

## **Meditation and Therapy**

### Zen is therapeutic, not therapy

A recent report says, “Studies have shown that regular practice of meditation can lower blood pressure, heart rate and respiration and reduce anxiety and anger and help alleviate insomnia and mild to moderate depression as well as lead to other benefits” (*Los Angeles Times Syndicate*: quoted in an Indian newspaper). Diet, exercise and meditation are the three basic things recommended to heart patients and other such seriously ill people. There seems to be a meditation boom (along with alternate medicine, yoga and their like) in the West. Meditation is dragooned in service of health and well-being by the consumer culture. On Buddhist meditation National Geographic magazine for December 2005 notes (p. 124): Buddhist “meditative, ‘mindful’ approach to living offers a way to deal with the everyday turmoil of the 21<sup>st</sup> century...Recent studies suggest that stress-related illnesses like cardiovascular disease and high blood pressure can be helped by meditation...While meditation is one aspect of Buddhism, compassionate social engagement is another.”

The form of meditation usually recommended and practiced is mindfulness of body and breath, or simply using some word or phrase, or some repetitive activity, combined with a passive attitude towards intrusive thoughts. Herbert Benson even named it as ‘relaxation response.’ It is a form of meditation secularized, simplified, and shorn of all tradition, symbols and authority. The breath/body awareness meditation of Theravada Buddhism, for example, is a complex, many-layered practice, rooted in Buddhist tradition and vision, and it is in service of awakening to impermanence and no-self, which ultimately are meant to lead to nirvana. The same can be said of zen or of Tibetan Buddhist mediation. Even classical yoga’s goal is similar, it is *kaivalya*, which can be translated as aloneness, or isolation and separation from matter and all forms of embodiment. Neither nirvana nor *kaivalya* come under experience, for experience is mental modification, or of conditioned nature. Nirvana is Unconditioned, Uncompounded (*asamkhata*). *Kaivalyam* is freedom from all material and mental stuff; totally free of affect and percept.

What then about the secularized, simplified, watered-down form of meditation practiced, recommended and praised in the modern West? One may ask, Why cannot one practice a form, however simplified, if it helps one improve one’s health and well-being? It is all right as far as it goes. But is it meditation proper? Well, the term is problematic, but I do not see why the term cannot be taken over and used in this way. But is it true of the claims made for this form of meditation? Partly true, but it seems to have much of placebo effect. Does this form of meditation replace now the complex, tradition-bound ones? Not at all. Do not the traditional forms also lead to the same or similar results of health and well-being? Partly yes, but not fully. Their goal is nirvana, *kaivalya*, *kensho*, wisdom and compassion; but as side-effects, there are also health benefits. Let me first focus on the simplified forms of meditation practiced as health-giving ‘relaxation response.’

**Healing Meditation:** Practice of awareness or mindfulness is basic to most forms of Buddhist and Hindu meditation. Many of the modern psychotherapies have incorporated such awareness into their therapy. Mindfulness is primarily and basically grounded in body/breath sensations, but it extends to being aware of

feelings, thoughts, sensations that are occurring in the present. Such awareness first of all brings one to indwell one's body-mind, to be in touch with whatever is happening to one here and now: one lets-be all that is happening to one here and now in body-mind; such letting-be facilitates some distance and detachment from one's emotions and thoughts. There is breathing-space, so to say, between one's emotions/thoughts and oneself. One gets some perspective. It involves holding within and tolerating one's conflicting emotions of anxiety, terror, delight, omnipotence, confusion, etc. Usually we tend to identify with one set of emotions and thoughts, and to avoid or repress the so-called unwanted thoughts/emotions. Here in this mindfulness practice, one lets be together, non-judgmentally, all contraries and problems. One does not fly away with one's angels nor fight with one's demons. It is the contrary of denial, displacement, projection, rationalization, etc. It is a practice of letting-be, being-with, befriending, all of one's emotions and thoughts and images.

Such meditation needs initially at least the support of a human relationship and it needs also sustained practice. Further, without some faith and belief, such a practice has only minimal power. Herbert Benson, who first formulated the 'Relaxation Response', realized this and he talks of 'faith factor' as vital to the relaxation response to reach its full potential. What we perceive or believe to be real is the deciding factor. This mindfulness meditation is suffused with faith and trust.

From such mindfulness practice flow trust in oneself, in one's own mind and body, self-acceptance and empathy. One gets the confidence that one can deal with one's emotions, fantasies and thoughts, however frightening or enticing they may be. Trust, self-acceptance and empathy flower not from one's thinking of such things, but from mindfulness of body and emotions; however, one's beliefs and expectations have to at least be open-ended. Such mindfulness practice is healing and freeing; it also seems to affect and modify the neural-brain functioning. Mindfulness practice has to flow into one's daily life. This will help one to live in the now, in fearless and compassion. One experiences empathy for oneself as well as for others.

**Therapy as Spirituality:** The Behavior therapists Steven Hayes and his colleagues have taken to this mindfulness in their therapy and they have also drawn out the further implications of mindfulness for therapy and spirituality. (Mindfulness, awareness, and consciousness can be used interchangeably, in spite of their subtle differences). They help their clients to differentiate between self-as-content, self-as-process and self-as-context. Self-as-content is the conceptualized self that we construct to make sense of ourselves putting our own histories and tendencies into a coherent relational and evaluative network. Self-as-process is oneself as experiencing life-events as joyful, or painful, or as traumatic, and so on; it is one of 'getting in touch with feelings', or, establishing relational framing with respect to emotional terms that coordinate more generally with those operating in the wider verbal community (Chapter 7, 2001). It is the self-as-context, field or frame that is the dimension of spirituality: it is the self-as-consciousness as boundlessly open perspective. Self-as-context is the perspective one has of one's life and its events. "...all psychological experiences, all thoughts and feelings, occur from the perspective of 'I' located 'HERE' and 'NOW' .....Self-as-context has a rather strange quality to it because it seems to have no limits. One can be conscious of the limits of everything except one's own perspective or consciousness. For that reason, this sense

of perspective, or self-as-context, as a place from which things occur, does not change once it emerges (around the age of three)...Self-as-context is the ever present I, HERE, and NOW. It is simply not possible to 'jump out' of this perspective without taking another perspective, and thus I, HERE, and NOW always continues unbroken and without limit." This leads them to the (spiritual) claim: "Self-as-context is not experienceable as a thing. Therefore, I (self-as-context) is 'no thing' (the word 'nothing' was originally written as 'no thing'). The only events that are without edges (they are not things) are nothing and everything. Experientially, I am everything/nothing" (Chapter 13, 2001). Clients are taught to take a perspective-taking stance towards their problems, to see their life-histories, emotions and thoughts not as identical with their selves; and to experience oneself as the boundless, perspectival field underlying, or beyond, thoughts, emotions and all such contents. It is the so-called WITNESS perspective of traditional Hindu/Buddhist meditations. One thus goes beyond one's emotional problems, lets-be what is here and now, and also is further enabled, with the prodding of the therapist, to choose one's values and commitments. They teach by parables and paradoxes, which is close to the zen approach to language and verbalization. In this approach of Hayes & Co., meditation, spirituality and therapy seem to lose their separate boundaries and to coalesce. However, not all psychologists or therapists will accept the validity of their claims of therapy of mindfulness as spirituality. For these critics, Hayes & Co. introduce spirituality surreptitiously without proper warrant. Furthermore, the perspectival dimension is only one aspect of oneself, though basic and fundamental; there is one self in multi dimensions and one is all of them. Healing and spirituality pertain to the whole self in its many dimensions, phases and relationships.

**Therapy versus Meditation:** There are many forms and kinds of therapies, and mindfulness meditation can be used in almost all forms of therapy, though the use Hayes & Co make of it is remarkable. Mindfulness practice is basic to meditation, but there are also other forms such as, for example, the Tibetan forms of chanting, visualization, the use of mandalas and mantras, and of the figures of deities and demons; guru devotion which involves idealization of and identification with the guru is also central to Tibetan Buddhism and it seems to help many (Cf. Capper). Meditation in all of these forms, particularly of mindfulness variety, can be therapeutic but it cannot take the place of therapy; therapy has something which meditation and religion do not offer. On the other hand, meditation in the great traditions or religions goes beyond therapy, and therapy cannot take their place. It is important here to remember that meditation of the great traditions cannot be divorced from the particular tradition and community, their vision and way of life, and their religious dimension. In the West, however, often therapy has come to serve the needs of religion for many people; therapy then has a religious aspect, or becomes religion. It depends very much on the attitudes, beliefs and world-view of the therapist.

**The Zen Way beyond Therapy:** I teach zen meditation and let me say something on zen and therapy; though I have sporadically written on this theme, let me elaborate a little more. Zen meditation is therapeutic, but not therapy in the usual sense; zen meditation is religious, not a religion; zen is ethical, but not a moral system nor moralism; zen is personal and interpersonal, not individualism nor libertinism; zen meditation is a body-mind practice, and it is rooted in zen tradition and vision, as

well as in a sangha/community and master-disciple relationship. Zen is oriented to awakening, which is the dawning of a new world-view and a transformed reality; this calls for dying to one's self and world. Authentic awakening flows into compassion for self and world. Let me also make a caution: zen depends much on zen teachers and they vary in their depth of awakening and realization, as well as in their psychological, moral and intellectual maturity.

**Zen prerequisites** traditionally are Great Doubt, Great Faith and Great Striving. One comes to zen in quest of liberation from one's suffering and from heart's longing for awakening. One can, however, come in search of some healing, peace or freedom. Then in the course of the practice, one may discover the heart's deeper desires and longings: Mahayana Buddhism calls it the stirring and drawing of *Bodhicitta*, the heart-mind of awakening. One normally begins zen practice with a master, who stands in the zen tradition and community. Faith in that zen tradition, trust in the master and the sangha as well as commitment to the discipline and way is vital. The relationship of faith, trust and commitment between disciple and master and sangha is healing and empowering. One has to face oneself and struggle in the loneliness of one's heart with one's own doubts and questions, but one journeys in the company of the master and the sangha. Meditation and faith are circumscribed and nourished by the human relationship. For it is love that really heals and liberates, whether in meditation or in therapy.

**Just Sitting:** The basic zen practice is seated meditation, *shikantaza*. What was said above about healing meditation of mindfulness applies here. But it is done in zen in faith and trust; faith and trust not in something or some person but simply in the sense of being embraced by Mystery and grounded in the Mystery; it implies also some trust in the zen way, in the master and finally, trust in one's heart-mind. In this mystery and openness one comes to the realization of unconditional self-acceptance and oneness with the all. There arises in this zazen a deep sense of 'All shall be well, all manner of things shall be well' (Julian of Norwich), or in Ummon's words, 'Every Day is a Good Day'. One's neuroses or illnesses may not be cured, but one comes to a deep 'yes' to life and to one's imperfect selfhood; it is a form of letting-be, being, surrender and self-acceptance. "Boundlessly flows the river, just as it flows. Red blooms the flower, just as it blooms."

**Samadhi and Exertion:** Zazen is not only 'just sitting, the grass grows'. It is also intense striving and exertion, which particularly comes out more clearly in koan zen. On one side, zen meditation is letting-be, be-ing, *Gelassenheit*, self-acceptance; on the other side it calls for labouring with all one's heart and mind, body and soul towards awakening of self as well as of all beings. Such exertion should not be willful struggle but a form of willingness and egoless striving, *wu-wei*, action that is non-action. It is concentration without willful effort. 'For us there is only the trying. The rest is not our business' (T.S.Eliot). In zen meditation practice this leads to samadhi (*zanmai*), which is one-pointed concentration. Without samadhi and the power flowing from samadhi (*yoriki*), one is a prey to the ceaseless stream of emotions, fantasies and diversions. Samadhi unifies the psyche, body and mind. Samadhi becomes in daily life mindful and alert living grounded in the body-breath awareness. However, samadhi alone is not enough.

**Thousand Doors through the Koans:** Working with zen koans with an awakened master can be wonderfully freeing, healing and awakening. One is challenged to let go one's bounded world-views and identities, to take on varied and different identities, to realize one's self as boundlessly open and also as one with all the world; and to learn to play-act, to let-go, and to affirm oneself over against the master and also to receive in gratitude and joy self and world. One comes to realize that it is all right to be imperfect, to be human, to be vulnerable and mortal. *Self is not self, therefore self is self.*

**Self-constitution and self-appropriation:** Zen practice takes place as said earlier in the field of relationship to the master, the sangha and the tradition. Standing within this field of relationship and love, one is called to constitute oneself as self, to choose oneself in self-appropriation. It is a call to freedom from slavery to conventions, laws and traditions, ideologies and dogmas, society and institutions. It is a matter of self-constitution in interiority and subjectivity: it is consciousness becoming conscious, self transcending itself as well as returning to coincide with itself in a ceaseless to and fro of questioning, dialoguing, experiencing and judging. It is the call to self-affirmation in self-transcendence in love and compassion. It is a journey through one's heart and mind in the questioning of who I am and what reality is. One is called to follow the way of listening to one's heart-mind as well as listening to the world. It is a life in authentic freedom and selfless compassion.

**Awakening to Emptiness:** Zen is oriented towards awakening. Freedom and compassion flow from authentic awakening. Zen awakening is awakening to Emptiness-- Emptiness awakening to Emptiness. There are many dimensions and levels in this awakening realization. The core of awakening is the realization of the self-as-consciousness as 'empty' as well as open to and one with all the world; it is also the realization of "It is the same as you, you are not It", as the **Song of the Jewel Mirror** (of Tung shan Liang chieh, Jap. Tōzan Ryokai) puts it. Emptiness and oneness are two sides of one realization; the world is the self, the self is the world. It is, in the words of Dogen, 'forgetting the self and being enlightened by the ten thousand things.' Each and everything is the coming of Emptiness that is the self, each thing and each person is a call that is grace and gift. It is a cosmic vision, a Weltanschauung, as well as an attitude and stance; the attitude is one of 'yes' to life, world and self. Emptiness is the ground of one's very self and in this mystery of Emptiness, one's finite self of body-mind is embraced and cherished in love and gratitude—this is one's manifested form of Emptiness. One awakens to the Heart-Mind of Emptiness as one's own heart-mind. It is the heart-mind of compassion. The inhumanity of humans to humans and to animals, the unbearable sufferings, tragedies and traumas of innumerable people, will be almost breaking your heart: the awakened heart is a broken heart and only the broken heart is the heart of compassion.

**Interaction of Mediation and Therapy—Another Formulation:** In meditation, which is but a form of 'being with oneself, doing nothing' one comes to touch the heart's longings; the heart's longings are ultimately for ultimate peace, freedom, joy and compassion: it is in reality the longing and seeking for the Ultimate Reality in terms of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful, -- it is the longing of and for the True Self. As mentioned earlier, Mahayana calls it the stirring of *bodhicitta*. It leads in zen to the awakening to Emptiness and the oneness of all beings. Zen Emptiness can be said to be

'Boundless Openness', as well as 'Mystery that is graciousness'. Religions, both Buddhism and Christianity, have most often compromised the awakening of the heart's longings by their teaching of negation of desires, portraying desires as the root cause of ignorance and evil. It is the misguided desires, desires absolutizing the finite beings such as health, wealth, sex, power, etc, that is the problem, and not the heart's longings themselves. Here therapy can be of help in articulating and liberating the heart and its longings. However, therapy cannot lead one to the realm of the True Self, to the vision and experience of the Ultimate Reality of life and world, of self and others. It can be realized only by the heart's faith, hope and love. Faith is a 'leap' beyond the boundaries of the sensible and the perceptible: at the limits of one's world and experience, one comes to an absence, a void, emptiness; one has to let oneself fall into the void, darkness and unknowing; only thus one awakens to the nameless mystery at the heart of reality and of oneself. The poet's words point somewhat to the phase of waiting in the darkness of the night (T.S. Eliot, *The Four Quartets*): "I said to my soul be still, and wait without hope/ For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love/ For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith/ But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting." It is the religious dimension, and it is embedded in a religious or spiritual tradition and community. One has to freely choose for such a community and tradition in order to find sustenance and meaning, which the 'world' cannot give. By such choice, faith and experience of compassion, the world itself is transformed into a wondrous mystery. This is beyond the competence of psychotherapy.

There is another misunderstanding often perpetuated by religions and spirituality: that there are two opposing and contradictory wills in one, one evil and one good, the evil one often called confusedly the 'ego', or even 'self'. There is only one will and one desire in terms of the ultimate good and beatitude of the human heart. The ultimate reality flows through and is articulated and actualized in terms of one's individual heart and selfhood. Of course, one's understanding and willing can be muddled, mistaken, disoriented, confused; and further, our body and emotions can be opaque and recalcitrant; and one can be arrogant, stubborn and self-willed. But one's heart and will are basically good and oriented to the good and the true. The proper way is then to help the person to see rightly, discern the truth in love, listen to one's heart's deepest longings and desires. This may need the help of the therapy; therapy with its nonjudgmental attitude and the encouragement of the clients to be agents of their own life can be of tremendous help. Yet, psychotherapy is only the half-way house; it is finally the province of spiritual guidance and discipleship to help in leading to the vision of the ultimate reality and meaning of life, to 'the leap of faith'. All this is not merely the work of the individual or the individual with the teacher. It implies what religious and spiritual traditions call 'grace'--'happy chance'--, unmerited gift and blessing showered on one on the way. The right response to such 'grace' and blessings is one of gratitude, as well as selfless self-giving in service.

**Selfless Living and Living from the Heart:** In such a life, one has to learn not to look back or hold onto oneself in self-defense, self-justification, or self-indulgence, or in the many forms of desperate clinging to securities and certainties; for, in awakening to Emptiness, one has surrendered oneself and walks freely in the knowledge of all-embracing compassion and mercy. And it calls for a 'conversion' to the good: one lets oneself be chosen again and again by the good and the true rather

than by willful domination, power or pleasures. But it is not a matter of merely objective, impersonal values; it is a matter of listening to the heart's deepest desires and longings and following the good, the true and the beautiful as manifested through one's heart and soul as embedded in the world. In such a life, doubts, conflicts, anxieties are an inescapable part of life. One has to live with all the ambiguities and anxieties as well as the untold sorrows and pain of the world; at the same time learn to simply live and love with all one's heart, mind and soul, in boundless faith, freedom and trust flowing from the realization of Emptiness that is the ground and being of one's very self.

**Problems and Dangers:** This ideal of zen is beautiful and alluring. But there are so many problems and pitfalls in realizing awakening and compassion. More often than not, the teachers are shallow, immature or manipulative. Many Western teachers reduce meditation and zen to some form of psychotherapy; in this they betray the spirit and betray their students. As regards the students, most seem to come in search of health, well-being and self-improvement. Many who have serious psychological problems, come to zen in the hope of getting a cure. As mentioned earlier, there will be some benefit to these people, but zen or meditation cannot take the place of therapy, meditation is not the answer to these problems. Furthermore, **most of the psychological illnesses arise from societal problems and social evils.**

Psychotherapy is not only not adequate to these, it has become most often the unwitting servant of a narcissistic culture. Many people are obsessed seeking some great experiences in avoidance of their mundane life and life's tasks; some want to achieve great breakthrough experiences by their own willful effort and struggle: for these people meditation becomes a narcissistic ego trip. For the people seeking an escape from the pain of their own selfhood, words like emptiness, void, detachment, and no-self become magical doors out of the messy self-becoming and human relationships that go beyond one's control and prediction. Many also are allergic to tradition, to authority and to discipline. Some are too willful to be able to listen to a teacher; some are too restless, or too disturbed, to be able to sit quietly in zazen or practice mindfulness. Therapy may be the better option for all these people. But for the serious spiritual seekers, therapy cannot take the place of spirituality or of the religious quest for ultimate reality and meaning. Zen or spirituality has to do with salvation or awakening and it goes beyond ordinary well-being and health, which usually are the domain of therapy and medicine. However, therapy can be of great help to many meditators. For, often meditation 'bypasses' emotions, emotional complexities and unconscious motivations, or even tends in the hands of teachers with false and mistaken views to repress and deny human desires and individual selfhood; and therapy in such cases can be liberating. However, it is important not to interchange or confuse spirituality/meditation and psychotherapy, one with the other.

**Return to the Marketplace:** There is also the danger of taking meditation as the be-all and end-all. Meditation is only one part of the spiritual way. Further, meditation and awakening have to flow into daily life and into one's relationships. One has to take responsibility for one's life and the way one lives. It is in living one's daily life, learning to relate to others, caring for the world, committing oneself to a vocation, that one's practice of meditation and awakening are authenticated. Awakening is not simply for oneself; it is a call to care for the world and others as

well as oneself. Most often one is healed and even cured when one begins to care for and commit oneself to others and the world. At the same time one also needs to understand oneself, learn to listen to one's heart and mind, discern the good and the true from the untrue and the bad, and choose the life-giving way. This will involve learning to live with others in communion, learning to listen, share and dialogue. In this way, life itself becomes therapy; and the field of life is the realm of authentication and actualization of awakening. The source of the awakened life is grounded in the vision of the Mystery of Emptiness of self and world and their non-duality. Let me put it in terms of zen awakening: **Abide in Emptiness while walking on the roads of the world; and walk on the roads of the world while abiding in Emptiness.**

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