

## MEDITATION, THE CONTENTS OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND SHOPPING LISTS

### *A talk to a group of experienced meditators*

The basic instructions in most classic meditation techniques are simple enough. Usually the new meditator is told to focus attention on a meditation object (be it a sound or the breath or an image or an idea etc.) for the duration of the period of meditation.

It doesn't take a genius to notice that from the very first time you meditate, lots of other things also arise in the conscious mind competing with and often replacing the object of meditation. Regular meditators will know what I mean, the internal discussions and arguments, the shopping lists and dreams, the observations, the insights, the thoughts we're ashamed of and the more noble ones we like, the boring habitual thoughts ('not that again!') and the sometimes endless internal jabber. Typically many of these intrusions filling the contents of consciousness are related to what we've done in the previous few hours before the meditation session, for example an event that's replaying in our mind and may continue to replay, off and on throughout our meditation. Whether profound or mundane such thoughts seem to bubble up from the unconscious (for want of a better word) and contrast with the meditation object that is placed in the mind consciously, or wilfully.

### A BIT OF SILENCE

Occasionally the inner dialogue stops and there is (relative) silence. Along with the silence and stillness we tend also experience an intensification of the 'now' moment and a strong 'feeling of one's own 'Beingness' (a rather inelegant description but the best one I can come up with at the moment). The Mind seems more powerful and concentrated like the beam of a searchlight. I called it relative silence because with a bit of experience of such states, which inevitably (if not necessarily very often) come with regular meditation, it's easy enough to perceive that there's still a bit of noise going on in the silence. But the noise is 'pre-linguistic', that is, you're catching the disturbance as the words are forming in the conscious mind but the words themselves do not, or do not need to form. So the obvious thing is to try and silence that disturbance too. That's not the end of this route and the process of quieting the mind through it's various and deeper levels is described in terrifying detail by, for example, the early Buddhists (the Jhanna states as described in the Abidhamma).

Meditation teachers are often surprised at how often beginners can get to fairly 'deep' states quite early on. Never mind, we all know it won't last and often (and more to the point) neither will the meditator when such experiences dry up (if you need cheering up, read 'The Dark Night of the Soul' again). It's hardly surprising that many meditators live (or at least meditate) for these moments. Such highly concentrated and intense states of mind spill over into daily life, making the world seem a much more profound and nicer place.

Our view and image of meditation tends to be coloured by such experiences. A silent mind and the 'relief' and feeling of wellbeing that goes with it is not that uncommon in everyone's experience, meditator or not. To have lots more of it is surely a good idea. Teachers, books and articles on meditation tend to dwell on this sort of area because it is a universal experience at some level, relatively easy to describe and with obvious benefits.

## THE GREAT STRUGGLE

The next logical step might be to think that THE GREAT STRUGGLE of meditation is between the silent mind and the apparently endless babble in the conscious mind. The more you meditate and the more you get to know the 'ordinary' contents of conscious mind with all its tedious shopping lists, then the greater the desire for a bit of, lets face it, peace and quiet. According to this view THE GREAT STRUGGLE will only end when the contents of the conscious mind (during the meditation session at least) is exclusively filled with the meditation object. To paraphrase George Orwell's sheep, "Meditation object good, everything else bad"

For many of us, ten years down the line it may be a different shopping list but it's still there. So what's gone wrong? The technique perhaps? The teacher? "Or maybe I'm just not doing it right. Maybe my mind is simply not made of the right stuff or I'm really weak-willed (why can't I hold the object of meditation in my mind for more than two minutes - on a good day?). Perhaps meditation doesn't work so I'll try something else."

There is a problem at least potentially, in all forms of traditional meditation. If the instructions are to concentrate for a period of time on the breath or a mantra or whatever, it sets up the idea that the mind wandering from that object is a failure of will in some way. Therefore perfect meditation is the ability to be able to keep going without distraction for the allotted time (like Tantric sex).

## HAPPY TALKY TALKY HAPPY TALK...

Why do we talk to ourselves? If we want to deal in some way with the inner dialogue, first of all we should try to understand why it's there at all. What's it for?

Going over in the conscious mind events that have or might happen to you is part of our problem solving mechanism. If you have a problem, let's say finding a faster route to work, you get out your map, pore over the possibilities until you've found a solution, or give up if you feel the problems unsolvable. Either way the problem is resolved. The chatter in the mind is always unassimilated experiences that the mind is trying (sometimes desperately) to deal with, one way or the other.

A typical and classic example would be an argument we had with someone earlier in the day. Perhaps we made a mistake or did something that upsets someone. If there is passionate content we replay it endlessly, adding things we ought to have said, checking all the nuances of the argument, justifying ourselves to ourselves, all in order to integrate and stop the nagging feelings that arise. To survive we have to assimilate and digest, because we can't pretend it didn't happen.

Eventually we do sort it out, and we have various strategies for doing so, for example by convincing ourselves that we are right and justified in our actions and the other party is wrong or lacking in intelligence or whatever. It may take a long time, but the whole event must be integrated without a fragmentation of our World View (which of course includes our Self View). The more inconsistent and fantastical our World View is the harder this assimilation process may become, but we have evolved to be resilient creatures so we usually succeed in putting the experience 'to bed', although as we know it can jump out of bed again years later. Highly disturbed people are those that cannot make peace with certain events that have taken place.

So it's hardly surprising that all this stuff intrudes into our conscious mind whilst we're meditating. Meditators now and again go through a stage when the inner chatter and the repetitive tape-loops get worse. In fact, by creating a space for ourselves for half an hour, is actually giving the 'problem solving' mind an opportunity to deal with the latest batch of unassimilated experiences. Perhaps we should be grateful for that, because you can be sure they're going to come out one way or another.

## A BIG QUESTION

Looked at from this point of view, it might be most useful to ask the question; how to deal with unassimilated experiences more effectively. Unfortunately, to do that you have to be prepared to change your entire World/Self View. In the above example about an argument replaying in your mind, if you had a World View that really could accept that you make mistakes, then there would be nothing to justify. As every psychology student knows, when you can finally accept that the love affair is over it stops being obsessive. The emotional powerhouse is no longer activated and the problem-solving faculty won't have much problem in assimilating the events. A whole raft of inner dialogues would be gone and would therefore not arise in your meditation. When they clamour in your mind for attention it really is pointless complaining about it.

Changing your World View is a big thing. It means questioning and being prepared to give up everything you believe about yourself.

## THE INNER LIFE

Descriptions of the different types of discursive thoughts that we get to know in meditation do not in themselves describe our real Inner Life. Rather they are like the clothing that surrounds and reflects. Our inner lives are essentially emotional and in meditation we get to recognise the rich and messy soup of excitement, boredom, humour, rage, calmness, delight, anxiety, and so on that underpins our Inner Life. Our Inner Life is largely private; sometimes we might let somebody we are close to see part of it, but we like to keep a large portion of it to ourselves. Again our psychology student will note that body language often gives it away (we all know the cheesy grin syndrome).

A person's World/Self View and their Inner Life are interwoven like an ornate pattern on a tapestry. Our Inner Lives are unique (if not necessarily very interesting). My rich messy soup is certainly not the same as yours, and that I suppose is why our Inner Life is what we usually consider to be 'ourselves' or our 'real self'. While our emotional life is notoriously inconsistent, there are recurring patterns that reinforce it, like the secret chocolate hoard or pornographic book at the back of your drawer, or the sentimental song that moves you to tears 'despite' yourself. Our Inner Life is where we think the unthinkable and consider things that we're ashamed of (e.g. murdering your mother/spouse/baby etc.) and would never dream of discussing with anyone else (not even your therapist).

## THE INNATE BUNDLE OF TENDENCIES

So, where does your Inner Life come from and what function does it have? Saying it's all just a load of conditioning, while mostly true, is not a very satisfactory answer. Why do two people from an early age, with the same kind of background embrace one type of experience and the other, another. Why does one friend love Rock music and another Classical? Why is a third indifferent to music altogether? We go towards and embrace a certain type of conditioning but not blindly, we choose this rather than that, only then do we

forget and let the conditioned reactions take over which then builds the unique patternings we call our Inner Lives.

The nature v nurture argument must be as old as the hills but the existence of a unique 'inborn nature' (or you could simply say 'variation') that is different from one baby to another is pretty obvious. Whether it's caused by blind genetics or the remnants of a past life or some other theory should not concern us here. Behind our Inner Life is an Innate Bundle of Tendencies and that innate bundle is there throughout our lives, expressing itself through and forming what we think of as our personal Inner Life. From this point of view, our Inner Lives are mechanisms for expressing our Innate Bundle of Tendencies.

Our Innate Bundle of Tendencies works unconsciously (it was there before we developed a conscious mind in the accepted sense of the word) and is therefore very powerful as we are not normally aware of it pushing us in one direction or another. It is so deep in us and we take it for granted as such a natural a part of us that we fail to see that it's actually different in different people.

This Innate Bundle of Tendencies has a direction that can be perceived in various ways. It can be seen, as it were 'second-hand' when for example we look back on our lives and see patterns. Why did one person become a Doctor rather than a Lawyer? And if that was because their parents forced them into it, why did that person become attracted to Orthopaedic Medicine rather than General Practice? Why do I choose this type of person for a friend and not that? Why do I like this kind of holiday and not that?

## RETURN TO THE GREAT STRUGGLE

I suggested earlier that THE GREAT STRUGGLE in meditation is usually seen as one between attending to the meditation object and distracting thoughts filling the contents of the conscious mind. But the real problem is not that at all. The real problem is our view of what is Meditation. The first real struggle isn't with the jabbering mind at all, but is the letting go of all the mediator's preconceived notions of what meditation ought to be.

This first struggle is the struggle to abandon the words OUGHT and SHOULD. "I 'ought' to have a silent mind. I 'should' be able to control my thoughts, I did it once I 'ought' to be able to do it again. I 'should' be calm. I've read about all those wonderful experiences in the books, I 'should' have got them by now. I 'ought' to try harder. I've been meditating for months/years/decades, the babble 'shouldn't' still be there." (Please feel free to add to this 'I ought' shopping list).

The crucial problem then is viewing meditation as a 'getting something' exercise such as 'getting' calmness or wisdom or enlightenment or power or knowledge or love or God-knows-what-else. I am not saying that silence and deep concentration is not real meditation. When the mind locks intensely into that path as it sometimes does, it is only right and proper to pursue those moments for all they're worth and get as far as you are able to at that time. In the silence there is Knowledge. But spending all the other times trying to get to those kinds of states is futile and a wasted opportunity.

The more we can clear away our personal views of what meditation is meant to be, so the more authentic our experience becomes. A discursive cluster of thoughts is what it is, and has just as much right to be there as anything else whether you happen to like it or not.

It is possible to turn your attitude towards meditation from one of exclusion to inclusion. Whatever enters the content of consciousness is real, whether it be a thought, a fantasy, a strange image or your meditation object. All are real for that moment in time. With an attitude of inclusion, meditation can be transformed from one of struggle to one of delight. Delight at the endless richness and complexity of your Inner Life flowing and changing from moment to moment. Even more interesting are the moments of a state of mind we might classify as a sort of intense equanimity where it's possible to view the flow of our Inner Life with a sort of profound detachment yet without indifference. If the discipline of meditation is held, the meditation object tends to change or rather become deeper or subtler as the mind starts to see the underlying 'glue' of the Inner Life (it's Innate Bundle of Tendencies). But this penetrative process will only be partial if there is a desire to 'root' it out or have any other agenda about its value.

There is a view that Meditation is about controlling the mind. More important is the attempt to discover who is controlling what.

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