlier, people who have had the good fortune (or karma, as the religions of the East understand it to be), to grow up in a loving and secure environment, are confident in their approach to life. When such people meditate, their natural disposition works greatly to their advantage. Benefits include:

- *Self-regard - a basic sense of worthiness.* Feeling worthy to give and receive love. A sense of entitlement to engage in relationships, human or Divine.
- *Psychological stability.* Being at ease with oneself. The capacity to engage with the unknown. A relaxed attitude that enhances appreciation of life. Meditation readily integrates with the tasks and challenges of day-to-day living.
- *Reality testing/secure boundaries.* The capacity voluntarily to enter the quantum/virtual domains and return at will. Loss and recovery of ego managed with equanimity.
- *Gnosis of the archetypal realm / Godhead.* Enhanced spiritual vision. Spur to constructive and compassionate action in the material world.
- *Soul consciousness.* Awareness of the soul. Desire to safeguard the soul and deepen understanding. Recognising the material world as the stage for action and experience but intuitively drawn to the greater whole, beyond the limitations of sense perception.

For the more anxious, less secure individual, there are certain problems that may need dealing with along the way.

- *Fight / flight reaction.* Because anxiety stems from an underlying fight / flight reaction, attention is often directed outwards in order to cope with the sense of threat and the inner world goes by default. Inner resources are not activated; awareness of soul and expression of its natural qualities are often suppressed in this hyper-vigilant state.
- *Persistent anxiety and depression.* Usually the consequence of a failure of early relationships. This connection is generally unconscious, so that a person will only be mindful of the stress of the external situation. But what is stress? It is not the stimulus in itself, but how we react to it that counts. This reaction will be

intensified when the inner world feels unsafe, once memorably described to me as like a floor of rotting timbers about to collapse.

- *Idealisation and disillusion.* People who throughout childhood have been traumatised or suffered privation have usually been unable to express anger, for doing so only leads to more punishment. Instead, the anger is split off and repressed. The healthy maturation of the self gets blocked, since the shadow side must now be denied. This lack of integration impairs the development of wholeness. Relationships are often unstable, suffering the twin fates of idealisation and disillusionment. Unrealistic demands for love lead to disappointment and hurt; the split-off anger then erupts, against the other, or directed towards the self, leading to depression.
- *Archetypes* are by their nature constellated in polar opposites, for *Yin* always co-exists with *Yang*. But for the person whose self has suffered from pathological splitting, there is no stable and loving image of the Divine to turn to. There may equally well be persecutory encounters with angry gods or devils and visions of hell.

Yet this deep desire of the unquiet self to find peace through the power of meditation is the royal road, not only to a knowledge of the unconscious, as Sigmund Freud²⁰ once famously said of dreams but to healing and wholeness. What could be more important than re-connecting with our spiritual source? For it is our relationship with the Supreme that we bring into the phenomenal world and which from birth onwards impels us to seek contact soul to soul, in forms both human and Divine.²¹

Guidelines for a safe journey and return

How can the unquiet self be best helped along this path? Here are a few suggestions.

1. If a person's reality testing is shaky, including borderline psychotic reactions, I do not advocate meditation. Life can be soul centred without trying to enter other realms. Straightforward prayer will do. A good life, lived with generosity of spirit, understanding and courage takes the soul a long way indeed. In these circumstances, soul-centred psychotherapy stands more chance of helping such a person learn to be at peace with themselves and their emotions than meditation per se.^{22 23 24}
2. Where meditation is the chosen path, it's generally best to situate the practice of meditation within a clear framework of spiritual teaching.²⁵ This provides a meaningful and secure foundation for what is to come, connects the person with a like-minded community of others and addresses the frequent problem of isolation.^{26 27}

3. Psycho-education can be a great help, including understanding how the archetypes of the spiritual domain are coloured by the influence of negative emotions.^{28 29} This is especially likely when the emotions have not been acknowledged and when they can rebound on the self. The task is not heroically to attempt to defeat the shadow but to accept it and to treat it with compassion, as one would a wayward child. Then it loses its power to dominate and destroy.³⁰

4. The infant science of psychology has come a long way, but wisdom is timeless. Seven hundred years ago, Dame Julian of Norwich³¹ wrote, 'I do not say that evil is praiseworthy but that our Lord's allowing it is praiseworthy. In this his goodness shall be known forever; by his loving kindness and by the power of his mercy and grace'. In other words, first we are given the opportunity to fail, and then when we fail, however miserably, we can ask for and receive forgiveness. This is tremendously important because depression so often turns on an unforgiving self, bent on self-punishment. *What a revelation to discover that to experience being forgiven unlocks the capacity to forgive! With it comes the healing of the soul.*

Also from the fourteenth century there is the mystical text known as 'The Cloud of Unknowing'. Here is an excerpt.³²

'It is the work of the soul that most pleases God...when you first begin, you find only darkness, and as it were, a cloud of unknowing...reconcile yourself to wait in this darkness as long as is necessary, but still go on longing after him whom you love...this work does not take a long time for its completion...it is neither shorter nor longer than a single impulse of your will, the chief part of your soul...for he comes down to our level, adapting his Godhead to our power to comprehend. He cannot be comprehended by our intellect or any man's – or any angel's for that matter. *But only to our intellect is he incomprehensible: not to our love*'.

In our own time, Jiddu Krishnamurti³³, whose reflections on meditation are among the most profound I know, reminds us that the action of love is the one action that has no motive and needs no motive. He writes:

'The mind must be clear, without movement, and in the light of that clarity the timeless is revealed...when the mind is no longer seeking, no longer breeding conflict through its wants and cravings, when it is silent with understanding, only then can the immeasurable come into being...when the mind realises the totality of its own conditioning ...then all its movements come to an end; it is completely still, without any desire, without any compulsion, without any motive. Only then is there freedom'.

What benefits are conferred by such freedom? The freedom is from longing that cannot be satisfied and from attachment that serves to bind. Then

the unquiet self finds what the world cannot give, a peace that passes all understanding.

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