

MEDITATION FOR NOSY PEOPLE

Meditation is the most difficult subject on which to speak. Many of its practitioners have opted (perhaps wisely) to speak on it as little as possible. Nevertheless, a great deal has been said about meditation, much of it contradictory. Meditation is at the same time both an exercise in will power and the surrender of the will. The word meditation itself means thinking, yet some see meditation as the suppression of all thought. Meditation seems to appeal both to people with an obsessive regard for their own health and to those with an equally obsessive disregard for physical well-being. Some meditators appear deeply religious, regarding meditation as a form of prayer integral to their own particular faith; others are apparently atheist, practicing meditation in the context of the rejection of all dogma.

There are a number of reasons for these apparent contradictions. First, the aim of meditation is indescribable. Second, the various aspects of its methodology are not unique to meditation, and this leads to a confusion with more specialized activities. Third, the effects of meditation are general in nature. Fourth, anything of value said about meditation has its origin within the context of a living oral tradition, applied to the particular needs of each of its individual practitioners, and phrased in the language of the time.

The aim of meditation is indescribable. Sometimes an aim is apparently specified. However, this aim on closer inspection usually turns out to be something that is itself indescribable - such as union with or attainment of an indescribable mode of being. Some see it as the way to a type of knowledge that is not expressible in words. Alternatively, the aim may be formulated as freedom from anything that is describable. Some may even deny that meditation has an aim at all. One could go further still and deny that it is an activity, rather than a form of not-doing.

It would appear from this that meditation, in so far as it is an activity at all, is a rather pointless one. In a sense this is true, but meditation is not random, and not all pointless activity is meditation. Despite the fact that they have no apparent purpose, most meditative practices seem very purposeful. There are precise instructions involved, which fall into two categories: the instructions concerned with the meditation practice itself; and the rules, regulations and philosophy within which any form of meditation is inevitably enclosed.

Much of the packaging that accrues to meditation consists of attempts to describe and explain some of the phenomena that arise as its by-products. Since meditation itself is in the final analysis indescribable, what one inevitably gets instead is psychological or even cosmological models which are products of their time (my own observations are of course entirely objective!). Thus wanderers across metaphorical deserts have become, in recent times, astronauts of inner space. With the discovery of brain-waves, interest has focused on physiological measurement. This is not a sign of modern materialism. Mystics have always been interested in contemporary science. When the mathematical pattern underlying musical relationships between different sounds was discovered, it became fashionable to explain any interior experience in terms of a harmony of some sort of vibrations. Now the unified field theory sought by modern physicists is a powerful current metaphor for the quest for personal integration. For the coming generation meditation may perhaps be best conveyed in the language of computer programming or in terms of something yet to be invented. Some of the older descriptions in terms of basic things such as child-rearing or the irrigation of agricultural land may remain comprehensible. As a general rule of thumb any analogy may legitimately be employed in the perpetuation of meditation so long as it can be relied upon to break down under close scrutiny. Things have to be kept open-ended, otherwise the essential aimlessness of meditation is compromised.

`Packaging' is also necessary for a number of other reasons. A pointless activity aimed at the indescribable may not immediately appeal to everyone: some form of marketing is required.

Alternatively, it may be necessary in some times and places to disguise the fact that meditation is occurring at all. Or again, some of the packaging may consist of things conducive to the practice of meditation (the voluntary keeping of rules is itself a form of mental discipline that can set the ground for meditation).

Of course, some of these things may be desirable in themselves, even apart from their usage as packaging. Without being drawn into a discussion of the relative merits of different belief systems, the general point must be made that, while meditation is an individual activity, in the final analysis the meditator exists to serve society and not vice versa.

Meditation and the Economics of Attention

Instructions concerned with meditation itself fall into three types: instructions for performing some simple activity which forms the basis of the meditation; instructions for fine-tuning the attention paid to this activity; instructions for dealing with other phenomena encountered during the attempt to perform the activity.

Meditation is usually based on the performance of some very simple activity such as observing a simple object, uttering simple sounds, walking or even just breathing. Of course, all these activities are capable of being made quite complicated, and usually are in everyday life. Therefore, it would perhaps be more accurate to say that meditation is based on some fundamental human activity reduced to its simplest elements. It should be mentioned in passing that this simplicity may not be immediately apparent to the beginner. If the meditation involves the conscious performance of unfamiliar movements or the memorizing of sound-combinations not used in normal speech, it may seem complicated. However, compared with the complex regulation of breath in speech, for example, meditation is not complex. It is just that these everyday activities have become so routine that we have forgotten how complex they are. What all these various meditative activities have in common is that they are unnecessary. That is, either the activity itself, or the manner in which it is performed, is not necessary to the normal round of life.

While breathing is obviously necessary, sustained conscious awareness of it is not. In the normal course of things attention is drawn to the breath when it becomes abnormal (as in sneezing) and its conscious performance (as in blowing the nose) has the objective of restoring the smooth running of its automatic rhythm as quickly as possible. Prolonged awareness of normal breathing serves no apparent purpose.

Similarly, while language is essential to social functioning, sounds uttered by a lone meditator cannot serve any such purpose. Admittedly, the widespread habit of conversing with oneself (as long as it remains discreetly sub-vocal) is an accepted method of reinforcing one's self-image. However, the repetition of simple sounds having no personal associations seems ill suited to such reinforcement (which typically necessitates detailed commentary and convoluted argument).

Those meditations based on the act of walking seem, on the face of it, more reasonable. After all, walking is often necessary to post letters, visit the bathroom and so on. However, meditative walking has no such objective. It is true that aimless wandering is apparently common and acceptable in gardens, for example, but this aimlessness is an illusion due to the subtle nature of the overall objective. Rather than being to get to a single location the objective is to 'view the garden', which entails walking to a number of locations in order to examine particular flowers, or 'enjoy' different vistas, and so on until the task is completed. In meditative walking there is no such external objective. True, the physical act of walking itself is often advocated by doctors and health professionals as a gentle form of exercise. However, meditative walking is probably too gentle to be of much benefit in this respect. Some people find the act of walking conducive to thought. However, in meditative

walking the attention is not on thoughts, but is directed outwards, with the physical sensations of movement as the focus. It is very necessary for the attention to be directed in this way if one is negotiating a building site at night, but careful attention to each movement seems superfluous when traversing a closely mown lawn or empty room in broad daylight.

Meditation involving quiet sitting may seem less bizarre. After all, a large percentage of time is spent in this way in the normal course of life. However, there are usually good reasons for doing this, such as driving a car, resting, or freeing the attention for thought or conversation. Meditators do not sit down because they are tired. Immobility is not necessary to perform the extremely simple tasks typically associated with sitting meditation, tasks which often entail prolonged attention to a single object (either external or visualized). In the normal course of work or recreation some people may stare for long periods at VDUs or TV screens, but here the attention is not restricted to a single object as it is in meditation. These screens entrance by generating complex changing patterns.

Prolonged observation of the *same* pattern is rarely necessary. A pattern, once discerned and noted, ceases to require attention. Having noted the position of a table in a room, for example, one seldom finds it necessary to keep an eye on it in case it moves or disappears. Similarly, repeated actions once set up can be left to perform themselves. Work of a repetitive nature does not require human observers, and it is usually considered more efficient to replace them with machinery.

In normal life, prolonged attention to a single thing is unnecessary; in meditation attention to everything is unnecessary. Some people appear very inquisitive, but this is a selective attention to things that catch the interest, or a particular sensitivity to large or unexpected physical stimuli. It is characterized by reflexive orienting to outstanding stimuli, movement towards those labelled by memory as attractive (or away from those labelled unpleasant) and a general restlessness. This behaviour is very different from the quiet sitting of meditators, and so is the behaviour of people sitting and apparently gazing into space. The attention in these cases is usually lost in internal thought and daydreams (or in the case of the elderly, on recall of distant memories).

In meditation based on external gazing the attention is directed to the outer world. People often sit on park benches apparently doing this, but the attention deployed is still selective, wandering to particular things that catch the observer's interest. This is a useful and very necessary habit. One cannot think elaborate thoughts about everything at once, or respond with complex movements to all stimuli. One attends, therefore, to what is presumed to be relevant to survival and the perpetuation of one's lifestyle.

From the foregoing it is apparent that attention is a valuable resource (which is why everyone wants to be the centre of attention and nobody wants to pay attention). There is an economics of attention. This is necessitated by the limited 'size' of the normal attention span. Some psychological experiments suggest it may be as limited as six or seven items. We are able to live complicated lives in spite of this limitation by setting up autonomous routines that can function independently and unconsciously (because they are performed consciously, meditative activities are necessarily simple). Attention is regulated as a homeostatic field. Homeostasis is the maintenance of some value (such as a constant body temperature) by self-limiting processes (negative feed-back). The field of attention is self-regulated so as to hold the contents of consciousness at an optimum.

Overloading of the system is prevented partly by the limitations of the perceptual apparatus itself. The senses respond to a limited range of stimuli. Information is further reduced by being filtered through numerous levels of processing before the results are presented to our consciousness. Complex patterns can be simplified by 'chunking' items together to produce a few categories (a phenomenon occurring at all levels of perception). Repeated stimuli such as a ticking clock or one's own breath soon cease to be noticed. This process of 'habituation' is not limited to individual stimuli - large-scale features of our familiar environment become taken for granted.

As oft-repeated stimuli become excluded from awareness, so too do our own oft-repeated actions, which then function independently of our normal consciousness. The mechanicalness of much of our behaviour can be an embarrassment if the conditions which favoured its establishment change. However, it serves the useful function of freeing consciousness to be deployed elsewhere. Although usually squandered on childish fancies, this surplus of attention is the most valuable resource we have. It is the talent we bury as quickly as possible, exchanging our birthright for a self-deluded psychological soup. It is a perennial fallacy that attention should be a slave to serve the various mechanical behaviour patterns fashionable in any given society. Even if it is true that we are machines, one should remember that machines are designed to produce some commodity. In the case of human beings the commodity is surplus attention. In religious symbolism this is acknowledged in the setting aside of holy-days.

Surplus attention is the natural product of the human organism. It is a fallacy that 'spare time' is the result of any particular social organization or technology. This is putting things the wrong way round. It is in fact not a surplus of material resources, physical labour or measurable production, but a surplus of conscious attention which is the real basis of any of our economic systems.

All such endeavours can be seen as arising from mechanisms which prevent underloading the field of attention. When the contents of consciousness fall below optimum, feelings of boredom lead to an increase in complexity because whatever is available is examined in greater detail. An extreme, but easily observable example is the increased sensitivity to sound that occurs when input is reduced by closing the eyes. When the rate of change in the external environment is very slow, the attention tends to turn 'inwards' to active thought and planning or to memories and daydreams. Meditative exercises seem to stress the system by underloading or overloading the field of attention. In the latter case, material is presented at too fast a rate to enable ordinary mental processes to continue. In the former case, too little material is presented to occupy consciousness, and normally memories would be replayed or fantasies generated to make up the deficit and occupy the surplus attention.

For this reason, meditation has sometimes been presented as suppression of memory under a dark cloud of forgetting. It would perhaps be more accurate to see it as a special form of memory training. Keeping the attention on present sensory input or constantly retrieving the same item is itself a form of memory.

It is, however, a highly unusual form of remembering. Attention would normally move to one of the senses or to another related memory item, rather than recycling the same item. Although apparently random, this movement occurs within pre-set boundaries. What stimuli we are sensitive to depends on personal interest, which is governed by habit. On a deeper level there is the peculiarly individual channelling of particular desires. Underlying these desires are preconceptions reinforced by self-imposed limitations on sensitivity in a self-maintaining cycle.

Therefore, as well as being regulated in terms of quantity by an inbuilt homeostatic mechanism, the types of contents held by the attention are also controlled by a form of conditioning. It is not conditioning of observable behaviour or conditioning of perception, both of which may operate independently of conscious awareness. It will vary from one individual to another: artists and policemen, for example, are both highly aware of their surroundings, but attend to different aspects. It also varies within the same individual according to situation. Meditation itself involves a form of conditioning of the attention, albeit a somewhat peculiar form.

Being Follows Attention

The link between conditioning of attention and conditioning of behaviour and perception is such that we become what we attend to. If you pay a lot of attention to driving your car, you become a good driver; if all your spare attention is spent listening to the radio, you may become an expert on pop

music and good at quiz games. This simple, common-sense observation can be given greater dignity by expressing it as a suitably portentous aphorism: being follows attention.

On the principle that being follows attention, it is amusing to speculate on the consequences of using the attention in meditation, whose aim was held to be indescribable. Presumably one would become indescribable! This needs some qualification. Like the rest of humanity meditators utilize the radiation of our nearest star as a source of energy (though indirectly and less efficiently than plankton), they can run (though not as fast as a cheetah), climb (though not as well as a squirrel), swim (though not as well as a fish), organize into societies (though they will lack the integration achieved by the colonial insects), develop languages (although lacking the complexity of the genetic coding required to specify the simplest bacterium). What is peculiarly human is sophisticated organization combined with lack of specialization. In its aimless pursuit of the unspecialized, the main effect of meditation is arguably to make its practitioners more human.

In a sense, saying that being follows attention is no more than stating the obvious. Attention is involved in learning patterns of perceiving and acting that subsequently become ingrained as habit. As explained previously, the very automation of these processes frees attention, giving the possibility of fresh observation, acquisition of new skills or the changing of old habits. However, the surplus of attention which is constantly being created cannot be utilized if its very deployment becomes conditioned - which is in fact what happens during the normal course of human development.

This conditioning of the attention can of course be short-circuited accidentally by physiological disruption, emotional stress, or even intellectual trauma (although the latter is extremely rare since it presupposes an attention conditioned by a highly organized intellect). In fact, any old stress will do the trick. No specific esoteric knowledge is required to set up such accidents. The rapid production of heightened states of awareness is the easiest thing in the world, given sufficient skill in marketing techniques to get punters to accept the disruptive treatment involved. Ironically, life itself provides greater traumas than any person, no matter how unscrupulous, can contrive.

Such accidental freeing of the attention can even be quite rewarding. Negative reinforcement will occur if there is a temporary cessation of unpleasant emotional habits, positive reinforcement if there is something pleasant for the surplus attention to latch on to. In such cases the individual will seek to replicate whatever circumstances are perceived as having caused the experience. Of course, the difficulty in identifying which of the many coincidental factors have a true causal relationship to the desired phenomena can lead to the acquisition of the most hilarious eccentricities (Incorrect Diagnosis Of Liberating Symptoms). Accidental awareness can also be a punishing experience, however, if liberation of attention is accompanied by major disruption of psychological organization. Such accidents lack any regulatory mechanisms that can limit to what extent and under what circumstances surplus attention arises.

If the results are too disruptive, surplus attention itself may be perceived as a threat to integrity. Mechanisms then have to be set up to prevent future recurrences of the threatening situation (Metaprogramming Entity Denying User Surplus Attention).

This special type of self-programming can be seen at work in late-night discussions where, as tongues loosen and conceptual inhibitions drop, possibilities open up, only to be suddenly shut down as the danger becomes apparent (leaving one perhaps with a poignant sense of loss). By an unspoken conspiracy all concerned agree to terminate the conversation or to resort to banalities. In extreme cases, victims of accidental awareness may be characterized by a pathological busy-ness or an abnormal degree of normality. However, assuming there is no inherent tendency to instability and the smooth running of acquired conditioning has resumed following their attentional mishap, such defensive strategies would not be diagnosable as illness under the usual definition of mental well-being. On the contrary, such people might be regarded as socially well adjusted and their obsessive

deployment of all awareness in 'useful' work as exemplary.

Even where accidental freeing of consciousness is not perceived as threatening, it is not sustainable. All surplus attention is soon redeployed. This aspect of attention has led to analogies with a liquid that tends to flow away, or a form of energy which needs to be conserved.

Surplus Attention

Although these 'accidents of awareness' are transitory, there is a type of memory which stores such events. It is not the sort of memory that analyses experience into different aspects and stores them separately with similar or related items (the sort of memory that passes exams and wins quiz games), but a memory that stores entire episodes.

Moving episodes with a strong personal content (such as moments of betrayal or personal triumph) are obviously relevant to how we interact with others in everyday life. Other episodes are less so, yet still significant (for example, a child's first view of the sea or first experience of snow). Memories of this latter type may not be accessible because no connection has been made to everyday life. If threatening, they may even be shut away, as a growing tree compartmentalizes foreign objects or infection within itself.

If sufficient episodes of this quality are accumulated, however, they may exert an influence on individuals, leading them to seek out the company of others with whom they apparently have little in common. In fact without such hidden motivation no one would ever seek to meditate. One is reminded here of the alchemists' maxim, 'It takes gold to make gold.'

It is the possibility of the recurrence of surplus attention itself that is significant, rather than the details that form the apparent content of such memories. Increased awareness can occur in all sorts of different contexts. As a generalization we can say that its arising is favoured by contexts in which habitual modes of being are seen as inadequate or, perhaps less dramatically, the contextual clues that trigger habitual modes of being are lacking or ambiguous. A simple example of the latter is asking a prospective meditator to relax with eyes closed (habitually associated with sleep) while sitting perfectly upright (a posture conducive of alertness). The unusual degree of physical immobility in sitting meditation removes many of the sensations of movement and touch that form the context for a normal self-image. This, combined with closed eyes, is a mild (but incomplete) form of sensory deprivation, that (in the absence of sleep) is conducive (in the short term) to surplus attention. Meditative exercises that employ rapid movement also remove context, but do so by disorientation. In the period prior to adaptation to the new context, surplus attention arises.

A more dramatic example is the disorientation encountered on space missions. This is compounded by overload of the attention (as in the American astronaut's packed schedule) or underload (as in the Soviet cosmonaut's long isolation). One might expect that these are ideal conditions in which surplus attention could arise, and predictably psychological experts have ingenious plans to prevent such a 'problem'. Of course, the best solution would be to screen candidates for susceptibility to such aberrations. There might be a useful spin-off for selecting and training people for positions of responsibility back on earth (the advice of some mystics to seek potential for heightened awareness among the poor and marginalized, rather than privileged élites, seems prophetic in this respect).

Meditation has in fact been suggested as an aid to living in space, but usually on the assumption that it is a relaxation technique. The relationship between meditation and relaxation is too complex to go into here. Since the aim of meditation (as I use the word) is indescribable, one cannot meditate in order to relax. One could, however, relax in order to meditate since (used carefully) this may help set conditions for the arising of surplus attention. During certain phases of the process triggered by surplus attention, spontaneous relaxation may occur. However, surplus attention does not

automatically result in relaxation. In fact meditation instructions often have relaxation techniques built in precisely because surplus attention can be so alarming.

It is not difficult to see why this should be so. A general activation of the central nervous system is usually occasioned by an instinctive mechanism that alerts to dangerous situations. This link between fear and heightened awareness leads some to seek out risky (but apparently pointless) activities and others to try to get such behaviour banned. Dangerous situations are unpleasant if one is alone or helpless. In a therapeutic context any techniques that break up familiar patterns are accompanied by a great deal of soothing, sympathetic support. In the context of meditation, individuals must proceed alone, but they are not helpless - they do know what to do, they have been given very precise instructions that they must carry out no matter what (objects used in meditation are therefore described as secret passwords, enabling the bearer to bypass the inner fears that restrict awareness).

Fear cannot be relied upon to sustain surplus attention, however. Such is the power of conditioning that one even becomes habituated to situations of extreme danger if they persist for long enough. There is also a limit to the number of contextual shifts one's environment can provide that are sufficient to generate surplus attention. One can sometimes put off the problem for a while by manufacturing increasingly bizarre situations, but the law of diminishing returns seems to apply.

A more immediate problem is that any free consciousness that arises will quickly attach itself to whatever is most easily available. Typically, but not necessarily, this is habitual modes of thought and action (real or imagined). In the case of meditation, the contextual conditions have been manipulated in such a way that what is most available is the meditation 'object' itself.

However, as explained earlier, the (comparatively) simple activities that form the basis of meditation do not fully occupy attention. Surplus attention will inevitably arise again, only to be redirected back to the object of meditation, resulting in more surplus attention.

Directing Surplus Attention

Undeployed attention is both the beginning and end of this work (represented as a serpent biting its own tail). The cycle is not self-sustaining, however. Effort is required to keep returning the attention to the object of meditation. Such effort is of course unnecessary where moments of free consciousness have been set up merely as a prelude to redirecting attention to some pre-set pattern of perceiving or acting for therapeutic or utilitarian purposes. Here the result is an attention fully occupied by something pleasant or useful.

In the case of meditation the attention is tricked into seizing an object which is both bland and apparently useless (meditation objects and the philosophies with which they are associated are therefore compared to sharp hooks, hidden in attractive bait). If too little effort is applied to redirecting any free attention back to the meditation object, it will attach to something more interesting among whatever incidental phenomena arise. In fact some attention will inevitably be deployed among distractions, but hopefully not all.

Too much effort, however, is counterproductive. If excessive surplus attention is liberated at once, it is unstable, cannot be handled, and will attach all the more readily to any available distraction. This makes it even harder to redirect attention to the meditation object. Therefore the appropriate advice could be either to increase effort, or to stop trying too hard, depending on the predilections of the individual meditator at any given time.

What is required is gentle, sustained effort - to use a chemical analogy, gradual, indirect heating of the retort in a bath of warm water or sand, rather than lighting a fire under it. The effect of this gentle, sustained effort is to produce a small but constantly renewed surplus of attention - a partial vacuum within the field of awareness into which the contents of the mind will move, like fuel syphoned out of

a tank. In order to know himself, the meditator must create a space within himself. A by-product of meditation is therefore the manifestation of the contents of the meditator's own mind (which is why meditation objects may be called keys to open the inner chambers of the heart).

The creation of a void within the field of attention is not the only way in which the contents of the psyche can be projected. The same effect can be produced by attending to that which is without form. The perceptual apparatus seems pre-programmed to find pattern in whatever it is presented with. When the senses are fed with an apparently random input, the mind will amuse itself by inventing a pattern. The structure of the mind itself will be projected into such 'white noise': voices will be heard in rivers, visions seen in shimmering crystals and flickering flames. Even tea leaves may take on a deep significance.

The patterns that arise within chaos can have a strange attraction, but the problem is that they have a tendency to absorb one. Too much attention is involved in the process. The meditative technique of constantly returning to the meditation object is less dramatic, less hallucinatory, and enables experiences that arise to be integrated and something of their nature understood.

Nevertheless, some assume that meditation is an enhanced form of daydreaming, that the disciplines of meditation are designed to exclude external awareness so that people can project themselves into their favourite virtual reality, in the cyberspace generated by a brain isolated from its environment.

This is understandable. One might expect that the more one becomes absorbed into one's internally created worlds, the more profound the level of mind that is encountered. If this were true, it might be better to dispense with the distraction of the meditation object (and many do).

However, the opposite is the case. The quicker the attention returns to the object of meditation following any shift in focus, the more profound the level of mind that is incorporated. The less you move, the further you travel.

What often happens is simply a continuation of current activities. Surplus attention is pulled back to preoccupations that held the attention prior to meditation. This focusing has given the mind a sort of momentum in a particular direction. Of course, that is what some people want. They may perceive meditation as a means of focusing more strongly on whatever currently drives them, without the rest of life distracting them. Such people may be admired as single-minded, despised as bores or pitied as obsessed.

Equilibration

Constantly redirecting attention to the object of meditation will tend eventually to loosen attachment to current preoccupations. One may then become aware of the rest of life. This could be seen as a process of equilibration, and some meditators do claim that meditation gives them a broader, more balanced view.

Of course, this process of equilibration can recur at various levels. One may remember jobs and chores conveniently forgotten, awkward letters unwritten. This may trouble some people since they assume meditation should exclude such worldly concerns. Others may be tempted to use these memories as a prompt to start planning the rest of the day/year/life, which of course stops the equilibration process.

People who live very much in their imaginations may find an awareness of their own physical body and surroundings arising. This is a great disappointment to people who find external stimuli distracting. Loud bangs and clatters, snatches of conversation and so on, all tend to break one's train of thought and interrupt one's fantasies. The resultant free attention will tend to return to the object of

meditation, which is a cause of quite understandable irritation! This can be avoided by making each physical impression that manages to impinge the starting-point of a fresh train of associations or the basis of some new fantasy. The physical stimuli themselves can then be blamed for lack of attention to the object of meditation.

Awareness of the body itself can be a distraction if there is a great deal of discomfort. Meditation postures are not designed to be uncomfortable. Such discomfort arises partly because of the length of time a single posture is held (in normal life one rarely sits completely still for very long), but this is not the only reason. Common everyday postures would be considerably less comfortable than meditation ones if there was awareness of the body (which there usually isn't). However, since objects of meditation create surplus attention, any discomfort in the body will be more apparent. The enhanced perception of pain may then occupy too much attention.

One can of course train oneself to tolerate or ignore pain. However, since the pain in question is often an indicator of damage to the physical body, this is not necessarily a good thing. On the other hand, physical well-being is not the objective of meditation. However, in societies that have such a high expectation of physical health that even a reduced statistical probability of it is unacceptable, an activity like meditation (which is by definition useless) would not be tolerated unless it could be shown to have no measurable detrimental side effects. Since meditation is a very complicated process (despite the simple instructions), is practised by people with a wide range of other eccentricities, and serves no apparent purpose, such side effects are hard to identify.

So postures used in meditation are designed for maximum comfort and economy and minimum damage. All forms of useful work have some form of occupational disease associated with them. Since meditation serves no useful purpose, it should not, if practised properly, have any deleterious side effects.

Of course, some meditators will already have developed awareness and control of the physical body as a hobby. For them meditation may open up other areas of life. Or again, those who are prone to emotionally meaningful experiences may find an intellectual abstraction a revelation. For busy people a period of nothing much apparently happening might represent an exploration of a hitherto hidden aspect of themselves.

Although we can delineate broad categories such as these, the precise nature of the experiences that may arise will vary from individual to individual. The broad categories of experience are sometimes arranged in the form of a map of the psyche. Typically, these show a gradation from the personal and immediate to the impersonal and timeless. Although such schemes are useful, one should not assume that they always represent the order in which particular phenomena will occur, any more than a musician improvising on a theme will play notes in the order in which they occur in the scale. Also, one should make no prior assumptions as to how the various aspects of mind may arise. Not everybody is prone to talking to themselves using visual images, or seeing things in terms of verbal language. Moreover, areas of mind which are uncovered by processes occurring during meditation may not manifest during the formal period of the meditation itself, but in the everyday events of ordinary life (which is ironic since many people see meditation as something apart from life in general).

The precise nature of the experiences that may arise will also vary from culture to culture, as well as from individual to individual. Meditators who find it difficult to organize their lives so they can meditate often pretend it is society that is preventing them, but with the exception of those times and places where conditions are particularly bad, this is usually not the case. Indeed, it is a great privilege to live in a society that tolerates meditation. Any society which tolerates activities such as meditation is tacitly accepting the validity of the objective of meditation. It is making a form of investment and it is only fair that individual meditators give the civilization that supports them value for money.

It is important not to overvalue the hitherto suppressed aspects of mind, making them an objective, since this will create further imbalances. Which aspect is predominant may vary with the same individual at different times. As a broad generalization, in high-technology, urbanized cultures with widespread literacy and large numbers of people doing non-manual work, it is the right hemisphere of the brain that is assumed to be the repository of all mystic wisdom. In those times and places where most people are manual workers and express themselves in movement and symbols, it is the left hemisphere's mystic powers of writing and mathematics that are regarded with superstitious awe. However, both views are correct in that contact with whatever is unfamiliar interrupts normal conditioning and allows surplus attention to arise.

It is perhaps a mistake to assume that any particular aspect is necessarily a feature of the 'conscious' mind as opposed to the 'unconscious'. Children devote a great deal of conscious attention to learning physical movement, whereas the rules of language and logic operate largely unconsciously in arguing adults.

Some people form a very definite opinion as to what they lack and then regard the process of equilibration itself as the objective of meditation. This is usually mistaken, either because it is very difficult to see one's own imbalances, or because there is a tendency to attribute undue importance to what one lacks, to assume that everyone else lacks it.

Attempts to correct one's own imbalances stop the process of meditation, since there will be attachment to a part of the mind rather than attention to the object of meditation. This is one reason why meditation can be described as not-doing.

Byways

One by-product of this process is an occasional dislocation in the sense of time. Different levels of organization within the mind have different speeds of response. The knee-jerk reflex, for example, is almost instantaneous. The conditioned response of a braking driver may occur before he has had time to think about it. He may take many years to ponder an abstract problem, however. Traditional ways of symbolizing this aspect of mental organization are the different speeds of planetary orbits and the different notes produced by objects with different lengths. However, such metaphors have often been taken literally.

The length of time that has elapsed in retrospect depends on which level is being compared with which current standpoint. For example, compared to the level of mind that is reading these words, a more direct interaction with the physical environment moves so fast that external events would appear in slow motion. On the other hand, on emerging from absorption in inner imagery, one doesn't know where the time has gone. These shifts are described in folklore as visits to other realms. The natural phenomena that trigger such shifts by catching the attention of susceptible people have become the focus for all sorts of superstition.

The different levels may be linked in various ways. A disturbance in the field of being (observable as a change in breath) may turn a person's attention to the visual sense, for example. The interaction of sight may trigger a conditioned response and give rise to a chain of associated thoughts and images and so on.

Such a progression through levels of decreasing speed is not uniform. Due to the immense difference in speed when moving between certain levels, a gearing mechanism is necessary. This takes the form of buffers. A buffer is an accumulator of impressions. An impression of sufficient power will cause the entire contents of the buffer to be assimilated at the next level. The old wives' tale about a dying man seeing his life flash before him is probably based on experience of one of these buffers.

If some phenomenon that arises is particularly attractive, it tends to get maintained as a focus of attention alongside the meditation object (despite the fact that this contradicts the straightforward instruction simply to maintain the given object of meditation). The rival object of meditation is usually something that has personal meaning and importance for the attendant and can therefore act as a core around which the mental contents can cohere. The resultant 'concentric' organization (as one could call it by analogy) gives a feeling of integration and satisfaction.

Of course, this is simply an exaggerated form of what happens all the time. Such concentric organizations are not permanent and can occur around more than one centre, depending on environmental conditions. The organization of the psyche is more like a kaleidoscope than a fixed structure. Thus, for example, taking on an old role will cause things to be rearranged so that the memories appropriate to it will come back to one, and less relevant material will become less accessible.

When such a configuration is given excessive attention, its lifetime is prolonged. An individual who does this appears to have great power and integrity since different configurations are not being triggered by the appropriate environmental cues, but the same pattern is being projected on all conditions - at least until the pattern, finally devoid of any surplus attention, is broken up like an empty husk.

An even more interesting phenomenon is where an enhanced ability to maintain a focus of attention is directed entirely to a particular area of mind. Since this will be something that is inherently attractive anyway, there will be an escalating process of self-reinforcement. Like all processes of positive feedback, this cannot be sustained indefinitely but will result in discharge - manifesting as an emotional outburst or peculiar behaviour. It is an explosion within the retort (or, in cases where excessive rejection of some aspect forms the nucleus, an implosion). This is the same principle that occurs in mechanisms that result in ejaculation or the birth of a baby (where it is useful and appropriate). Discharge can be useful if it breaks a self-reinforcing binding of attention and enables a return to the indescribable aim. It is not useful to introduce negative feedback that blocks discharge once self-reinforcement has built up, since the organism is being stressed by an obsessional loop rather than experiencing a general revitalization. It is sufficient merely to return the attention to the meditation object and the organism will take care of itself.

People rarely understand the significance of the distractions that arise during the practice of meditation. It is a great privilege to experience anything in the presence of surplus attention. In the case of new experience it is an opportunity for change; in the case of memories it is a second chance. (I hope this doesn't encourage the popular sport of deliberately rooting out unpleasant past experiences, which only serves to reinforce them.) Meditation seems to be self-regulating to the extent that the shock of disturbing phenomena trying to arise will tend to break the partial vacuum in the field of awareness, and so create the opportunity for attention to return to the object of meditation.

Perhaps the best advice for dealing with whatever phenomena may arise is to neither accept nor reject them. Like all meditation instructions, this is very simple. In fact it is so simple that it is difficult to believe it means what it says.

Meditation and Transformation

After all immediately accessible experience has arisen, the process of equilibration will (temporarily) stop. So will most meditators: they have either completed the job they set out to do, or become disgruntled because meditation no longer seems to be working. This is rather like assuming that the process of digestion has ended when food has been swallowed since nothing interesting seems to be happening.

This is not something peculiar to meditation. In any activity which requires sustained attention, a point will be reached where one has apparently got the hang of it and there seems no point in going further. If the object of attention is another person, then this is the point at which friendships are terminated because they have ceased to be entertaining or useful.

There are many ways of giving up apart from getting up and walking out. Falling asleep is an obvious ploy, since this is the usual response to reduced stimulation. Older children and many adults have a particularly low boredom threshold. This protects newly formed levels of organization against premature psychic development. Boredom is the teething pain of free attention.

If the attendant is capable of a great deal of love, he or she will continue to meditate even though the meditation may become extremely tedious for very long periods. During such phases it is very important to keep investigating, experiencing and observing the meditation object - this keeps it alive and prevents the field that has been built up from collapsing back on itself.

If meditation is persisted in, a stage will be reached where what is required of the attendant is a willingness to change. It is comparable to the pupation that precedes the butterfly (the traditional symbol of psyche), but which can only occur after a long period of monotonous munching as a caterpillar. Again, this is not something confined to meditation. Any sustained activity, however mundane, if persisted in past the boredom barrier, will lead to a change within the performer. They may see the activity (or even the world) in a completely new way.

Of course, most people want to change, but this is usually with a view to making themselves more attractive to others. From the point of view of meditation, the purpose of inner transformation is to make the attendant more attractive to the indescribable. Meditation objects bring about a state of holiness; that is, they produce holes in the field of attention, gaps in the normal flow of events (holidays). These inner spaces are like rooms set aside for meditation - places of well-kept emptiness.

The only objects that can subsist in such a space are sacrificial objects. The psyche is organized (made whole) by sacrifice. This is not a change in physical appearance or outward behaviour, but the acquisition of a special software package within the nervous system. For what is being talked about is not an external physical space, but a space within the attendant's head and heart. The creation of a space (even a psychological space) is not of course the objective of meditation. Meditation objects are a bridge over a dangerous abyss.

In mythological terms this inner space corresponds to chaos in the original sense of the word, which interestingly has the same origin as the word gum, in the sense of that which encloses the mouth - the empty space in which sounds are formed by modification of the invisible breath. During meditation new experience is labelled and memory re-labelled with the meditation object itself.

The object of meditation is a symbol that can stand for all experience. It is an invocation of total being (as comprehended by the attendant). It also stands for the whole world (as the meditator sees it).

How does the meditator see it? Prolonged attention to a pattern that is imprinted on all experience at whatever scale, that describes both the part and the whole, seems to have predisposed some mystics to a very odd view indeed - that the above is like unto that which is below, macrocosms are in microcosms, a world in a grain of sand, the universe ordered by the creation of self-similar parts. The entire universe is perceived as being in some sense scale-invariant and through his faith in this the mystic hopes to realize his identity with the absolute.

Such a view of the world may seem irrational in our modern scientific age. One must remember that in trying to make sense of their experiences they were limited by the ideas of their time. Our computer-generated fractals would no doubt look as odd to them as their sacred geometry looks to us. Although it is necessary for us constantly to reformulate what we know, one must remember that the object of meditation is also associated with the arising of surplus attention - the content of which is not definable. Meditation objects are garments of the unseen. The meditation object therefore represents the moment of knowledge between the known and the unknown, the arising of consciousness (literally meaning 'with knowledge').

It will be apparent why it is undesirable for the person's own name or some aspect associated with normal personality to be used for meditation purposes. This might lead to the delusion that they were the totality (Self Experiencing Limited Field). Therefore objects used in meditation tend to be impersonal, though significant. They are royal messengers, since they summon the King's attendants.

The Sense of I

Something that can be related to a number of different situations is in fact the basis for a sense of 'I'. Since one effect of meditation is to link experiences with something totally impersonal, one might predict that this will generate as a by-product a somewhat peculiar sense of self (peculiar in that it lacks the likes and dislikes that are, together with the normal I-labels, imprinted on experience, and which thereby characterize self-image).

It is amusing to speculate on what would happen if everything was labelled using the indescribable aim of meditation itself - would a super I arise, or would there be effectively no labelling and an absence of self?

Many would deny that I is an entity at all. They might see it as an attentional process, a special level of programming that controls other programs (Epiphenomenal Gear Operator).

I is that which prioritizes, memorizes and mechanizes. It is even capable of parallel processing, running two patterns of conditioning at once (synchronization). I forms a view of the world (fantasizes) and of itself (romanticizes), based on past experience (rationalization). It recognizes other Is (with which it sympathizes or which it criticizes) and thereby defines itself (socialization). It also controls the relationship between other Is (moralizing).

Of course, if I is simply a piece of software in the brain, there is no reason why it should be confined to just one biocomputer. Indeed many Is appear to have been copied from existing Is with a few personal modifications (customization). This would provide a rational explanation for the conviction many Is have that they have been lived before.

Meditation is a slow, inefficient, but fairly reliable method of generating small amounts of surplus attention if practised on a regular basis. This increases the probability that the organism may adapt temporarily to operate under conditions of increased surplus attention. This occasional increase in efficiency involves a change (usually short-lived) in the nature of the attendant's I. It might be assumed that the purpose of meditation is to find or fabricate some permanent basis for identity. However, the peculiar I that may occur during meditation is not a permanently maintained state or structure, but is constantly being displaced by existing I-organizations (where the appropriate cues are present) and is itself modifiable by association with various responses to whatever may arise.

In fact, for meditation to occur an I must be produced that can function in the presence of sustained surplus attention (the process of realization). Since they are associated with heightened awareness these peculiar Is are more real than normal Is.

Realization is not usually a problem. Most of its effects are quite harmless. Tantalization is the production of an I that takes the indescribable aim of meditation very seriously, but doesn't know what to do about it. Sensitization produces an I that is very aware but helpless. Sterilization results in an I that suppresses the acquisition of new patterns of conditioning in the belief that any creative expression will deplete the supply of surplus attention.

These are all examples of parasitization - realization generating Is that sustain surplus attention when conditions are right, make no useful contribution to normal psychological functioning, but get out of the way when something practical needs to be done. They arise when meditation occurs outside of any supporting philosophy as a special daily practice, or is otherwise unconnected to the rest of life. A special modified normal I can also occur that is aware that periods of enhanced surplus attention are occurring, but regards such events as totally irrelevant to ordinary life (marginalization).

Other forms of realization can be more dangerous. Paralysis, for example, is a bug in the programming that results in an I that sustains the mental set appropriate to a particular meditation practice outside periods set aside for it. The thought of such an I getting into the driving seat of a car is truly horrifying. Since such an I is produced in response to surplus attention, the organism's natural alerting mechanism only makes things worse. It is largely a matter of luck whether a person with such an I reaches the other side of a busy road.

Intensive meditation (especially if unsupervised) sets conditions for the arising of such programming errors. It is therefore useful to terminate meditation retreats with a period of renormalization. This is also why it is useful to set aside a special time and place for daily meditation practice. The purpose is not just (as is often assumed) to make it easier to meditate, but to make sure that each meditation is cleanly broken and the I that has sustained it destroyed by instant renormalization. Another safeguard is that the philosophies and practices often associated with meditation set up special programming (virus-killers) that destroys the products of useless realization.

All this may surprise people who think that the sole aim of meditation is realization and who think that what they want is a permanent indestructible I (if they are particularly unlucky, that is what they get). People are understandably attached to a real I that arises during meditation, but its loss is no great setback since meditation is a long-term process of attentional conditioning.

It is important to grasp the fact that such Is are undesirable, not because one shouldn't have an I (this idea is a very dangerous virus), but because they prevent I performing its proper function within the organism. Meditation, on the contrary, helps one to develop a fully functioning I.

The Four Levels of I

A fully functioning I can arise naturally (if temporarily) in emergency situations, where people act with great presence of mind. Such situations are relatively easy to analyse, and so can help us to see what a fully functioning I consists of. For such action it seems that I needs to be able to co-ordinate four broad areas of organization.

Firstly, presence of mind obviously requires the ability to respond to the requirements of the immediate present. This living in the present moment is like the action of the breath, which is constantly adjusting to the moment-by-moment needs of the organism. In meditation the equivalent is staying with the object of meditation which is being consciously reiterated in each moment. However, this reiteration can itself become mechanized and the attention absorbed for long periods of time in interesting phenomena. If meditation is not terminated cleanly and this attachment lingers, then the attendant will be less aware of surroundings than the average person.

The second aspect of co-ordination involves associative memory. Since there is less daydreaming and internal chatter when the organism is functioning efficiently, it is sometimes assumed that the level of associative thinking is a useless or even dangerous liability (like the appendix) and should be removed. And meditation is sometimes seen as a suitable method for thought-blocking (if one was particularly unfortunate, one might actually succeed in doing this). This is like trying to stop a car squeaking by taking the wheels off, and so stopping it going at all.

Although people who have acted with presence of mind may say that they acted instinctively, is this really true? A person who was really acting instinctively would do very little apart from breathing (and related physiological functions). When a driver says he braked instinctively, he means that the appropriate conditioning had been acquired and the right cues were present to trigger it. However, well-established conditioning is not presence of mind. Indeed, the operation of habits at inappropriate times is a symptom of absent-mindedness. If one considers what actually happens when people act with presence of mind, it is apparent that the situation has been assessed, calculations have been made, probabilities have been weighed up, memories accessed - all in a miraculously short space of time.

To use current jargon, this all requires a great deal of processing capacity. So useless activities like internal commentary and daydreaming cannot continue - the levels of mind usually occupied in such a way are far too busy doing something more useful. This may occur in meditation where remembering the object of meditation is required in each moment. Attention to the object of meditation breaks the normal flow of associations that sustains preoccupation. This allows other memories to become accessed, and the organization of memory becomes more fluid.

If the object of meditation has been carefully chosen to be a label of general significance rather than personal meaning, and if the instruction to neither accept nor reject phenomena has been followed, then the kaleidoscope should fall into neutral and the attendant should emerge from meditation unpreoccupied by the chatter of the associative mind. (Of course, this ceases to be presence of mind if neutrality is seen as an objective and the memory is prevented from re-organizing to meet each particular situation.) Then, if attention is directed to the demands of the present moment, memory will respond (like breath) to the needs of that moment.

The third level of organization requires another type of memory altogether. This is the memory that keeps track of things, remembers where you are up to in any task. Life consists of processes within processes. Preparing a meal contains the sub-process of peeling potatoes and is itself part of the process of the day's activities.

When we become aware of the larger processes of which we are a part, this usually manifests to us through verbal thinking or images, but such phenomena are not essential to the type of memory in question. One can remember the correct sequence of a set of physical movements with no verbal thought or imagery. Speech itself is only comprehensible through this special type of memory. Music is enjoyable because something keeps track of the processes going on as the sequence of notes unfolds.

In general life, being aware of larger processes, or even where one is up to in a given process, is something that does not happen very often. We usually only become aware of the larger context of any given action, if at all, near the point of its termination. To take a mundane example, in the moment of finishing cleaning the carpet one may become aware of the process's place within the larger sequence of the entire day. A more dramatic example is the point of approaching death.

Our old friend the alerting mechanism is usually required to make us aware of this type of memory. Often this needs to be supplemented by artificial alerting mechanisms such as alarm clocks. An important aspect of meditation is training the body's alarm clock, enabling meditation to be terminated at a prescribed time. There is more to this than simply avoiding the distraction of continually looking

at one's watch or the inconvenience of having spent too long meditating. The type of memory involved is an important aspect of presence of mind, without which awareness of the present moment leads to absorption in it, and the present moment then becomes a prison rather than a gateway.

The fourth component of a fully functioning I involves psychological motivation. Since this is in the final analysis related to big philosophical (even religious) issues, it may not be immediately apparent how this is relevant to the presence of mind that can occur in emergency situations. But consider the scenario of your house being on fire; you have time to take just one possession. What will it be?

An emergency situation calls for prioritization. In everyday life a person who has a well-organized set of priorities has a lot of presence, like a magnetized piece of metal in which all the constituent fields have been aligned. Meditation clears the mind so that priorities can be organized. In meditation presence of mind is a means to an end. The attendant becomes fully present through an inner absence. He must be absent so that something else may be present. The moment is thereby transformed into the present. Objects of meditation are therefore custodians of presence.

Conclusion

To summarize, meditation sets up conditions whereby a psychological organization that tolerates surplus attention can recur. Since there is a more economic deployment of attention at such times, the organism will function more efficiently and this may be accompanied by a feeling of increased vitality.

Although different from the imbalance that occurs due to obsessive self-reinforcement, this vitalization can itself be destabilizing. The phenomenon is comparable to unruly children at the end of school term, or the disruptive behaviour observed in communities during the third quarter period of temporary isolation and confinement. If there is too much vitality to handle, then the previously mentioned discharge mechanisms may serve to protect integrity, just as electrical wiring is protected by the blowing of a fuse.

Some people seem to have a talent for making themselves a focus around which a great deal of surplus attention is liberated, and become the target of various discharge mechanisms for their troubles. Laughter is a relatively harmless discharge mechanism (and is therefore regarded as undesirable by those who generate surplus attention for destructive purposes).

Sometimes, if a real I arises that sustains an efficient and stable organization, then a stillness may descend upon the mind. This is not the stillness where nothing appears to be happening, but is a potent stillness - sitting in pregnant silence, in quiet anticipation, upon one's sacrum (the sacred bone).

This is often associated with a stilling of the breath. This is not to imply that the meditator deliberately holds his or her breath. That would be a form of doing inimicable to potent stillness. It is rather that when a stable supply of surplus attention is produced, the organism is regulated with maximum economy and its demand for oxygen is reduced accordingly.

Minimal breathing is not of course the objective of meditation. If that were the case, physical movement would hardly be a suitable activity on which to base a meditation practice (as in Dervish whirling, or slow walking). Obviously, the extent to which minimal breathing occurs will depend upon the type of meditation practised. Meditation practices based on movement require more oxygen than those that involve sitting. The common factor is oxygen demand adjusting itself to match maximum efficiency. In moving practices this may be accompanied by a quality of gracefulness.

What is important, though, is the change in quality within an individual, rather than how athletic or artistic one person's posture or movement is compared to another. An old person with arthritis is hardly likely to be as supple as a very young person, but he might understand more about economy of effort.

Of course, allowing the breath to calm down can be a useful relaxation technique, but since such relaxation is a prelude to sleep or reverie, this is what usually happens when it occurs in meditation - in which case, more effort needs to be applied to return the attention to the meditation object (resulting in increased alertness, equilibration, boredom, revitalization and so on).

However, occasionally the stilling of the breath is an indicator of a stabilization of the field of awareness itself. This is the origin of psychic power. It is the cessation of attentional wandering, rather than of physical breath, that is significant. No control is involved. It is more akin to the stilling of the breath that occurs when one endeavours to listen for a very important sound, a sound so quiet that any noise on one's own part would obscure it, a sound whose quality and moment of arising cannot be predicted, a sound that would be missed by a moment's lapse of attention (Full Attention Inclined To Hear).

For although the body is still, there is a tension within the field of awareness. Attention itself is that which stretches out, or tends, that has a tendency towards. To stretch out or attenuate is also the origin of the word time and of temple - a place resorted to on special occasions (holidays) within which time itself is stretched out. A temple is a place built when people ask, a place carefully measured out, a place where contemplation - being within the temple - becomes possible.

What does attention have a tendency towards? It would seem that it has a tendency towards anything but the objective of meditation itself, since that was held to be indescribable and undefinable. The aim cannot therefore be absorption in the meditation object as object, since then no surplus attention would arise. Indeed, meditation objects are chosen because of their unsuitability for absorption (they make people aware of the whole of awareness by making holes in awareness). It is difficult to generate sustained surplus attention without a meditation object because the attention tends to become absorbed in phenomena. That is why a meditation object is necessary as a psychological crutch, with the support of which the attendant can hobble hesitantly and circuitously in pursuit of the indescribable.

It would appear that this indescribable aim arises only by default, in the absence of anything else for the attention to attach to. This might make it sound as though attention is in fact repelled by the aim of meditation. If this were the case, however, no one would persist in such a fruitless activity as meditation. I would suggest rather that human attention is pre-programmed to seek the indescribable. In its passion to do so, it attaches enthusiastically to whatever it comes across - and gains an education in the process, learning what is attractive to the indescribable. Some may become sidetracked, dispirited, even bitter and cynical, but the basic need remains.

For without the influence of the indescribable, there would be no surplus attention. The fact that human beings generate surplus attention can ultimately only be explained by there being always further to go. The indescribable aim seemingly imposed upon the unruly attention by the meditator is that which draws out the attendant's surplus attention, creating the various levels of organization in the process - just as a distant sun, by the immediate proximity of its light, causes seeds upon a planet to germinate and grow, each according to their nature and circumstances. However, the seedlings might not see it like this. If they utilized the same levels of language as us (human vegetables), they might say they were simply fulfilling various desires to grow, obtaining water, minerals and so on. All these things are obviously necessary (to them).

An activity (or non-activity) like meditation is apparently unnecessary (this is in fact the only objective definition that can be consistently applied to the diverse activities of meditation). Why is it

necessary that meditation should be unnecessary? It might be helpful at this point to consider what makes normal activity so apparently necessary. We rarely do anything for its own sake, but rather we do it in order to achieve something else. In what normally passes for thought we are content merely to be aware of the next link in the chain of purpose. Say, for example, that one is contemplating posting a letter. It is enough of an explanation to know that the purpose of walking down the street is to post a letter, the purpose of posting the letter is to pay the gas bill. If we pursue the matter, we find that the 'purpose' of each activity is usually another activity. One could in theory continue indefinitely – in which case the meaning of life can be defined as that which takes an infinite time to describe.

So it can be seen that the ultimate aim, purpose or cause of any activity whatsoever is identical with the aim of meditation in being totally indefinable. Meditation merely differs in that its indescribability is more obviously apparent. Meditation is not opposed to everyday life, but facilitates an education of the will whereby all activity penetrates the barrier of necessity in the service of the indescribable.

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