

MORE MEDITATIONS

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Abstract

More Meditations is a sequel to the author's earlier work, *Meditations*. It proposes additional practical methods and theoretical insights relating to meditation and Buddhism.

It also discusses certain often glossed over issues relating to Buddhism – notably, historicity, idolatry, messianism, importation to the West.

This book is drawn from the author's larger work *Logical and Spiritual Reflections*.

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1. Go directly and keep going

After preparing the environment for meditation so you will not be distracted, you sit down comfortably. As soon as you do so, remind yourself why you are doing so: your purpose is *to meditate* for the next hour (or whatever time you have decided) – not to dream or think of various things, not to fantasy, reflect, decide, plan or calculate. Remind yourself that meditation requires *a sustained effort of attention*; it is not an opportunity for letting your mind wander busily or lazily in all directions, or doze off.

I find this introductory resolve against mental agitation and dullness saves a lot of time, maximizing the time spent in actual meditation. If you resolve this from the start, it is relatively easy to keep it going.

Now, *go directly* to the contemplative mode. In principle, there is no need to resort to various artifices to connect with the mode of consciousness we seek. If we practice meditation regularly, and remain true to it in our everyday life, then as

soon as we sit we can reconnect with the higher form of awareness we previously attained. The meditation then consists simply in sustaining that way of looking at things for the maximum amount of time. It is very difficult to describe in words the experience here referred to; you recognize it when you encounter it.

However, if your attention starts to lose energy and wander, or you find yourself at all mentally and/or physically restless or tired, you must for a while make use of some appropriate technique to focus your attention again. Certainly do not use such difficulties as an excuse to put off or stop meditating – but tell yourself that the difficulties are evidence of just how much you need to meditate. Redouble your efforts and keep trying.

If your mind's wandering is mainly visual – then try focusing it on some (mental or physical) visual object. If your mind is mostly absorbed in verbal thoughts – then try reciting some mantra (mentally or orally). If your body tends to fidget, rest your awareness in your body, feeling its discomfort or pain more attentively (without trying to relieve it). Alternatively, in all such cases, try more general means, such as focusing on your breathing or on the *chakras* (energy centers) along your central nervous system.

Use your judgment to find the best means to return your consciousness to its highest level. Experiment as necessary – but also persevere in such experiment, don't jump nervously from one technique to another. Remember, techniques are

means, not ends in themselves. If you gaze at a candle, or recite a long deep “OM”, or watch your breath in your nostrils and abdomen – the phenomenon that you focus on is of no great interest *per se*. It is just a way for you to avoid distractions and get to concentrate on your true object of meditation – which is the contemplative mode itself.

If I meditatively stare at a wall or concentrate on a sound, it is not because I expect to find ‘reality’ in that material or mental object. Such concrete objects are not themselves the key to the reality sought in meditation. Rather, what happens after sustaining such effort for some time is that another mode of consciousness appears, a mode in which particular objects lose their customary importance. Our concrete experiences become irrelevant, and the emphasis is rather on the consciousness itself. It is wide and deep; it is calm and secure. The self vanishes and the world bubbles on.

Consider seriously the idea that all mental and physical objects are like a dream or mirage – a projection of images, sounds and other sensations in space and time. Reality is what lies behind them, and these illusions act as veils in front of it. It is as if you are wearing transparent spectacles, in which images are optically reflected (or electronically displayed); these images capture your interest and distract you from seeing beyond or in-between them. According to this view, just as mental projections veil over physical objects, so do both mental and physical objects veil over ultimate reality.

Meditation consists effectively in learning how to look through that interfering curtain; gradually, it becomes more transparent and we get to see through it. Such meditation is just attentiveness, avoiding total seduction by appearances, remaining aware that the apparent may conceal more than it reveals. Whether sitting or in motion, we are mindful, watching out for any clue to what all experience really conceals and reveals.¹

Another way to express what I refer to here as “going directly” is to use the horse and cart metaphor. The Zen master Nangaku said to Baso: “When a cart does not go, which do you whip, the cart or the horse?”² Clinging indefinitely to physical sensations or perceptions, or to emotional or mental experiences, is like whipping the cart. Rather, whip the horse – by tuning in to your intuitive awareness. This takes you straight to the core of meditation, relative to which all phenomenal experiences are a mere sideshow.

Forget the past; forget the future; forget even the present³. You become aware of a vacuum. Then just sustain that

¹ In Kantian terms, we look out for the noumenal behind or above or beneath the phenomenal.

² See S. Suzuki, p. 81.

³ This meditation advice echoes the more general advice in the *Dhammapada*, v. 348: “Leave the past behind; leave the future behind; leave the present behind”. See also Bodhidharma (p. 75): “But sages don’t consider the past. And they don’t worry about the future. Nor do they cling to the present.” Paramananda (p. 151) quotes a passage of the *Udana* in a similar vein, enjoining us not

awareness. Sustaining does not mean clinging to some ideal outlook on things or experience – but pumping in energy, to renew moment by moment the meditative effort of increased consciousness. Sustain the cause, not the effect – for the effect may vary.

“to add” anything to our experience; the moment we but call the now “now” (or even just judge it so, wordlessly), we add to it.

2. Breath and thought awareness

To meditate is to make *a sustained effort to increase one's awareness*, or at least to prevent it from decreasing from a certain level; this defines what constitutes *meditation*. This is to be distinguished from *contemplation*, which is steady, effortless, stable awareness (or increased awareness, in comparison with some previous state). Contemplation is a goal of meditation. At some stage, meditation (an effort of awareness) becomes contemplation (effortless awareness).

There are many ways and means of meditation, of which two may be mentioned here.

In *breath awareness* meditation, we make an effort to watch the breath entering and leaving the body, patiently, without interfering in its speed or trajectory. Calmly and single-mindedly, fix your attention on the sensory receptors inside your nostrils (which are static relative to the movements of breath); and persevere in this attentiveness for a long time. At the same time, be mindful (from the inside, if only

peripherally) of the rise and fall of your belly with every incoming and outgoing breath.

Experience one breath at a time. You cannot achieve mindfulness of breath in a mechanical manner, merely by initially deciding to watch your breath and then doing so for a couple of breaths. You cannot just launch breath awareness – or any other sort of meditation, for that matter – and expect it to carry on by itself. Your attention will in such case naturally float away at the first opportunity. Awareness is not something inertial – it demands effort.

Thus, to sustain your interest in the breath, engage one breath at a time. At the end of the first in and out breath, *remember* to make a new decision and effort to attentively follow the trajectory of next breath, and so on – one step at a time. This principle is applicable to all sorts of meditation (e.g. to walking meditation or to calligraphy). Even when one reaches the level of free-wheeling contemplation of one's breathing, feeling the emptiness within, one has to remain focused and not take things for granted.

In the words of Zen master Dogen: “the breath that comes in does not anticipate the breath that goes out”⁴. You remain mindful of things as they are, at their own pace. This mental will (or more precisely, spiritual will⁵) must be distinguished

⁴ Dogen, p. 234.

⁵ Will (or volition) is a function of the self; its source or origin is not the colloquial “mind” (i.e. the phenomenal domain of

from the effort of breath control, which involves physical will (on the muscles of the nostrils, the diaphragm or whatever). It is more akin to the “presence of mind” (or again, more precisely put: presence of spirit, or spiritual presence) used in Tai Chi or Yoga⁶.

If your breath is irregular in some way (whether ragged, uneven or however uncomfortable), the simplest way to calm it is to wait for it patiently to do so by itself (as it is bound to do eventually). If such waiting results in your forgetting to watch the breath, no matter – when you become aware of your loss of attention, just return to breath awareness. If you lack the patience to wait but want to do something about it, then count the breaths as they occur (whatever their speed and shape). But abandon words again as soon as possible, for they are ultimately a hindrance to progress.

In *thought awareness* meditation, we make an effort to watch our thoughts come, play out and go. This is again essentially a spiritual act, a willing of attention – to be distinguished from the effort of thought control, which involves willing one’s thoughts to take shape, to go in a certain direction, or to stop. It takes a lot of practice to get to the point where one

memories, imaginations, thoughts, anticipations, dreams) but the soul (i.e. the spirit – a non-phenomenal domain of the psyche).

⁶ In Tai Chi and Yoga, movements are so slow that we get the time to follow them in great detail mentally. Ideally, one’s breath should be equally gentle, to facilitate awareness of it. Similarly, when reciting a mantra, it is wise to utter it slowly (e.g. one in or out breath per syllable).

can sit back and watch one's thoughts flow without getting caught up in them and carried away by them; but, although the brain seems programmed to hinder it, such detachment is indeed possible.

Thought awareness is facilitated by body awareness, breath awareness and awareness of one's surroundings. When thoughts run wild, you can rein them in more readily if you increase awareness of the here and now. The thinker is suspended in a cloud, unaware of his physical existence or his surrounds: return him to earth. If the thoughts are overwhelming, ask them only for a little room in a corner of your mind – a place for monitoring thought. Then slowly expand this observatory's portion of the mind.

It would not be quite correct to say that one should just sit back and watch one's thoughts, as one watches one's breath. Breathing is not expected to stop (but only to calm down), whereas thoughts ought to eventually stop. Therefore, one has to use a certain amount of thought control, even while avoiding crude force. Paradoxically, true thought control is not possible without thought awareness; you cannot precisely influence what you are not sufficiently conscious of. That is to say, to succeed at fine-tuned control, one needs proportionate attentiveness. Therefore, meditation on thought is a cunning *mélange* of awareness and control, in measured succession, until awareness and control both reach their peak level.

At that stage, it is possible, not only to instantly stop thought by an act of will, but to sustain this interdiction for a long time. Eventually, even this act of will becomes unnecessary or unconscious, because we come to reside comfortably in inner stillness and silence. This is not the final goal of meditation, but merely an intermediate stage. Until now, thoughts were a distraction from deeper meditation; now, it becomes possible to contemplate the non-phenomenal self and its relation to phenomenal experience more precisely.

3. Self awareness

The philosophical idea of Monism is of utility to meditation. When the philosopher proposes that matter, mind and spirit must eventually be One, he/she does so because this theory seems like a logical conclusion from all the data of experience and thought. But for someone engaged in meditation, this idea has a more practical intent: it informs him/her that all common distinctions are ultimately unnecessary to meditation, even artificial impediments to it, since they disturb the natural rest of the psyche, i.e. they are psychologically pointless and fatiguing.

In truth, it is more accurate to say that the distinction between soul and mind-and-body is at first psychologically valuable, too, in that it allows us to focus on the non-phenomenal soul alone, while regarding the phenomena of body and mind as mere distractions relative to that object of meditation. Once this level has been mastered, and we become adept at strongly intuiting the self in the midst of mind-body events, it

becomes wise to transcend all such separation, and view self-awareness as a distraction, too.

We may distinguish four senses or levels or types of “self-awareness” in the course of spiritual development:

- a. The lowest form of self-awareness is that of the narcissist. Here one focuses on aspects of one’s body and mind, of one’s life and history, etc., that are either pleasing or displeasing, confusing this “ego” construct with one’s self. This is a sort of egotistic and egoistic indulgence devoid of reflection, an unconscious and unintelligent existence.
- b. At a higher level of self-awareness, one begins to look upon the preceding level with some degree of criticality. Here, one realizes that one’s behavior thus far has been stupid and unseemly, and one makes some effort to improve and correct it. This is a start of spiritual consciousness, tending towards a more wholesome understanding of who one is.
- c. In a later stage, one realizes the distinction between: the non-phenomenal soul on the one hand, and the phenomenal body-mind complex on the other. As this realization develops, and one dissociates oneself more and more from the body and mind, and one associates oneself progressively more with the soul – one’s value system and behavior patterns are radically changed.

- d. But even the latter evolution is not final, because the soul one identifies with there is the individuated soul, whereas one has to eventually realize the universal soul; or, as some prefer to put it, the non-soul (i.e. non-individual soul). Although the individual soul is already realized to be non-phenomenal, it is still restrictive in scope; only when such limits are transcended, one attains true self-awareness.

For monotheists, this last stage corresponds to full consciousness of God; for Buddhists, it signifies enlightenment, realizing the Buddha-mind or emptiness. Thus, meditation proceeds by broadening and internalizing consciousness, tending gradually towards a holistic consciousness and a deep understanding of self.

The problem of identifying with one's real self could be viewed as a linguistic problem, to some extent. When you feel pangs of hunger, do not think "I am hungry" but think "my body is emitting pangs of hunger"; or when you feel some emotion, do not think "I am sad (or happy)" but "my mind is manifesting waves of sadness (or happiness)". Likewise, in similar circumstances – use language with precision, or at least be peripherally aware of the more accurate description of experience. Avoid bad habits, and do not confuse linguistic shortcuts with phenomenological formulations.

4. Meditation on the self

Why (as is evident in the course of meditation) are inner and outer silence and stillness so difficult to attain? Because through our imagining visual or auditory phenomena (e.g. daydreaming or humming a tune), or indulging in emotions (such as joy and sadness, or physical feelings), or intending non-phenomenal thoughts (including attitudes, resolutions, likes and dislikes, and other postures of the will), or thinking verbal thoughts (mentally or out loud), or engaging in various bodily actions (in pursuit of sensations or other causes of mental events) – we are constantly *producing mind*.

This compulsive production of mental content could be considered as the main way we generate and perpetuate our ego (or false self). Without such mental furniture, the ego effectively disappears, leaving behind a gaping hole. That is, to even momentarily stop such mental production, achieving

silence and stillness, is to come in contact with the underlying true self⁷ sought in meditation.

All our inner and outer babbling and restlessness is, in this perspective, just a pretext to obtain and maintain the (illusory) comfort and security of having a more substantial 'self'. The insubstantiality and elusiveness of the true self seems somewhat frightening to us, and so we work hard trying to produce a more substantial and manifest expression or substitute.

Meditation on the (true) self is daring to venture out into the empty internal space of egolessness. It is the adventure of inner space travel, more daunting perhaps than outer space travel.

Rather than dismiss the self on ideological grounds (as some people do, wishing to seem profound or fashionable), it is important to meditate on the self. This meditation consists in observing how we actually regard our self.

The sense of 'I' or 'me' is perhaps first of all physiological – consisting of the inner and outer sensations I have of 'my' body, including touch sensations, smells, tastes, sounds and sights. At first, I naïvely associate myself fully with these sensations. I do not regard them as objects relative to some more central self; they simply *are* me. I cannot at first

⁷ This is often referred to by Buddhists as the non-self, or more paradoxically still as the non-existent self. But it would be more accurate to characterize it as the non-phenomenal self, to distinguish it from the phenomenal self (self in the sense of ego).

conceive of me as someone other than the person associated with this body, this face, this voice, this way of moving, and so on. It is only at a later stage, by means of intellectual reflection, that I can reject that instinctive view as inadequate. I may for instance argue that a person can lose an arm or leg, yet still remain the same person.

I may then look for my self within more psychological aspects of my experience. Most of us attach great importance to our emotions and valuations; they feel like true expressions of our deeper self. Our desires and fears, our joys and anger, and so on, all seem to intimately describe us. Yet, as we go through life, we may realize that all such self-expressions are not indispensable; we may change emotions, appetites and affections, yet still consider we are the same person somehow.

We may then seek to identify more precisely with our cognitions and volitions. By cognition, is meant the relation we have to apparent objects, whatever their status or nature seem. By volition, is meant the force through which we seem to determine physical actions (moving arms and legs, making facial expressions, etc.) and mental actions (imaginings, thoughts, valuations). But even here, if we reflect philosophically, we soon realize that although such acts may be expressions of some deeper self, they cannot be equated to it, because they noticeably vary in orientation and content.

The effective self must therefore be something more 'abstract'. But this abstraction cannot be in the way of a

concept, **for a concept would not suffice to explain how I know myself to be the author of *particular* actions at a *given* time – a concept can only declare me the *occasional* author of *kinds of* actions.** Therefore this abstraction must be assumed and recognized to be something non-phenomenal that is directly experienced. Hence, the idea of apperception or intuition of self.

Once this idea is philosophically understood, as here explained, one can with an effort of attention, become more conscious of one's actual intuitions of self. These intuitions are generally present in everyday consciousness, but being very fine they require particular attentiveness. The most effective way to learn to notice the precise focus of self is in the course of sitting meditation, when one is maximally calm and contemplative.

Note well here: our knowledge of the self is direct and experiential; philosophical analysis only serves *to eliminate* inappropriate or incoherent views about the self, which interfere with our positive intuition of it. We intellectually disown what cannot logically be the self, so as to open the door to refined discernment of the self.

Thereafter, meditating on the self more precisely, one will at first identify it as the Subject of cognitions and the Agent of volitions (including valuations); this is an individual self. At a higher or deeper stage, if one perseveres in meditation and other virtues, one may realize and get to contemplate the universal self (or so we are taught by many traditions).

On the basis of the preceding insights, I would recommend the following as an effective meditation on the self⁸:

Turn your gaze on yourself; with eyes open, with eyes closed.

Anything phenomenal you see, hear, sense or feel is not you.

Think, without words: “this is not me”; move on from it.

What is left? Look for yourself. Do you find anything?

This meditation could be characterized as a ‘method of the residue’. It consists in eliminating from consideration sensory or mental experiences that cannot rightly be identified with the self (since it is non-phenomenal); we are then left only with the intuitive experience of it. Practice of this technique increases one’s sensitivity to apperception, teaching us to be aware of something always present in us to which we usually pay little attention because we are blinded to it by the more noticeable phenomenal percepts.

⁸ This exercise is comparable in effect to the “original face” koan.

5. Various remarks on meditation

Attention and intention. Cognition may be said to have two aspects: *attention*, the experiential, receptive aspect; and *intention*, the rational, active aspect. Thus, perception and intuition are attentive, whereas conception, proposition, argument and evaluation are intentional. Both of these cognitive acts involve an effort, i.e. some willpower by the one cognizing (the Subject); but the volition involved is different in each case.

The effort of attention is twofold – an effort to cognitively adhere to some object(s), and an effort to avoid distraction by other objects or purposes. Thus, this effort has both a positive component and negative component; its Agent (the Subject) is in a sort of tension: pushing in one direction and pulling in an opposite direction. The effort of intention is likewise or even more complex, involving diverse mental projections and manipulations, and sundry acts of will and valuation.

Meditation tends towards pure cognition – that is to say, cognition without volition. This means that when we meditate, we gradually diminish intention and opt for attention; moreover, our attention slowly becomes effortless, i.e. we become established in it in the way of a natural place to be. At that stage, there is no paradoxical tension between cognition and volition, and we are peaceful observers. This is called contemplation.

In the context of meditation, everything is merely part of the scenery. You may feel pain somewhere, or some impatience may unsettle you, or many thoughts may assail you – but you remain unaffected. You do not cling to passing sensations, feelings, imaginings or discourses. You transcend all such phenomena, and focus on the here and now. You remain aware and conscious; you maximize such alertness and mindfulness.

The crux of meditation is presence of mind, or more accurately put *présence d'esprit* (presence of spirit). That is to say, meditation is generating self-awareness; it is being aware of your self – being fully present as a self (spirit, soul), while sitting or moving. This does not mean to say being and doing “self-consciously” (artificially, awkwardly), but is to be contrasted to being and doing “unconsciously”, i.e. performing absent-mindedly, without mindfulness.

The nature of mind. An outcome, or the outcome, of meditation has been described (using Buddhist terms) as knowing or resting in “the nature of mind”. This somewhat cryptic phrase seems to mean: “what mind really is”.

Thus, enlightenment is or comes about through lucid awareness of the mind or mentality as such *as it naturally is*, i.e. its essential character whatever changes occur; or it consists in recovering the *natural state* of mind, i.e. the spiritual position or posture in which consciousness is effortlessly full and optimal.⁹

The superlative consciousness concerned is moreover described as the “ground of consciousness” or “pure consciousness”. By this is meant that it is always present in the background of or underlying all ordinary consciousness – only, we must be sufficiently alert to notice it. Meditation is thus an effort to awaken consciousness to what is already present, rather than an attempt to produce something absent.

Furthermore, this way of viewing is said to be “non-dualistic”. As used in Buddhism, the expression “dualistic” seems to refer to our tendency to oscillate between yes and no. Some say: “it is”, others contend: “it is not”; today I think: “it is”, tomorrow I may think: “it is not”. This sort of fatiguing decision-making seems to aim at finding out the

⁹ The masters insist that this experience is “nothing special”. Enlightened mind “is” ordinary mind and vice versa; they should not be viewed dualistically.

truth, i.e. reality – but in fact (according to Buddhists) it distracts us from what is already evident right under our nose.

Another interpretation of non-dualism is made with reference to the Subject and object of consciousness. Ordinarily, we distinguish these three aspects of any event of appearance; but in enlightenment, we are told, this distinction disappears and all existence seems like one thing. Subject (i.e. that which experiences), object (i.e. that which is experienced) and the consciousness relating them merge together into the single and unique One. Thus, meditation is often described as a way to get away from dualistic thinking.

Subject and object as one. Actually, I have experienced something close to such unification of subject and object in meditation. What one experiences is not so much the subject becoming the object or vice versa – it is not an equation of individual things, as the wording might lead one to think – but rather the impression that the whole field of one's awareness (at that time, 'here and now') is a single, continuous event. In this single field, the sensations of one's body (which are powerful components of one's sense of separate selfhood) are experienced as being objects just as any sight or sound one is currently experiencing. Simultaneously, everything in this field of awareness is experienced as imbedded in one's consciousness of it, including 'oneself' (which in this context has no particular location).

Evidently, in such a state of consciousness, the idea of self becomes more diffused, or may disappear or even be forgotten. We no longer feel the ordinary strong attachment to the bodily sensations and mental impressions; these are all seen and felt as mere little bubbles of experience in the unitary field of awareness. All thoughts, worries, pleasures and the like appear as momentary attention-grabbing events in the essential unity of experience. Thus, the various components of the false self lose their weight, and the apparent self is seen not to be the real self. What we ordinarily cling to as our self is understood to be an illusory self with a particular location, not to be confused with the more all-embracing real self.

With this positive experience in mind, it is easier to understand seemingly paradoxical statements made by Zen masters and others, to the effect that the self “both is and is not” or “neither is nor is not”. The illusory self is indeed experienced in ordinary consciousness, but in a higher state of consciousness it is seen not to really be the self, i.e. to be an illusory appearance. Thus, it is and it is not – it is phenomenally, but it is not ‘noumenally’. This simply means that the intuited self is more real than the phenomenal self. Moreover, the real self cannot properly be said to be or exist, because it does not exist in the way of a delimited individual entity, but in a more diffuse manner underlying all consciousness. However, it cannot be said not to be or exist, because there is indeed something there that experiences and wills and values. Thus, it neither is nor is not.

Cultivate a sense of wonder. In sitting meditation (*zazen* or other ways), we encounter our spirit (or soul), in relation to mind (at an early level of meditation, when thoughts and fantasies are still present) and then alone (when mind is transcended). In moving meditation (such as the *kinhin* walking meditation, Tai Chi or Yoga), we experience the ability of spirit to move matter as well as mind.

One should always reflect on the miracles of consciousness and will; these powers of ours, however limited in scope, should never fail or cease to fascinate us. Our spirit is not divorced from mind and matter, but interacts with them. Somehow, cognition shows us some things, while volition allows us to affect some of them.

Through volition, we have some degree of power, not only over our mind, but also over our body. Volition is a causal relation between spirit, on the one hand, and the mind and body complex it animates, on the other (although we colloquially describe this, imprecisely, as “mind over matter”).

By cultivating a sense of wonder in regard to our possession of consciousness and will, we can learn *to steady and concentrate our attention on consciousness and our energy in will*, which efforts are the essence of both sitting meditation and moving meditation. These are the most direct means to ever deepening self-understanding, and self-mastery.

We should also be constantly aware of the powers of mind and matter over our spirit – that is to say, how these domains may (causatively) affect and/or influence us. Affecting means something causing, while influence refers to *the experience or idea of* something causing. In either case, causation (determinism) is involved; but in affectation the cause directly has its effect on us, whereas in influence, the same cause has its effect on us indirectly, *via* our awareness of it to some degree.

We should also in this context note the powers of different individual souls to affect and influence *each other*, at least through the medium of matter and mind (physical force, verbal discourse, etc.), and possibly even (keeping an open mind on this issue) more directly, by means of telepathy and telekinesis.

Meditate instead of thinking. Most of us, most of the time, use thought as a sort of self-entertainment. We find it hard to bear idle moments, and use thought as a distraction to furnish our minds. Many of us regard having a blank mind as a waste of time, and feel obliged to occupy our minds with thought. If we are at the toilet, driving a car or waiting in a line, we keep busy thinking, unable to stay quiet inside. If other people are around, we may chat with them, engaging as it were in collective entertainment.

Instead of thus using thought as a pastime or mind-filler, use meditation. Meditation can occupy you just as well, and at

the same do you good. Thus, in everyday life, whatever you are doing, try and get into the habit of meditation: consciously feeling you body, watching your breath or your thoughts, mindfully reciting a mantra or a psalm, etc.

To meditate, one has to remember to meditate; so this effort of memory is primary. When you sit down to meditate, always remind yourself that you are sitting down to meditate, and then keep reminding yourself of that intent when you find your mind straying. If you sit without such conscious resolve, it will likely take you much longer to actually begin meditation.

Practicing meditation even after you get up from your sitting meditation will greatly improve your next sitting meditation, and is moreover a major goal of sitting meditation. Here again, even if you have generally resolved to practice meditation in everyday life, it won't happen if you forget your resolution. Therefore, remind yourself again and again.

Meditation on velleities. Self-knowledge is achieved by meditatively observing not only our thoughts and actions, but (more subtly) our *velleities* in thought and action. Velleity is starting but unfinished volition. Often, we are unaware of our own valuations. But we can discover them indirectly through observation of our velleities.

For instance, I express my desire for a girl I met by clinging to her image in my mind; or more forcefully, by imagining

myself putting my arm around her and kissing her, and so on (progressively indulging in more detailed fantasies). This is a first degree of velleity – in thought. I may thereafter choose to put these thoughts into action. For example, I may communicate my desire to the girl by chatting her up and eventually offering her a light kiss, and observing her reaction (whether she draws back decisively or lightly kisses me back). This is velleity in action; it is a tentative exploration that may end up with a full commitment to the desire.

During meditation, and in life in general, one should be alert to such less than explicit mental and physical activities – and not focus exclusively on the more obvious events.

Meditation as alchemy. We should not, out of a desire to universalize meditation, forget its ethical aspect, i.e. the fact that it improves individuals, makes them more virtuous, orients them to higher values. I have in mind, when saying this, certain sublime Buddhist teachings, but it is obviously a more general truth.

- Manifold desires, sexual lust, power lust, greed for money and belongings, dependencies on people or on substances, bad habits, compulsions, obsessions, and all other forms of attachment and “selfishness” are slowly turned into non-attachment and unselfish helpfulness.

- The anger and hatred, the coldness and enmity, which emerge from the actual or potential frustration of desire, are gradually replaced by serenity, loving-kindness, warmth and peacefulness. When one is essentially content and secure, one is never lacking or afraid, impatient or short-tempered.
- Ignorance, delusion and foolishness eventually become enlightenment, liberation and wisdom. The source of desire and frustration is a fundamental ignorance; it is a tragic error at the very beginning of our existence, by which we misapprehend its true nature. We then attach to the surface of things, and fail to notice their deeper unity, and thus get sucked into the vortex of samsara.

Meditation is a sort of alchemy, a cauldron wherein gross materialism is transmuted into spiritual purity and elevation. Its ultimate purpose is to return us to the nirvana that is our natural heritage.

Poetry in motion. In the *individual* practice of a Tai Chi form, an attitude I find valuable to adopt is that of a wave of water in motion. I imagine my whole body as a wave of seawater, swelling, flowing, ebbing, moving back and forth continuously every which way, twisting and turning, suspended momentarily then breaking onto the rocks at the shore, pulling back, sweeping round from another direction, pounding the rocks again, on and on, without end, never quite

repeating the same move, always sticking close to the rocks, enveloping them, caressing them, wearing them down. Nevertheless, all movements should be very slow and conscious.

When *fighting* an actual adversary (or many), I do not view him (or them) as represented by rocks, because rocks are too still and tough. Rather, I view the opponent as a swimmer in the sea that I am. I imagine this bad swimmer desperately trying to stay afloat in the rough sea of my Tai Chi. The waters surge all about him, drag him down into the depths, throw him up in the air, turn him this way and that, never leaving him the time to breathe or rest, till he finally gives up and thankfully drowns.

This self-image of water in motion is very valuable in Tai Chi training or combat, because it well induces in us the full and empty, the continuity, elasticity and reactivity, the inevitable power, the adhesion, and many other such characteristics of masterly Tai Chi. In some circumstances, this water might become even more insubstantial, and we identify rather with a cloud of smoke – something elusive, ungraspable.

The Tai Chi master Yang Ch'eng-fu used the same image when he wrote: "If the ch'i is not blocked it is like the sea wind which blows up waves and billows. ... The whole body is as one ch'i."¹⁰

¹⁰ See Wile, pp. 102-103.

Such holistic approach to Tai Chi is greatly enabled by the regular practice of sitting meditation. The mind must be empty of distracting thoughts to be capable of assuming such watery identity; and it must be capable of sustained concentration to make the image last for an hour or so. The body must be profoundly calm before it can muster the energy of a flowing wave, an irresistible tsunami.

Moreover, meditation gives us maximal sensitivity to the states and intentions of the opponent, so that we can judge his condition and predict his next moves correctly.

6. Mental health

Just as our physical health is defined with reference to the human body, and its various members, organs and systems, as the optimum condition and function of that body – so in the case of mental health. Mental health is *the optimum condition and functioning of the psyche*.

The psyche, the subject-matter of psychology, is of course a very large concept. It includes to some extent the body, since our mental life is largely psychosomatic, and since the body is the substratum of the so-called mind; especially, our mental health depends on the healthy condition and functioning of our nervous system, including the brain and the sense organs. On a less physical level, the psyche has two main domains, the spiritual and the mental (in a narrow sense of the term).

By the spiritual domain, I mean the soul, and by the (narrow) mind I mean the mental phenomena that occur (as it were) around the soul. With regard to those mental phenomena,

they are perceptible (to various degrees) things or events, like thoughts, dreams and emotions. They are, strictly speaking, outside the soul. They can be experienced and manipulated by the soul, but their existence depends on the nervous system too; and indeed, sometimes they are entirely products of the nervous system.

The soul is the true self, that which constitutes a person within us. The soul may be active or passive relative to mental phenomena and relative the physical aspects of the psyche (i.e. the nervous system). The soul itself has three obvious faculties¹¹ or powers, namely cognition (intuitive, perceptual, logical and conceptual), volition (our will) and valuation (our values). The core issue in mental health is the health of the soul, although the issue is wider than that.

Mental health refers mainly to the correct functioning of the three faculties of the soul. It has three components, corresponding to these three faculties. These are of course closely interrelated, each requiring both the others to function. Mental health has degrees. The degree of overall mental health is proportional to the degrees and combinations of degrees of health in these three areas of human endeavor.

- The faculty of cognition is at its best when it is well prepared and trained to know the surrounding world and how to deal with it. That is certainly true and important,

¹¹ The term 'faculties' should not be taken to imply that the soul contains entities or departments – it merely refers to capabilities to cognize, to will and to value.

but the main cognitive health issue is **self-knowledge**. This is achieved by introspection¹² and self-observation in action. Without a lucid, profound and extensive knowledge of one's own inner workings (motives, desires, fears, emotions, capabilities, etc.) and outer behavior, one is bound to feel imprisoned or lost in strange territory.

- The faculty of volition, likewise, has to be maintained for maximum efficiency in dealing with mental and physical phenomena. But the essence of health in relation to it is **self-control** (in the best sense of the term, not implying oppression), i.e. getting into the habit of doing what needs to be done (energy) or not-doing what needs to be avoided (restraint). This is essential to self-trust and self-confidence. For it is clear that if one allows oneself to be at the mercy of every passing fancy, impulse, urge, obsession, compulsion, bad habit, one will soon experience great anxiety, for anything might happen

¹² Note that 'introspection' has a widening circle of meanings. The deepest level of meaning is the self *intuitively* aware of itself (i.e. of the soul), and of its cognitions, volitions and valuations. The next level is the self aware (perceptually and conceptually) of the mental phenomena in its mind (in the narrow sense), i.e. memories, imaginations, verbal thoughts, moods, etc. The third most superficial level of meaning is awareness (again, perceptual and conceptual) of its bodily phenomena, i.e. physical sensations, visceral sentiments, the sights of its body in different postures and positions, and so forth. All these levels are significant – but in ethical judgment, it is intuitive introspection that has the most impact.

anytime. Without discipline one becomes one's own worst enemy.

- The faculty of valuation is properly used when or insofar as one's values are conducive to life, to self-knowledge and to self-control. This may be called **self-value** (in the best sense of the term, not implying egoism or egotism, selfishness or vanity). Clearly, if one has twisted values, contradictory values, an inclination to perversion of some sort, and so forth, one will soon become confused and ultimately bring about one's own self-destruction.

Thus, briefly put, the three most spiritual aspects of mental health are self-knowledge, self-control and self-value. These are spiritual, because they concern the soul (or spirit or self), the core of our psyche or mental existence. When the Subject of cognitions, the Author of volitions and the Valuer of valuations is appropriately looked after, he or she is healthy and the rest follows. If the self's faculties are on the contrary neglected, the opposite occurs. We may thus speak of spiritual health – or in the opposite case, of a sick soul.

This is one aspect of mental health, its most intimate aspect. Of course, mental health does not only refer to how we take care of our soul, but to the full range of survival conditions and tasks. We need to improve our general cognitive abilities, e.g. by studying inductive and deductive logic, by being attentive, by remaining sober, and so on. Our capabilities of action will be improved by controlling our diet and our sex life, by staying physically fit, and so forth.

In short, without going into details, mental health relates to a wide range of inner and outer behavior patterns. It is therefore closely related to what we call ethics, the study of what is conducive to life. A person who cultivates mental health gets inner equilibrium and self-respect as reward, and achieves happiness, or at least basic contentment. Whereas the opposite person, sentences himself or herself to much inner conflict and self-contempt, and ends up suffering considerably.

Moreover, although the primary task of mental hygiene relates to oneself, this has a strong impact on one's social relations. That is to say, a mentally healthy person will naturally treat other people with respect and consideration, since that is the way he or she is used to dealing with himself or herself. On the contrary, a mentally unhealthy person will have many inter-personal conflicts, and suffer fear, anger, hatred, and similar negative emotions as a consequence.

Thus, mental health begets both dignity and decency. And inversely, mental sickness spoils life for self and others. Mental health is ennobling; mental sickness is debasing.

When one has mental health, the ongoing task is to maintain it and increase it. When one lacks it, the first task is to obtain it, i.e. to cure oneself of mental sickness. A very powerful way to obtain, maintain and improve mental health is *meditation*. Through meditation, one gets to really know oneself, gets to really take charge of oneself, and gets to

really see for oneself what is good and what is bad in life, right and wrong in behavior.

7. Behold the mind

Judging by a collection of essays attributed to Bodhidharma¹³, the latter's teaching of Zen meditation was quite introverted. He keeps stressing the futility of physical acts and rituals, and stresses the necessity of "*beholding the mind*", to achieve enlightenment/liberation. This message is repeated throughout the volume in various words. For instance:

*Responding, perceiving, arching your eyebrows,
blinking your eyes, moving your hands and feet, it's*

¹³ *The Zen Teaching of Bodhidharma*, consisting of four essays. Like the translator, Red Pine, I assume their author is indeed Bodhidharma; but who the genial author(s) is/are, is ultimately not very important: some human being(s) had this interesting teaching to transmit to us. I notice that D. T. Suzuki, in his *First Series of Essays in Zen Buddhism*, (pp. 178), mentions six (not just four) Bodhidharma essays as quite well-known and popular in Japan today. While acknowledging the Zen spirit of all those essays, Suzuki considers only two of them as likely to have been written by the first patriarch of Zen.

all your miraculously aware nature. And this nature is the mind. And the mind is the buddha... Someone who sees his own nature finds the Way... is a buddha.” (P. 29.)

The implication here is that buddhahood (ultimate realization) is not something far away, like the peak of a high mountain difficult to climb. It is something close by, attainable by a mere change of outlook. That is, the separation between samsara and nirvana is paper-thin: on one side, you are in samsara, and on the other, in nirvana. In his words:

Seeing through the mundane and witnessing the sublime is less than an eye-blink away. Realization is now. (P. 113.)

The transition is not to be achieved by elaborate external deeds, but by acute attentiveness. Thus, he states:

People who seek blessings by concentrating on external works instead of internal cultivation are attempting the impossible. (P. 95.)

Even so, in view of the ambiguity of the word “mind” the advice to behold the mind remains somewhat difficult to understand precisely. For “mind” (to my mind) in the largest sense includes every aspect of the psyche:

1. The *real self* (or soul or spirit), which stands as Subject of all acts of consciousness (i.e. awareness of any sort) and the Agent of all acts of volition (will)

and valuation (valuing or devaluing anything). This ‘entity’ is without phenomenal characteristics (“empty” in Buddhist parlance), and so intuited (apperceived) rather than perceived, note well.

2. The *faculties or inner acts* of that self – viz. consciousness, volition and valuation. These intentional expressions of the real self are also in themselves devoid of any phenomenal aspects, and so intuited rather than perceived. Here, we must carefully distinguish between the *fact* (or relation) of consciousness and the *content* (or object) of consciousness¹⁴, as well as distinguish the Subject who is conscious from the particular act of consciousness. And similar distinctions apply to volition and valuation.
3. The *illusory self* (or ego), a collection of body and mind phenomena that the real self habitually delusively (at least partly delusively) identifies with itself. This composite ‘entity’ includes a multiplicity of changing mental phenomena (i.e. mental projections, memories, imaginations, concepts, verbal descriptions, emotions) and physical phenomena (sensations, sense-perceptions, physical feelings), and is ordinarily confused with the real self. The ego is

¹⁴ There is no awareness without content (i.e. object); one is here aware of another act of awareness whose content is in turn something else.

constantly crystallizing in our mental outlook, if we do not work hard to oppose this seemingly natural tendency¹⁵.

4. The *physical infrastructure* of the psyche and its workings; i.e. the nervous system, including the brain, spine and nerves, the physiological characteristics of humans that are involved in sensory, motor and emotive functions. This is one sense or aspect of the term “mind” as colloquially used; it is sometimes the intent of the more specific term “unconscious mind”. It is appropriate to refer to these physical structures and events as pertaining to the mind, insofar as they apparently constitute the interface between the material and the mental and spiritual domains; the mind is supported and fed by them and acts on the body and the world beyond it through them.

Note the difference between the last two of these factors of the psyche. The third refers to inner phenomena, a private subjective self-perception (which thereafter may have social ramifications), whereas the fourth refers to objective

¹⁵ Meditation is precisely the most effective tool for overcoming our built-in tendency to ego formation. Even so, one may at any moment fall back into old ego habits; for example, the other day a young woman looked at me in a certain way, and I found myself flattered and captivated.

phenomena (knowable only from the outside, even for the body's owner).¹⁶

Now, when he recommends our “beholding the mind” Bodhidharma is obviously not referring to the third aspect of the psyche, the perceived (phenomenal) aspect; the ego is (rightly) the *bête noire* of the Buddhist.

He does sometimes seem to be referring to the fourth aspect of mind, the mystery of the mind's wordless power over the body; for instance, when he states that no deluded person “understands the movement of his own hands and feet,” or more explicitly put:

*...every movement or state is all your mind. At every moment, where language can't go, that's your mind*¹⁷.

¹⁶ In this regard, it is important not to confuse the latter ‘objectivity’ with an exclusive standard of truth, as do certain modern “scientists”. Such Behaviorism, advocated under a pretext of positivism or radical empiricism, is a non-scientific ideological stance that would more accurately be described as narrow or extremely materialist. It is epistemologically fallacious, because its proponents deliberately ignore a major portion of common personal experience (viz. introspective data), and formulate their theories on the basis of an arbitrary selection of experiential data (viz. physical phenomena). Really, what this anti-phenomenological doctrine signifies is that the convenience of certain low-level laboratory technicians is to be elevated to the status of a philosophy of mind! The psychological motive behind this doctrine is an ailment that afflicts more and more people nowadays: it is a deep personal *fear of introspection* – i.e. of confronting the mental and spiritual aspects of one's psyche.

But mostly, Bodhidharma seems to be referring to either the first or to the second of the above-listed factors – i.e. to the intuited (non-phenomenal) aspects of the psyche.

If you can simply concentrate your mind's inner light and behold its outer illumination, you'll dispel the three poisons and drive away the six thieves once and for all. And without effort you'll gain possession of an infinite number of virtues, perfections and doors to the truth. (P. 113.)

Sometimes, his emphasis seems to be on the real self; as when he writes: “No karma can restrain this real body” (p. 21), “Awaken to your original body and mind” (p. 31); “Your real body has no sensation, etc.” (p. 39), or further (emphasizing the non-phenomenal nature of the real self):

The buddha is your real body, your original mind. This mind has no form or characteristics, no cause or effect, no tendons or bones... But this mind isn't outside the material body... Without this mind we can't move. The body has no awareness. (P. 43.)

Sometimes, it seems to be on the acts of consciousness, and the related acts of volition and valuation, of that real self; for example:

¹⁷ P. 23. This makes me think of Tai Chi, which is a meditation on movement, on the relation between the mind and physical movement. Similarly in Yoga.

Language and behavior, perception and conception are all functions of the moving mind. All motion is the mind's motion. Motion is its function... Even so, the mind neither moves nor functions, because the essence of its functioning is emptiness and emptiness is essentially motionless. (Pp. 43-44.)

All this gives me the idea of a meditation consisting of 'awareness of awareness'. In this meditation, one focuses on *the one who is aware* (oneself) and/or on *the fact of awareness* (as distinct from its content). Whatever material or mental¹⁸ phenomenal objects come to our attention, we simply ignore them and rather pay attention to *our being conscious* of them. The objects come and go during the meditation, but the Subject and consciousness endure and are focused on persistently.

It may be suggested that the emphasis ought to be on the awareness rather than on the one aware, for there is a danger in the latter case that one may get fixated on an ego representation of self rather than on the real self. Moreover, my experience is that meditative insight seems to hit a peak when the impression of self seems to disappear; one seems to face the surrounding world unburdened by an extraneous presence. Thus, even if the self is not really absent (since it is

¹⁸ In the narrower sense of 'mind' – referring to *phenomenal* events (memories, imaginations, dreams, verbal thoughts, etc.) only. Note in passing that the term 'mind' colloquially also often refers to the *mindspace*, the presumed extension *in which* mental phenomena occur.

being conscious), it is best to behave *as if* it does not exist. For this reason, we should describe this exercise more narrowly as meditation on awareness.

Be mindful of the miracle of your being aware, or of your awareness as such, whether directed outward or inward. Bodhidharma says: “*Buddha* is Sanskrit for what you call *aware, miraculously aware*”¹⁹. The sense of wonder when observing consciousness is, he clearly suggests, essential to enlightenment²⁰. Cultivate this wonderment. Don’t take consciousness for granted, making it invisible to itself.

¹⁹ Verbatim from the present translation; on p. 29.

²⁰ It is interesting to note in passing how far this viewpoint is from the view of some Buddhists (more ‘Hinayana’ in outlook, perhaps) that Enlightenment is the actual *extinction* of consciousness (and volition and all other aspects of selfhood). For Bodhidharma (a ‘Mahayana’ teacher), the purpose of it all is to reach a summit of consciousness, not *unconsciousness*. The difference is perhaps due to a different reading of the twelve *nidanas* doctrine (on the chain of causation of samsaric existence). According to that, the first three causes in the chain are ignorance, actions and consciousness; these clearly refer respectively to lack of spiritual understanding, acting in accordance with such incomprehension, and the narrow and delusive consciousness emerging from such action. It is not consciousness *per se* which is the problem (as some seem to think), but the *limited and limiting* consciousness of ordinary existence. The solution is therefore not the annihilation of consciousness, but its maximal intensification and expansion. Thus, consciousness as such is not a disvalue, but a value. (In accord with this divergence in interpretation, the Hinayana branch tends to regard Emptiness as nothingness, literally a negative, whereas the Mahayana branch stresses the positive meaning of it, as the “Buddha-nature” underlying all things.)

Realize the marvel that one thing (you) can see another (whatever you look at, including yourself). Wow! How can such a thing be?

At first, such meditation requires effort; but one can eventually reach an effortless level of concentration that may be characterized as contemplation. Note well that the true object of such meditation on awareness itself is not phenomenal – it has no visual or auditory or tactile or gustatory or olfactory qualities. It is truly spiritual and purely immaterial, and is for this reason likened to a transparent empty space.

Of course, it is not much use to take note of one's awareness just momentarily; one has to persevere in that effort for some time. At the same time, one should beware of making this a "gaining idea"²¹, i.e. of letting such effort become a distraction in itself. One cannot grab hold of results in meditation, but must proceed gently, with some detachment.

I have personally tried such meditation on awareness repeatedly lately, and it seems to be an effective way to discard passing perceptions, fancies and thoughts, and attain a more dilated and contemplative state of mind. Although I cannot yet claim to have had the lofty experience of beholding the mind that Bodhidharma recounts, I have found it worthwhile.

²¹ Advice often given in his books by a modern disciple of Bodhidharma, Shunryu Suzuki.

8. The four foundations and the core practice

In practice, meditation on awareness has to be combined with four lesser meditations, which serve as takeoff platform and supporting pillars for the main intent. These four foundations (as I shall call them) are *body awareness*, *breath awareness*, *thought awareness* and *awareness of surroundings*.

At first, concentrate on your body:

- Posture: stable seat, straight back, stretched spine, chin down, shoulders back and down, open chest, stomach relaxed out, hands in the “universal mudra”.
- Tonus: relaxed yet alert body, immobile without stiffness, no tension around lips and eyebrows, or in neck.

- Sensations: touch sensations on skin and inside the body, physical feelings and psychosomatic emotions, tastes in mouth, smells in nose, bodily sounds.

Next, become aware of your breathing:

- Let it go at its own pace; don't interfere with its speed or trajectory. If you find yourself breathing mostly through only one nostril, let it be, that's natural.
- Feel the air go in, follow it as far up your nostrils as it goes, then follow it down through your nose and out of it all the way. Again, the next cycle, patiently on and on.

After a while, notice your thoughts:

- Are you thinking in any way, whether through memories or imaginations of sights and sounds, through emotions, through verbal discourse, or through wordless intentions, decisions, plans, hopes, fears, and such? Just notice the fact, without classification or other comment.
- Thoughts may be voluntary, or impersonally produced by your brain (cerebral). The former require an effort, while the latter occur spontaneously. You may legitimately actively think for a while, to give yourself meditation instructions or learn lessons from current experience; but know when to stop that, i.e. stop it as soon as possible. As for involuntary thoughts (cerebrations), they may carry on as

background noise throughout a meditation session, or they may calm down eventually; just watch them without encouraging them or getting upset by them.²²

- Allow thoughts to run a bit, but keep them on a short leash. You don't want them to take control of you, but you cannot take control of them in a violent manner. Rather, let them pop up for a moment, but do not let them run wild: bring them to heel at the first opportunity and maintain mastery.

Now, pay attention to external stimuli, the context you are in:

- The sights before you. Ideally, you are facing a wall or some natural scenery, so that what you see does not stimulate thoughts, but rather can be used to divert your attention away from your thoughts. To look out has a steadying effect. If your eyes get tired (they feel hot, red), just shut them for a while, and instead look inwards.
- The sounds around you. Sounds made by your family or neighbors, mechanical sounds in your home, sounds of traffic in the city, sounds of water, birds

²² Of course, it helps considerably to have a coherent lifestyle. In general, one should try to *limit one's sensory inputs* to a minimum. If one lives in very exciting circumstances, one will naturally be assailed by numerous flashy and noisy thoughts, and one's mind will require a lot of work to calm down. For this reason, many seekers become hermits; it just makes meditation so much easier! In any case, a serene lifestyle is essential.

and insects in the country. Hear them all with equal attentiveness; they usually disappear eventually. They too can be used to counterbalance thoughts.

- Other sensations. The breeze or sunshine on your face, the air temperature, the smells around you, and so on.

These four meditations are merely foundations for the fifth, main meditation, which is meditation on awareness, remember. The four foundations are material or mental²³ (perceptual and/or conceptual) meditations, whereas the main meditation is a purely spiritual (intuitive) one. However, awareness of awareness is not possible without some prior awareness of something other than awareness; hence, those prior meditations. But don't get stuck in the preparation: do go on and make the extra effort of meditation on awareness!

Thus, we here propose a meditation program or package. One begins with the four lower meditations, giving one's full attention to each one in turn, and then learning to do them all in rapid sequence or at once (more or less). Every so often one returns to each of them in turn: checking one's posture is in order, assuring contact with the breath, verifying one is not involved in runaway thinking, and anchoring oneself in one's surrounds.

When one feels ready, one changes gear and begins the meditation on awareness. This becomes one's main focus;

²³

I use 'mental' here again in the narrower sense of the term.

but even so, one remains peripherally conscious of the four foundations at all times. On average, let us say (without intending statistical precision) that the main meditation will take up 60% of one's attention, while the four lesser exercises will take up 10% each. Thus, although the meditation on awareness is the core practice, the four other meditations ensure one gets to it and stays on course²⁴.

Meditation on awareness is a sophisticated form of meditation on the here and now. The four foundations center us in the here and now of body-mind and surroundings, while the core practice takes us deeper, into the here and now at the spiritual level. It is introspection par excellence. It is what Lao-tzu has described as²⁵: "There is no need to run outside for better seeing... rather abide at the center of your being."

Note that to be here and now, one should always peripherally be alert to moments when one is *not* here and now. Ideally, one should focus wholly on the here and now. But in practice, one often swerves away from it, carried off by passing sensations, emotions and thoughts. Successful meditation depends on one being quickly aware of such moments of distraction, when one is no longer focused on the present tense. As soon as one notices such change in direction of consciousness, one should gently pull back one's

²⁴ When thoughts run wild, as often happens, make every effort to focus on the other three foundations, with the emphasis on breath awareness. The latter is crucial to steady *zazen*.

²⁵ According to Bynner's translation of the *Tao Te Ching* (v. 47).

attention where it belongs. Thus, awareness of the here and now has two components: a positive one and an equally important negative one; both are needed to stay the course.

Consciousness of consciousness is experienced as consciousness within consciousness. That is, one is adding awareness to awareness, intensifying one's attention as much as one can. This practice of mindfulness should be carried over from sitting meditation to everyday life. Every sensation, every motion, every intention should be lived with erect attention, as if one is about to perceive in it the secret of all existence. This is, I think, what Bodhidharma prescribes in order that we "behold the mind".

9. Transcending suffering and karma

Bodhidharma makes clear that causes within this world cannot produce effects outside it; the Absolute can only conceivably be reached independently of the relative. Thus, the key to overcoming suffering and its underlying bad karma is not to be found in external rituals and deeds aimed at merit, but through an internal change of mind.

He insists that “invoking buddhas, reciting sutras, making offerings observing precepts, practicing devotions, or doing good works” are useless; only by “seeing [your buddha-] nature” can you “attain enlightenment”. As he explains:

If you attain anything at all, it's conditional, it's karmic. It results in retribution [i.e. reward or punishment]. It turns the Wheel [of karma]... Unless you see your nature, all this talk about cause and effect [i.e. acquiring religious merit] is nonsense. (P. 17.)

Thus, Zen meditation is not a way to change something, to annul our bad karma and its consequent suffering, but a way to awaken us to something that is already ever-present, something beyond karma, i.e. our “buddha-nature”. This is liberating, for:

Once a person realizes his original nature, he stops creating karma (p. 41). That which is truly so, the indestructible, passionless dharma-self, remains forever free of the world’s afflictions (p. 93).

It follows that: “The essence of the Way is detachment” (p. 47). In his *Outline of Practice*²⁶, Bodhidharma describes how this spiritual path is treaded. He refers to “reason and practice”. By reason, he means meditations that “turn from delusion back to reality”; while by practice, he means: “suffering injustice, adapting to conditions, seeking nothing and practicing the Dharma” (p. 3)²⁷. All four of these practices are about detachment, or non-attachment.

²⁶ This essay is also reproduced (differently translated) in D.T. Suzuki’s First Series of Essays on Zen Buddhism (pp. 180-183), under the name “Meditation on Four Acts”. Suzuki considers it probable that this essay was indeed written by the master. Moreover (pp. 183-186), he shows clearly how it was derived, sometimes word for word, from the earlier *Vajrasamadhi Sutra*. But he goes on to show the novelty in Bodhidharma’s presentation, which made the latter’s version a specifically Zen document.

²⁷ At first sight these “four all-inclusive practices” seem intended to parallel the Buddha’s “four noble truths”, viz. the fact of suffering (i.e. that existence is suffering), the cause of suffering (it is due to attachment), the cure of suffering (removing the cause, becoming unattached), and the way to the cure (the prescribed

1. “*Suffering injustice*”: when you encounter some hardship that seems unfair to you, tell yourself that somewhere in your history (it does not matter just where) you must have deserved it somehow. In this way, you neutralize the suffering that believing you are being unjustly treated gives. You transcend the academic and fatiguing issue of justice or injustice, and remain internally unaffected by relatively external circumstances.²⁸
2. “*Adapting to conditions*”: this does not refer to external adaptations to conditions, but again to an attitude of willingness to make do with any currently existing conditions or eventual changes of conditions. In this way, one is not at the mercy of favorable or unfavorable circumstances, but remains at all times mentally (i.e.

eightfold noble path). But while the two sets are obviously associated, they are not identical. The Buddha’s foursome consists of three descriptive items and one prescriptive item; whereas, Bodhidharma list is altogether prescriptive (with three negatives and one positive).

²⁸ Note that I (unlike Bodhidharma) do not believe that universal justice necessarily exists. I agree however that one should strive to be as indifferent to the issue of justice as one can, because to get locked up in such concerns is definitely a spiritual retardant. Notwithstanding, the pragmatic wisdom of unconcern with justice for oneself ought not be taken to imply that one should be indifferent to justice *for others*. The latter concern would fall under the fourth heading here, that of “practicing the Dharma”. One should obviously neither afflict other people with unjust acts, nor (as far as possible within one’s power) allow third parties to so afflict them.

more precisely, spiritually) prepared for and able to cope with whatever life dishes out.

3. “*Seeking nothing*”: is a virtue based on the realization that you open yourself to negative experiences when you are dependent on positive experiences. Everything in this world that appears desirable comes together with other things that are undesirable. You may for a while find satisfaction in certain people or possessions; but sooner or later, these will turn into less pleasant experiences, since all things are impermanent. All data considered, it is more pleasant to remain aloof and serene.
4. “*Practicing the Dharma*”: seems to refer to altruistic attitudes and acts. But even here, non-attachment is stressed, in order that egoism or egotism does not result from them. The aim is to transcend the distinction between self and other, to work for the good of all.

Thus, these four practices can be described as different forms of non-attachment. Not getting worked up over one’s supposed deserts; not preferring this to that, but being well able to deal with whatever comes; not pursuing sundry material and social things, thinking foolishly that one will find happiness by such means; and, on the positive side, being helpful to others.

Non-attachment saves one and all from suffering. It is attachment that ties us to karma and causes us to suffer; by non-attachment we immediately transcend this finite world and get to live our life from the infinite perspective of our

buddha-nature (i.e. in nirvana). This buddha-nature is, of course, empty “like space”²⁹.

²⁹

P. 43.

10. Behold the soul

Although Bodhidharma, as indicated earlier³⁰, seems at times to refer to a self in the sense of a soul, we can safely presume that, as an orthodox Buddhist, he did not literally believe in a soul. If asked who or what is beholding the mind, he would probably have answered ‘the mind’. Therefore, when I here bring up the question of soul again, I do not mean to impute such belief on him, but merely speak on my own authority as an ‘independent’ philosopher.

As also earlier indicated, I do agree that it is wise *not to* directly meditate on the self in the sense of soul. The reason being that it is easy for us unenlightened people to confuse our real self with our illusory self. The illusory self is so overwhelmingly present to our consciousness that we cannot easily ignore it. Thus, while hoping to soar meditatively, we may easily get bogged down in a low level of consciousness!

³⁰

In the first section of the present chapter.

For this reason, I suggested that in our attempt to “behold the mind” we meditate on the fact of our awareness rather than on the person being aware. This is, I think, valid in the early stages of the meditation, at least, till we reach a relatively high level of consciousness.

But since I have reason to believe in the existence of a soul, I must consider such meditative restraint to be a temporary “expedient means”, rather than an absolute no-no. It seems therefore legitimate to now suggest that, once one has reached a certain degree of peace of mind and meditative intensity, one may well turn one’s attention on one’s self in the sense of soul.

This, then, would be a sixth aspect and latest stage of our proposed meditation on awareness: eventually becoming aware of oneself being aware. One should do so, not only because awareness is logically inconceivable without someone being aware, but also because this true sort of self-awareness is indeed subtly present in all our exercise of awareness, in everyday life and during meditation, and ought therefore to be acknowledged and concentrated upon.

To summarize: Bodhidharma’s advice to “behold the mind” seems vague and impracticable, in view of the ambiguity of the term “mind”. Of the various senses of the term, he probably meant ‘the fact of consciousness’ and/or ‘the one being conscious’. Granting which, his advice was, more precisely put, to *behold the beholding* and/or to *behold the beholder*. I suggested, to avoid developing ego, to begin by

the first of these types of awareness, and at a later stage attempt the second.

The Buddhist idea of a “non-self” (*anatman*) being at all aware is, to my mind at least, logically unthinkable. Such so-called non-self is tacitly reified, even as it is claimed null. To say we have no real self at the core of our consciousness (and volitions and valuations) is to imply us to be mere inanimate objects. To claim that something truly absent may be aware (and will and value) is to deny that certain objects have such power(s) specifically, i.e. while other objects lack such power(s).

To deny that “we” each have a soul, i.e. that we *are* souls, is to turn us into mere things, or more extremely, into nothings. It is then discursively inappropriate to use “we” (or any other noun or pronoun) – yet those who make such claims continue to use such language. They either are not aware of the paradox involved in doing so, or contradiction does not bother them.

Buddhists claim that at the moment of enlightenment, the self (i.e. the apparent real self, not to mention the more gross illusory self) is *extinguished*. They claim that enlightenment is, precisely, the occurrence and experience of such extinction of the self. After that, “one” exists as a non-self (“in” nirvana), if at all (i.e. not at all, when “one” reaches the final stage, *parinirvana*). But such ideas are logically impossible to defend.

For the question arises, how do *we* know about such extinction? Not from our own experience, since we have not yet become enlightened. Therefore, merely by hearsay³¹. If so, who told us? Buddhists claim: the Buddha told us (first, and then perhaps other teachers who attained *bodhi*). So well and good – but if upon attaining enlightenment his apparent (real as well as illusory) self was fully extinguished, then he was no longer there and could not report anything to us.

If, alternatively, he returned and carried with him the memory of his enlightenment experience, then he was not quite extinguished. For, to return, and to speak of some past experience, implies some sort of *continuity*, i.e. excludes true extinction (which logically implies a radical break with existence). In short, the very idea of an extinction of self being reported by a witness to us after the fact is paradoxical and untenable.

The idea of extinction can only be discursively accepted as a ‘third party’ hypothesis, a conceptual projection by some onlooker, a mere theory or speculation. It cannot *consistently* be upheld as a first person account based on direct experience of actual obliteration. This being the case, the strict Buddhist

³¹ Hearsay of course has some logical value, but it does not constitute knowledge in the strictest sense. It serves to confirm a hypothesis, but cannot definitely prove it. For even if what the witness says he experienced happens to be absolutely true (in God’s eyes, say), it does not follow that his sincere belief in it is logically unassailable; and even if it were, it does not follow that we (other people) can take his say-so as fact.

idea of a non-self does not withstand logical scrutiny, and must be firmly rejected. For there is a more consistent alternative postulate, namely that we each have a soul, that we are souls.

There has to be a residue of some sort upon enlightenment, else we would not know about it. This does not however mean that the residue is an ongoing individual self; it suffices that the residue be the grand common Self, of which every individual self is but a tiny spark artificially delineated by ignorance. When this illusion of separateness collapses, enlightenment occurs, the individual self disappears but its underlying universal personhood remains.

To show the logic of this conception of enlightenment, an analogy can be made with a raindrop falling back into the ocean. As soon as it plunges into the larger body of water, the drop effectively disappears as an individual drop. The drop is immediately 'one with' the sea. Even so, it can conceivably, for a very brief while at least, be retrieved intact.

Similarly, the remnant of spiritual existence can initially report its enlightenment experience, although ultimately all its boundaries dissolve and it fully merges with its Source.

That Source we may call God, following our traditions. Buddhists would call it Buddha-nature, Buddha-mind or original-mind; Hindus would call it Brahman; and each other religion has its name(s) for it. The name is not so important, I think, as what the word is intended to refer to; I am not so

concerned with religious traditions as with their underlying significance.

In truth, when Buddhists pursue liberation from the karmic world, they do not seek total annihilation, absolute death³². They rather seek something they call happiness or nirvana. It is an existence, a ‘higher life’ of some sort, though not one subject to the suffering of samsara. Nirvana is certainly something beyond, free of and devoid of all phenomenal characters and events; but that does not mean it is totally nothing, a nihilistic non-existence. It is, let us say, a purely spiritual existence (whatever that means).

Reaching such conclusion, I realize that my thinking on this subject is closer to ‘high’ Hindu philosophy (such as Advaita Vedanta) than to Buddhism. I can never accept the “avatar” idea, so pervasive in Hinduism (as in Christianity), the idea that God can and does incarnate in human or other forms. For me, as a rational philosopher, this is a logically untenable notion; the whole cannot become a part. But many ideas in Hindu philosophy are indeed profound and reasonable.

³²

If so, those who do not believe in rebirth could just commit suicide and be done with this world, without needing to meditate and change their behavior.

11. The Buddhist no-soul theory

One of the major and distinctive theses of Buddhism is the theory of “no-soul” – (or *anatta* in Pali, *anatman* in Sanskrit). This is part of a larger thesis that nothing has a real essence, the individual soul or self being here conceived as a special case of the concept of essence, i.e. as the essence of a person.

The Buddhist no essences doctrine arose in reaction to a thesis, labeled “Eternalism”, which was apparently normative in Indian philosophy at the time, *that ‘things’ consist of eternal, unchanging ‘essences’, substantial and causally independent entities*. Similarly, with regard to the special case of souls.

The Buddhist no essences doctrine was based on the assumption that the belief in such “essences”, including in particular the belief in souls (as the essences of our bodily and mental existences), is the root cause of our imprisonment in samsara (i.e. our fundamental ignorance and suffering), so that its abandonment would put us in nirvana (i.e. enlighten and liberate us).

There has been a theory very similar to Eternalism in Western philosophy, namely the “Monadology” of Gottfried Leibniz. This was of course an extremist ontological idea, due to a simplistic reading of predication as stating that the predicate is literally “contained in” the subject. That is, that whatever is predicable of anything must be “part of its nature”, and therefore inextricably intrinsic and peculiar to it – so that the world is composed of a multiplicity of eternal substances each of which is an island unto itself.

Opposite such inaccurate philosophy, the Buddhist counter-theory would indeed *prima facie* appear to be a laudable improvement. But, I submit, the Eternalist theory serves Buddhism as a convenient philosophical ‘red herring’. It is surely not the commonsense or scientific worldview (which are effectively ignored by Buddhism); and the Buddhist rebuttal constitutes another extremist position (in the opposite direction), which altogether denies the reality of any essences by allegedly reducing everything in the world to an infinite crisscross of mutual dependencies (the co-dependence or interdependence theory).

Although Buddhists would protest that their thesis is not the opposite extreme, viz. Nihilism, but a middle way between those two extremes, it is hard to see how we might reasonably not judge it as an extreme view. It is true that there are two, nay three, Buddhist positions in this context. One, attributed to the Theravada branch, of ultimately a total void (extinction in meditation); another, attributed to the

mainstream Mahayana branch, of an ultimate original ground (an underlying universal spiritual substance of sorts, albeit one piously declared ‘void’ or ‘empty’); and a third, claimed by Zen adepts, of neither this nor that, i.e. fence-sitting between the previous two positions (hence, more ‘middle way’ than them).

Of these three, the said mainstream Mahayana option would seem the least Nihilistic, in that it admits of some sort of real existence – viz. the existence of the “original ground”. Logically, however, this Monist thesis (to which I personally tend to adhere) should logically be classed as an Eternalist philosophy of sorts, since the original ground is beyond impermanence. Impermanent appearances continuously bubble forth from it, but it is everywhere and ever one and the same calm fullness. Thus, the other two Buddhist theses, which are more clearly anti-Eternalist, can reasonably be viewed as Nihilist rather than middle way.

The commonsense view (to which most of us adhere, consciously or not) is rather noncommittal on such issues. It is truly a middle way, without prejudice. It does not draw any such general conclusions offhand. It neither reduces everything to independent substances nor reduces everything to mutually dependent non-substances, but remains open to there being perhaps a bit of both these extreme scenarios present in the real world, and other options besides. At a more scientific level, this common view becomes the “laws of nature” approach – the idea that there are various degrees

of being and forms of dependencies, which (in the physical domain, at least, and possibly in the mental domain to some extent) are best expressed through quantitative formulas.

In such ordinary viewpoint, there seems to be some concrete ‘substance(s)’ in the world, but not everything is reducible to this concept. Furthermore, substantial things need not be individually permanent, but change is possible from one form to another. However, Physics does assume as one of its basic premises a law of conservation of matter and energy – i.e. that the total quantity of physical substance is constant. Moreover, that which is impermanent lasts for a while. Things that exist must exist for some time (some more, some less) – they cannot logically be so impermanent as to “exist” for no time at all.

Anyway, the concept of essence is certainly not, in our commonplace view, equated to that of substance. Essences are rarely substances, but usually structures or processes that seem to be generally and exclusively present in the phenomena at hand, and so are used to define them. Essences are usually *abstractions*, i.e. rational insights or concepts, rather than concrete percepts or objects of perception. Abstraction claims validity of insight without claiming to be literally within reality; though it depends on a Subject to occur, it in principle correctly interprets the Object. One cannot deny abstraction as such without resorting to abstractions – so such a skeptical position would be logically untenable.

In the Buddhist view, in contradistinction, the apparent or alleged essences of things are *conventional*, or even *purely nominal*, and souls are no exceptions to this rule. By “conventional” (and all the more so by “nominal”) is here meant that we, the people who believe in essences or souls, project this idea onto reality, whereas reality has in fact no such thing in it. In Buddhist epistemology, people ordinarily use their mind conventionally (or under the bad influence of words) in this manner, projecting onto reality things that are absent in it.

How (we may ask) do we know that reality is not as it appears to the ordinary mind? We know this, according to this theory, through enlightened consciousness. Thus, Buddhist epistemology, while invalidating ordinary consciousness, affirms the optimistic idea that we can transcend it and see things as they are. This can, incidentally, be compared and contrasted to Kantian epistemology, which likewise claims our phenomenal knowledge to be imperfect, but distinctively puts the perfection of ‘noumenal’ knowledge beyond our reach. While this theory of Immanuel Kant’s is inconsistent with itself, the Buddhist theory is not so in that respect.

Still, note well the difference between ordinary ‘abstractionism’ and Buddhist conventionalism or nominalism. For the Buddhists, as in Kant, our minds *invent* abstractions without any objective support; whereas in ordinary rational epistemology, abstraction is *an act of*

rational insight – i.e. it does record something objective, which is not a pure figment of the imagination.

In addition to the said epistemological explanation or rationalization of its no-soul thesis, Buddhist philosophers propose various ontological claims and arguments. According to them, all things, including apparent souls, lack essence, because they are impermanent and discontinuous. They say this can be readily observed, and that in any case it can be logically argued – as well as being evident to anyone who is enlightened.

With regard to observation, they claim (much like David Hume later) to have looked for a soul everywhere within themselves and never found one. The soul is therefore (to them) an illusion of conventionally minded people – who are deluded by their ego (bodily and mental appearances of selfhood) into believing that there is something (i.e. someone) at the center of all their experience and thought.

But we must note that this is of course not a pure observation of an absence of soul, but a generalization from a number of failures to positively observe a soul. The generalization of negation could be right, but it does not have quite the same epistemological status as a positive observation. There is nothing empirically or logically necessary about the no-soul claim. At least, not from the point of view of an unenlightened person; and it is hard to see how an enlightened person could avoid equal reliance on generalization.

Moreover, we can fault their inference and larger argument by pointing out that it is absurd to look for the soul in the phenomenal realm (i.e. with reference to perceived sensible qualities, like sights, sounds, odors, savors, tactile feelings, whether mental or physical), if the soul happens to be a non-phenomenal entity (something intuited, which has in itself no phenomenal aspects).

It is worth additionally clarifying that, though our soul is a non-material, spiritual substance at the center of a multitude of mental and physical phenomena, it is not their “essence” or defining character. Our soul is “us”, our self – the subject of our cognitions and agent of our volitions and valuations. It is an intellectual error to try and identify us with things that are only associated with us. We are not one with or part of our minds and/or bodies, but something beyond them, though in their midst, cognizing and interacting with them in various ways.

With regard to impermanence, Buddhists apparently consider that, since our soul always has an apparent beginning (our birth) and end (our death), it is necessarily illusory. In their view – reflecting the general assumption, it seems, of ancient Indian philosophy, what is temporary (or passing) is necessarily illusory; only the permanent (or eternal) is real. Moreover, in their view, nothing is eternal – by which they mean, surely, that nothing phenomenal is eternal; for they certainly believe in the eternity of enlightenment or of the underlying “nature of mind” or “ground of all being” – even

if they affirm this universal substratum to be ultimately “empty”.

But this viewpoint can be contested. To be real is to be a fact, i.e. to occur or have occurred. How long or short this fact is or was or will be is surely irrelevant to its status as a fact. An illusion is something that is or was thought to be but is not or was not. To identify reality with eternity and illusion with impermanence is to confuse two separate issues. I have never come across a convincing argument why such equations ought to be made. Surely, one can imagine eternal illusions and transient realities. Thus, we should consider that the issue of the soul’s persistence, i.e. whether the soul is eternal or as short-lived as the body and mind evidently are, has nothing to do with its reality or illusion.

The Buddhist argument against the soul also appeals to the general idea of discontinuity, i.e. the idea that everything changes all the time, and so nothing can ever be pointed to as “one and the same thing” from one moment to the next. This idea is presented as an observation – but it is clearly a mere hypothesis, an abstraction extrapolated from an observation. Given the observed fact of change, one can equally well suppose that some sort of continuity underlies pairs of moments. Since all we actually experience are the successive moments, the issue as to whether some residue of each moment is to be found in the next is open to debate. Thus, to speak of discontinuity is already to *assume* something beyond observation.

Furthermore, even given a seeming discontinuity, we cannot draw a definite conclusion that there *really* is discontinuity – let alone that this is true in all cases. Discontinuity is an *abstraction* from experience; it is not a pure object of experience. Additionally, the concept of *universal* discontinuity remains always somewhat open to doubt, because it is an inductive assumption – at best, a mere generalization. Moreover, the internal consistency of this concept is unsure, since it implies a *permanence* of discontinuity across time. That is, if we regard abstraction as necessarily implying some sort of continuity (whether of the object or of the subject), the concept of discontinuity is self-contradictory when taken to an extreme.

This insight is especially pertinent in the case of the soul, which is here both subject and object. We could not possibly claim to know for a fact that the soul is discontinuous (i.e. a succession of discrete momentary souls), because such a statement claims for the soul to the ability to *transcend* discontinuity sufficiently to see that the soul is discontinuous. That is to say, to make such a claim, the soul (as subject) must be *present in the time straddling* two or more of its alleged merely momentary instances or segments (i.e. the soul as object). This is clearly a self-contradiction. Thus, the Buddhist argument in favor of the thesis that the soul is non-existent does not survive serious logical scrutiny.

Another Buddhist claim regarding the soul is that it is subject to “dependent origination” or “conditioning” – i.e. that its

actual existence, as a unit of being, as a fact – is impossible in isolation, is only possible in relation to all other things (which are themselves similarly interdependent). However, this theory – that everything in the universe could only exist in the presence of everything else in the universe, and that a smaller universe (holding just one of those things, or some but not all of them) is inconceivable – is just a speculation; it is not proved in any way.

Moreover, we could again ask whether this theory is consistent with itself. If it is, like all sublunary things, something dependent or conditioned – and it surely is so, notably with reference to human experience and thought – how can it be claimed as a universal and eternal truth? Any claim that the relative is absolute seems paradoxical and open to doubt. There has to be something absolute to anchor the relative on. To claim everything dependent on everything else and vice versa is still to claim this big soup of interdependent things to be an independent thing. And if this in turn is not an irreducible fact, something else must be. There is no way to be an absolute relativist!

The belief that something can be “both A and not-A”, or “neither A nor not-A”, seems to be the essence of all mysticism (in the pejorative sense). The claim to make no claim is itself a claim – there is no escape from this logic. To claim that everything is illusory is to claim this as a fact – i.e. as something that is not illusory. To claim there is nothing, no person, at the core of our being might seem superficially

at first sight logically possible, i.e. not self-contradictory – until we ask just who is making the claim and to whom it is addressed. Inanimate objects are not concerned with such issues. A non-self can neither be deluded nor realize its delusion. Any occurrence of cognition, valuation or volition implies a self.

12. Buddhist historicity

Buddhism emerged in northeast India about 6th or 5th Cent. BCE. It did not, of course, emerge in a cultural vacuum. India already had a rich religious culture, based on the Vedas and Upanishads, which gave rise to other religions, notably the Hindu.

It seems to be historical fact that Buddhism was founded by a man called Siddhartha Gautama, though historians disagree as to the exact dates of his life; most of them, in India and the West, suggest he lived in 563-483 BCE, others, in Japan, suggest 448-368 BCE.³³

Whatever the case, it seems reasonable to assume that Buddhism began with this single man's teachings, and over time expanded and evolved. It does not follow, of course, that all the stories that have come down to us concerning him are

³³

According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica.

historically true, nor that all statements made in his name were indeed made or implied by him.³⁴

More significant philosophically is the issue as to whether this man's claim of "complete enlightenment and liberation" is true or not. No historian can ever answer that question. It is not inconceivable that such a metaphysical experience and event is humanly possible, but it would be hard to prove or disprove it. The one claiming such "Buddha" status can only be truly understood and justified by another person with the same privilege; and all others can only take it on faith, or refuse to do so.

It is as with any witness – the witness was there and saw and heard what he claims; but others, who were not present, have still to decide whether or not to believe his say-so. His testimony supports but does not definitively prove the hypothesis. We have to take into consideration the possibilities that he misunderstood or deluded himself, or exaggerated or lied to impress or manipulate others, or that reports concerning him were or have become distorted. These things do happen, even today; and in olden days, the boundary between fact and fiction was perhaps more tenuous still.

³⁴ The following illustrates of the inaccuracy of transmission of information by tradition: Dogen writes at one point (p. 242): "It has been twenty-two hundred years since the Buddha's parinirvana"; assuming this is not an error of translation or a typographical error, and considering this text was written in 1246 CE, Dogen was mistaken by some 500 years!

Notwithstanding the speculative presuppositions, it seems fair for us to still conventionally call this man the “Buddha” (meaning the enlightened one). Insofar as the doctrine of Buddhism depends on faith in certain metaphysical possibilities, it must be regarded as a religion. Even so, it includes some very philosophical insights and discussions, and so may also be regarded as a philosophy.

This philosophical tradition is very broad and varied, and subject to very divergent interpretations. I do not claim to know more than a small fraction of this field of study, but nevertheless feel justified in sharing my reflections concerning the little I do know. For a start, this could be viewed as a record of one man’s gradual assimilation or rejection of Buddhist ideas. But moreover, I feel impelled to comment by virtue of the original and extensive logical tools I bring to bear.

I have sometimes been criticized concerning my criticism of Nagarjuna’s philosophy, through arguments that I did not exactly represent it. But my answer is always this: though I cannot vouch that my arguments are perfectly applicable to Nagarjuna’s philosophy as it really is, I stand by my arguments with regard to their applicability to the ideas I presented under the label of ‘Nagarjuna’s philosophy’. From a philosophical point of view, my arguments are interesting and valid, even if from a

historical viewpoint some issues may be left open. In any event, historians have varying interpretations, too.

Philosophy is concerned with ideas, and the issue of who precisely proposed them and when exactly is not so important. A philosopher (X) may represent, analyze and criticize an idea, without having to be absolutely accurate as to whether his formulation of the idea is exactly identical to its original formulation by some historical person (Y). So long as we understand that it is the idea as here and now represented that is being considered and discussed, the account given is philosophically respectable. Historians may debate whether X's account corresponds exactly to Y's initial idea, and to what extent X's discussion is relevant to Y's philosophy, but this is historical debate, not philosophy.

Concerning the credibility of Buddhism, we may also ask questions from the specific point of view of Judaism (and its derivative religions: Christianity, Islam and their derivatives in turn). A crucial question would be: if the claim of Buddhism to enlightenment and liberation is true, how come such a major human breakthrough to spirituality was never predicted or mentioned in the Jewish Bible and later books? Another question would be: if the Buddha went so high, how come he did not meet or mention meeting God?

These are of course questions for those who choose to adhere to Jewish (or Christian or Moslem) beliefs, for the Buddhist

would simply regard the failure of the Judaic traditions to foresee or notice the Buddha's attainment, or the failure of the Buddha to acknowledge God, as a problem of theirs and not of his.

Personally, I prefer to keep an open mind in both directions, and emphasize the positive teachings on both sides, rather than stress conflicts between West and East. It is a historical fact that different segments of humanity have evolved spiritually in different ways – and that may well be God's will. Our evolutions are still ongoing, and we may yet all come to an agreement. We can surely learn from and enrich each other, and the current historical phase of globalization can profit us all spiritually.

13. About Buddhist idolatry

I am comforted in my conviction that Buddhism is not originally and intrinsically idolatrous³⁵ after reading some of Mu Soeng's historical comments, like the following.

³⁵ Note that my use of this epithet is not intended to disparage Buddhism as a whole or Buddhists in general. My concern over "idolatry" is of course an expression of my Jewish roots and values (starting with the first two of the Ten Commandments). I admit frankly that I find such behavior patterns silly and extraneous. Nevertheless, I also have great respect and admiration for the more essential Buddhist beliefs and practices. When I read the stories or writings of past Buddhist teachers, I am readily convinced they are great souls, deeply moral and profound in their spiritual achievements. Moreover, my opposition to idolatry does not prevent me from appreciating the artistic value of Buddhist statuary and temples, some of which (notably, Angkor) I have visited. Perhaps, then, we should say that Buddhism (like Christianity) merits respect *in spite of* the forms of idolatry (deification of people and worship directed at statues) that have become attached to it. Certainly, Jews at least should always remain vigilant and be careful not to get drawn into anything suggestive of idolatry.

For the Sthaviras, the Buddha Shakyamuni was a historical personage—a great teacher but not a divinity. The Mahayanists, however, saw the Buddha as a transcendental principle rather than a mere individual in the phenomenal world. (P. 19.)

This confirms that the deification of this flesh and blood teacher is a late event in Buddhist history – occurring a few hundred years after the fact. It should be pointed out and emphasized that such deification was logically *in contradiction* to the essential message of Siddhartha Gautama (the founder of Buddhism).

Why? Because the message of this teacher was that he, *a mere human being*, was able to transcend samsara (the domain of karma) and attain nirvana (the domain of freedom). If it turns out that this apparent man was in fact *not a man at all, but a “god”* intending or predestined to save mankind, then the practical demonstration of the possibility *for humans* of liberation from the wheel of birth and death would not have been made!

If, as later Buddhists depicted him, he was a god, then his essential existential condition was not comparable to that of a man, and it could well be argued that his achievement could not be replicated by other men. The whole point of his story is that an ordinary human being can by his own intelligence and effort, even without the supervision of an accomplished

teacher³⁶, develop understanding and overcome all suffering forever. To change that story is to miss the point.

Some, of course, would argue that, though he was not a god incarnate at birth, he became “divine” upon attaining buddhahood, and more so at the end of his life (when he entered *parinirvana*). This scenario was also, however, a later interpretation of events, motivated by devotionalism.

...the rise of devotionalism in Mahayana. ...around the time of the beginning of the common era, in north-western India, under Greek and Mediterranean influences, Buddha statues were sculpted for the first time. In early Buddhism, as in the contemporaneous Upanishad literature, we find that the idea of a personality cult was frowned upon. In ancient India the veneration of a holy person took the form of worshipping a memorial shrine (stupa) rather than a physical image. (P. 91.)

Originally, Buddhism was not a religion of devotion, but of morality and meditation. It did not consist in worship of the Buddha (as a god or later still as God), or of a multitude of Buddhas, but in following his example (as a successful spiritual explorer and teacher). Moreover, the adoration of

³⁶ See the *Dhammapada*, v. 353: “I myself found the way. Whom shall I call Teacher?” The author (i.e. the Buddha, presumably) adds: “Whom shall I teach” – suggesting this attainment is not something that can simply be taught, like mathematics or English.

statues (as a specific form of devotion) representing the Buddha and other figures in the Buddhist pantheon was, it seems, a possibly separate and still later phenomenon.

It may be, as the above quotation suggests, that idolatry was not a religious behavior pattern indigenous to India, but one imported from the West. One might have assumed idolatry to have been an older cultural habit in India (in view of its ubiquity there today), but historians have apparently³⁷ not found evidence in support of such a hypothesis. However, it remains true that in regions of Asia farther north and east, Hindu or other forms of idolatry may have preceded the arrival of Buddhism, and that Buddhism merely accommodated them.

In this regard, we must probably distinguish the geographical movements of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism, being itself relatively more idolatrous from its inception, would merge more readily with preexisting local idolatries; whereas, Theravada Buddhism, although relatively less idolatrous originally, would rather begin by tolerating the local customs it encountered, by

³⁷ According to Mu Soeng's account. Note that in my *Buddhist Illogic*, chapter 10, I assumed that the worship of statues in India antedated the advent of Buddhism. In any case, idolatry is a wide concept not limited to the worship of statues. It includes all forms of polytheistic worship, and even the idea of an incarnation of a unique God. In this sense, at least, the religious culture of India (viz. Vedism) that preceded Buddhism was certainly idolatrous.

considering them as among the human foibles that it had to deal with to gradually effect liberation.

Here, we can quote Stephen Batchelor³⁸ with regard to Tibet in the ninth century, to illustrate the movement and adaptation of Buddhism:

Padmasambhava's presentation of Buddhism through the medium of tantric deities and forces struck a very sympathetic and receptive chord within the minds of the Tibetans. The subsequent widespread popularity of tantric practice can probably be attributed to the innate spiritual disposition of the Tibetans to respond more readily to religious truths that are embodied and personified. In this way the teachings of Buddhism came alive for the Tibetans and ceased to be mere abstract ideas and doctrines. (P. 48.)

Each people or culture, at a given time in history, has its particular spiritual predispositions. These will somewhat determine what they will accept in the way of imports, and how they will interpret it, and what they will disregard or reject. This too can be illustrated with reference to Tibet. Thus, Batchelor writes:

The Tibetans seem to have been entirely unaffected by the teachings of ... the two great doctrinal traditions which flourished across the border in China. Neither were they aware of the commentarial tradition ...

38

In his Introduction.

prevalent in the Theravada schools of Sri Lanka and South-East Asia. Yet the most remarkable instance of the Tibetans' resistance to other forms of Buddhism is found in their reaction to the attempted introduction of the Ch'an (Zen) school from China during the eighth century. (P. 64.)

The above criticism of Mahayana has perhaps an exception in the case of Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism. Although the modern Zen meditation centers I have seen all had statues of the Buddha on display, the philosophy of Zen is essentially non-devotional or even anti-devotional. This can be textually confirmed, for instance by the following extract from the *Bloodstream Sermon* traditionally attributed to Bodhidharma³⁹:

But deluded people don't realize that their own mind is the buddha. They keep searching outside. They never stop invoking buddhas or worshipping buddhas... Don't indulge in such illusions... Even if a buddha or bodhisattva should suddenly appear before you, there's no need for reverence. This mind of ours is empty and contains no such form... Why worship illusions born of the mind? Those who worship don't

³⁹ The reputed Indian founder of specifically Ch'an Buddhism in China (c. 490-528 CE). Some modern scholars attribute this sermon to later monks, perhaps "of the Oxhead Zen School, which flourished in the seventh and eighths centuries", according to Red Pine, the translator, though he accepts the traditional attribution (see his Introduction).

know, and those who know don't worship. (Pp. 25, 27.)

This passage clearly reasons that attachment to religious visions, and all the more therefore to representations, is antithetical to the core Buddhist belief. In the *Breakthrough Sermon*, replying to the question as to whether “casting statues” and other such external practices apparently taught in some sutras are of any use to achieving enlightenment, the Zen master answers that these are mere “metaphors”; he explains:

The Tathagata's sublime form can't be represented by metal. Those who seek enlightenment regard their bodies as the furnace, the Dharma as the fire, wisdom as the craftsmanship, and the three sets of precepts and six paramitas as the mold. They smelt and refine the true buddha-nature within themselves and pour it into the mold formed by the rules of discipline. Acting in perfect accord with the Buddha's teaching, they naturally create a perfect likeness. (Pp. 95-96.)

Note well the phrase “within themselves”. Repeatedly, he insists on the redundancy and uselessness of any such external works and deeds; the essence of the Way is working on oneself, from the inside.

Even today, some Buddhists, at least some Zen teachers, seem to eschew idol worship. Note for instance Shunryu Suzuki's statement:

In our practice we have no... special object of worship. ... Joshu, a great Chinese Zen master, said, "A clay Buddha cannot cross water; a bronze Buddha cannot get through a furnace; a wooden Buddha cannot get through fire." (P. 75.)

14. Buddhist messianism

Mu Soeng also writes:

The notion of past Buddhas was most likely accepted even during the lifetime of Shakyamuni.... By first century C.E., ...the notion of past and future Buddhas seems to have been well established. We can only speculate what influence the concept of world savior to come (sayosant), from the Persian religion of Zoroastrianism, might have exercised on these developments. (P. 55.)

With regard to the idea of a world savior, i.e. the messianic idea, I would not agree that it was probably imported. It is intrinsic to Buddhism, in the way of a prime given, that Buddha Shakyamuni⁴⁰, by finding his own way to Realization (assuming he did), and then preaching that way to others,

⁴⁰ This name simply means “the Sage from Shakya”, referring to his place of origin.

broke the ground for all humanity and showed them a way to salvation. By definition, his achievement (if it indeed occurred) is extraordinary and of universal significance.

The story goes that he could have been satisfied with his own personal escape from *samsara*; but out of compassion (*karuna*) for other sentient beings, he chose to put off his final departure (*parinirvana*) so as to help them out first. We may therefore consider him as an unselfish person, one wishing to save others, and admit that Buddhism from its inception had ambitious soteriological motives.

This does not mean that Shakyamuni's breakthrough was necessarily unique. There is no logical reason to exclude that there may have been past Buddhas before this one or that there would be future ones after this one. On the contrary, granting that Shakyamuni's achievement was 'natural' (in a large sense, allowing for the transcending of immanent nature, i.e. of physical and mental identity), we would expect past and future Buddhas to be possible and likely.

Shakyamuni may have been the first, or there may have been others before him whose existence and whose possible teaching may not have left a historical trace. As for future Buddhas, the very fact that Shakyamuni taught implies that he considered that others could also attain buddhahood.

In this perspective, the Mahayana ideal of the bodhisattva appears like a perfectly natural development. By his own altruism, in delaying his *parinirvana* to teach, the Buddha gave the example of this practice. However, in time the

bodhisattva ideal was perhaps taken to extremes. As Mu Soeng points out:

The bodhisattva was thought to embody not only a spirit of compassion but also one of voluntary suffering. At times, the resolve of the bodhisattva was expressed in almost Christian terms. The idea of the suffering savior may have existed in some form in the Middle East before Christianity arose, but it did not appear in Buddhism until after the Christian era. The suffering bodhisattva so closely resembles the Christian conception of God in the form of Jesus who gave his life for others that we cannot dismiss the possibility that Buddhism borrowed this doctrine from Christianity, which was vigorous in Persia from the third century C.E. onward. (P. 55.)⁴¹

There is (in my opinion) little in the original teaching of Buddhism to justify this particular development. Though Shakyamuni gave the example of altruism, he did not take it to the extreme of personal sacrifice, i.e. of suffering greatly

⁴¹ The Christian trinity is another doctrine which has a very close parallel in Buddhism, viz. the *trikaya* (three bodies of the Buddha). The resemblance between “father, holy ghost and son” (mentioned in Matthew 28:19, 2 Corinthians 13:14) and “*dharmakaya*, *samboghakaya* and *nirmanakaya*” (see Mu Soeng, pp. 89-90) is striking, although some differences can no doubt be pointed to. Here again, whether there has been an influence either way, or this is a similar response of the human intellect to the same problem of unification, is a moot issue. Judaism, for its part, has no recourse to a trinitarian concept of God.

for others. This notion could even be conceived as antithetical to original Buddhism, which after all is intended as a path for removing and avoiding suffering. Its teaching was positive, intended to make people healthy and happy, and not to cause them difficulties. The Buddha remained serene all his life, according to reports.

We should perhaps here distinguish two ways of suffering for others. A person wishing to help others may accept to suffer incidentally or accidentally in this pursuit. The suffering involved is not *per se* the means to the helpful goal, but only an unfortunate side effect. For example, a war hero goes first into battle, hoping to clear the way for his friends; he knows he may get killed or wounded, but that is not his intention; on the contrary, the more unscathed he gets through, the better (for he can then carry on fighting).

More prosaically, one may carry an old lady's shopping bag to stop her suffering muscular pains. The Christian ideal is not this – but rather one of “taking up the suffering of others”. This means, not just relieving others' burdens (which cause them suffering), but experiencing their suffering in their stead. Jesus on the cross is depicted as suffering *in the place of* sinners, so they do not have to pay the price for their sins. This is a distinctive concept of altruism, which I doubt was originally intended in Buddhism.

I do not see how suffering as such can have any utility to anyone. To free someone else of suffering one must neutralize the causes of that suffering. Such intervention may

occasionally cause oneself suffering – and it is easy to appreciate the virtue, value and beauty of such ‘selfless’ acts. If one realizes the relativity and impermanence of this world, one is not afraid of such personal sacrifice. But it is not one’s suffering that relieves the person one helps, but one’s effective action. The bodhisattva’s role is not to suffer, but to be effective⁴².

⁴² Suffering when helping others is not necessarily proof of unusual goodness; it is often just a sign of incompetence. Sometimes risks are taken and may result in personal pain, damage or destruction, but this is usually due to lack of skill. Tragedy is usually indicative of some weakness and failure.

15. Assimilating Buddhism

The migration of Buddhism to the West is bound to produce something new in many respects. Shunryu Suzuki⁴³ admitted as much when he said to his students: “Here in America we cannot define Zen Buddhists the same way we do in Japan.... You are on your way to discovering some appropriate way of life.”

This would not be a phenomenon particular to Buddhism, but concerns any religion or cultural product. We can observe for example the movement of Christianity into Africa, South America and Asia. In each case, there are noticeable differences from the European original. And indeed, even among Europeans (and North Americans), Christianity has a variety of expressions. The same applies to Buddhism in Asia, and can be expected to apply to Buddhism in North America and Europe.

⁴³

P. 133.

How did Buddhism migrate westward? First, Europeans came in contact with Buddhism (and other Oriental religions) in Asia. Some there showed their curiosity and willingness to learn, and eventually brought back some oral teachings, practices and texts to Europe. They gave lectures, and wrote articles and books, passing on Buddhist ideas. Documents were translated, as conscientiously as possible, both by Westerners and Orientals. Eventually, some Orientals came to Europe and North America to teach in person.

Translation is impossible without some interpretation. Every teacher carries a large part of tradition, but also a small part of personal interpretation. Necessarily, when any religion or cultural product arrives at a new region or country, it has to mix somewhat with the local culture, resulting in a new variation on the theme⁴⁴. However purist the recipients try to be, their vision cannot help but be colored to some extent by their cultural antecedents. This is true of peoples – and it is true of individuals.

Some individuals pick and choose what pleases them in the import, while others try to go all the way and become orthodox. But whatever external appearances suggest, what goes on inside each individual is a commonplace process of assimilation of new ideas. Each individual has to digest the new outlook in accord with his or her personal psychological and intellectual parameters. In some cases, some rejection

⁴⁴ An interesting example, because of its overt and extreme eclecticism, is the Cao Dai religion in Vietnam.

sooner or later occurs; in some cases, the individual finds his or her needs largely satisfied.

My own writing on Buddhism can accordingly be regarded as an account of my personal reactions, as a Western and Jewish philosopher, and especially as a logician, to this incoming wave of ideas, at a particular place and time. I am not standing aloof on some pedestal. I make no claim to superiority or omniscience, but simply share my thoughts – frankly evaluating, criticizing, praising, rejecting, adapting, and conflating as seems appropriate. Not liking to be fooled or intimidated, I try not to take anything for granted; but I keep an open mind and a humble willingness to learn.

I have certainly over time learnt a lot, and often been pleasantly surprised and affected. I am always grateful for any knowledge, wisdom or virtue transmitted to me. Certainly, Buddhism – and the Orient in general – has a lot to teach us. I do not however believe it is omniscient and immune to feedback and correction. I do believe the philosophical and spiritual confluence of East and West can be of benefit to both sides; it is not a one-way street, either way. With maturity, we can jointly evolve some common understanding and direction.

Addenda (2009)

1. Since writing *More Meditations*, I have been mentally using the following **awareness checklist** in my meditations:

- BODY (verify/correct posture; and intensify body awareness, including physical sensations and emotional feelings).
- BREATH (in the nostrils and in the *hara*).
- THOUGHTS (all mental phenomena included, watch them but also try to dampen them and eventually stop them).
- SURROUNDS (the visual and auditory fields, touch sensations and smells).
- THE FACT OF CONSCIOUSNESS (wonder at it).
- THE ONE WHO IS CONSCIOUS (one's self – a non-phenomenal object of intuition).

I may go through this checklist rapidly at intervals, while using other techniques – or I may use it as my central meditation technique. This may be done by focusing on each item listed in turn – for the time of one breath, or three or ten breaths or more. At the end of the series, try to merge all the forms of awareness together, into one total awareness. Repeat the process a number of times, till its beneficial effect – viz. an increased degree of consciousness – is clearly felt.

These items correspond, of course, to the various aspects of the ordinary “mind” (or rather: "psyche"), including phenomenal experiences (physical or mental) and non-phenomenal (intuitive) ones, and conceptual derivatives of all these. It should be obvious that when I refer here to the “self”, I mean the real self (which is entirely non-phenomenal, i.e. purely spiritual), not the illusory self or “ego” (which is largely phenomenal, though usually also involves some degree of consciousness of the underlying real self).

2. In meditation we want to focus on the here and now, remember. One valuable technique is to arouse **intense alertness**, like a hunter intent on spotting his prey or like a hunted animal. A useful way to motivate such alertness is to think of Zen stories where the meditator obtained sudden enlightenment (*satori*) when some unexpected event occurred, like some branch snapping. Thus, become watchful of all individual sights, sounds, or other sensations, with the

thought that any one of them might bring you the hoped for flash of insight. In such case, no phenomenon is routine, but each deserves your full attention.

This consciousness involves both open-mindedness and concentration, i.e. both a wide field of attention and a pinpoint awareness of eventual events in it. An interesting aspect of it is that the watcher becomes 'transparent', in that he forgets himself and is essentially unaffected by what occurs around him (objectively or subjectively, i.e. in the physical or mental surrounds), having resolved not to interfere in the world process for a while. He is open to all occurrences – not as one asleep, but as one who is extremely awake (in a non-nervous, contemplative way). This self-forgetfulness is valuable in that it effaces the superficial false self, which is ordinarily so weighty a part of our experience. The underlying true self is of course still in fact present, but without overt self-consciousness.

Meditation is not something mechanical. There is no technique, no formula that can be applied unthinkingly, that will result in enlightenment. If there were, we would all be enlightened by now. The essence of meditation is – always remember – awareness, presence of mind (i.e. being oneself consciously present). Techniques can only help us get into a position facilitating such presence of mind, but sooner or later that living effort is essential. Once you know this, you go straight to it with greater ease. Awareness also means non-attachment – i.e. not getting carried away by thoughts or

emotions that may arise. A light touch towards experience is necessary to remain free of its attractions, repulsions, compulsions and obstructions.

3. When focusing on phenomena, keep in mind that they are not the ultimate goal of meditation. Our field of ordinary experience is of necessity limited. We see and hear our immediate surrounds and thoughts, whereas the world out there and within is huge. Meditation aims at **the expansion of consciousness** – to infinity, if possible, i.e. beyond all limitations. We aim to look past the immediate experience – though not to its exclusion, i.e. while including it.

The realm of samsara is that of material and mental phenomena and the realm of nirvana is the transcendence of such phenomena. Thus, we need through meditation to realize that consciousness of the phenomenal is limiting – and learn to exist with a broader, hopefully boundless outlook. One can continue to walk through the phenomenal world and simultaneously be aware that this is only a small space within infinity. The value of this outlook is that one does not take the phenomenal world too seriously, not to get entangled in it – it then appears as an illusory narrowing of consciousness, beyond which one is able to look at all times.

4. We go through life with different and varying **degrees of consciousness**. Different people have different breadth and

depth of consciousness – and each one of us at different times of one’s life likewise has changing degrees of consciousness. When one is a baby, one’s “world” may be limited to the taste of mother’s milk, the feel of her kisses and caresses, and so on. As a child, we may be entirely focused on one’s family, one’s best friend, one’s toys, one’s school teacher, etc. Later on, as a teenager, one’s attention may be centered on one’s girlfriend, on one’s studies, and so forth. After that, one’s wife and kids, one’s job, one’s car and home, etc. In each phase of life, one’s “world” is necessarily limited to a number of things. We may of course have more theoretical interests, like science or history or philosophy or religion, but most people have this in relatively limited quantities.

Our degree of consciousness usually increases with time, but sometimes it may decrease. If one takes up drugs or some other vice, one may actually become a less conscious person. So there are ups and downs, it is not all smooth sailing. There is no inevitability of development or evolution. Looking back on one’s life, one can easily see this. If one learns from one’s mistakes and proceeds in a purposeful manner, one can gradually direct one’s life so that it is a spiritually upward mobile process. One can put one’s life in *a broader context* that what is immediately perceived and desired by one’s instincts or under the influence of various social forces. This is expansion of consciousness.

5. Basically, in meditation our goal is to become conscious of **the reality underlying** all phenomena – i.e. the “ground of being” or the “nature of mind” (in Buddhist parlance) or the “presence of God” (in a more Judaic perspective). Thus, when we focus on some physical and/or mental object(s), our interest in it/them is ultimately nil – we are in fact trying to get beyond these phenomenal fields, to look through them as it were. But to do so, we need to first focus on the here and now, and stop being distracted by passing thoughts and emotions.

Realization means getting in contact with reality. In principle, realization is possible at any moment – and indeed, some masters suggest that we are repeatedly throughout our meditations, our days, our life and even our death, at least momentarily getting such insight, but we are unable to notice it, or if we do notice it unable to stay with it⁴⁵. It usually takes a lot of meditation practice to get to the stages where we are able to notice it and stay with it. However, knowing that realization is in fact so near can be very helpful – motivating us and increasing our degree of awareness.

The motive behind our meditation is, by the way, very important to its success. If we meditate out of unhappiness, i.e. because our fondest earthly desires are repeatedly frustrated, hoping that this activity will give us success in

⁴⁵ See for instance: Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994), chapter 21.

life, we cannot expect to get very high. We must rather realize that existence within the space of 'samsara' is inherently one of suffering, i.e. that the very fact of having a particular form and individual life is the source of suffering, and that only existence in 'nirvana' can liberate us from such constitutional suffering. These are two very different attitudes, note well. The one is still egoistically inclined; the other is indicative of a considerable spiritual elevation already. The one pursues happiness; the other is beyond such petty concerns: it is an expression of wisdom.

6. A very good formula for meditation, I have found, is to imagine oneself already enlightened/liberated. Start your meditation by saying: **the Buddha that I am within** is now going to sit down and do what Buddhas like to do, i.e. sit still and silent, fully aware, enjoying the here and now, devoid of reminiscences, anticipations, worries, plans, or any such mortal concerns. Amazingly, this approach very often works, i.e. it helps one transcend one's usual concerns and thoughts, and to concentrate on one's meditation object more easily and for a longer time.

7. *Prajna vs. Dhyana*. Rereading D. T. Suzuki's *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, I am struck at how different his conception of Zen Buddhism is. I must have noticed that during previous

readings, but this time round it seems more personally significant. Due to a background in yoga meditation, I have personally inclined to Soto Zen, the more meditative branch of Zen, which teaches that if we sit in meditation, with the right posture and techniques, and with the right attitudes, we will naturally eventually break through to full enlightenment.

But D. T. Suzuki denies or doubts this result. He has more faith in Rinzai Zen, which uses *koans*. He considers the Soto way too passive, lacking in the necessary ‘spirit of inquiry’. In his view, apparently, meditation (*dyana*) may bring about inner tranquility and even many deep insights, which are valuable preparations, but it cannot take us through the final gate to true enlightenment. For this decisive victory (*bodhi* or *satori*), a sharper sword is necessary, that of wisdom (*prajna*). The latter is made possible through full-time intense concentration on a koan under the guidance of an accredited master. This is the more active Rinzai way. (Strictly speaking, I would call this a meditation, albeit one of another sort than that of the Soto sect.)

Philip Kapleau’s description of his difficult journey in *The Three Pillars of Zen* (1965) comes to mind here as a modern example. Personally, all my life I have considered having a guru as unnecessary, arguing that if the Buddha managed to find his way to enlightenment alone, without transmission from a teacher, then in principle other people could too. Now, rereading D. T. Suzuki, I’m wondering if such individualism

has been wise. The trouble with relying on a teacher, especially nowadays, is how to know if he is genuine?

8. **Subject and Object.** Pursuing D. T. Suzuki's thought further, I re-read his *The Zen Doctrine of No-Mind*, and found it inspiring in the same direction. He often stresses here the non-separation of subject and object, as for instance on p. 133:

The state of no-mind-ness refers to the time prior to the separation of mind and world, when there is yet no mind standing against an external world and receiving its impressions through the various sense-channels. Not only a mind but a world has yet to come into existence.

It occurred to me, reading that page, that this doctrine can be expressed in phenomenological terms. The phenomenological stance consists in just experiencing, i.e. in taking appearance as such, before any evaluations or theories concerning it are attempted – i.e. before it is classed as reality or illusion, matter or mind, or whatever. We could well say, as does Zen, that the subject-object dichotomy also occurs after this primary phenomenological experience – i.e. that it too is a rational rather than experiential belief.

Our ordinary response to experience (whether inner or outer seeming) is to immediately say “I am experiencing these appearances” – whence the Subject of experience seems to us

inevitably implied by the very fact of appearance. Thus given a subject experiencing it, the content of experience becomes an Object. And since subject and object are distinct, a relation between them, which we call Consciousness, has to be assumed. Zen tells us that we can (and should) merely experience appearance as such, without bringing a self into the picture as the one experiencing.

Even if we must, to construct a coherent and credible epistemology, admit that we each routinely experience our self and its functions (cognition, volition and valuation) directly through intuition, we can still make this consistent with the said Zen insight by including all such intuitions of self, consciousness, will and value as elements *within* the field of appearance. They should not be regarded as standing outside the totality of experience looking in, but as parts of it. In that case, the interposition of a subject experiencing, the consequent objectification of the content of experience, and thirdly the assumption of an intermediary of consciousness to link these two together, can reasonably be avoided.

Thus, the phenomenological stance, properly understood, is not only prior to the reality-illusion distinction, or to the matter-mind distinction, but even to the subject-object distinction. The latter is rational construction, a hypothesis, a supposition of reason with a view to explain things, and not as we ordinarily think of it a primary experience, not a brute incontrovertible fact. To momentarily experience the field of appearance in such neutral fashion ordinarily requires an

effort, but it is not too difficult. We stick to appearance as such (including any sense of self and consciousness we might have as part of it), and *abstain* from ratiocination as to whether someone is experiencing this appearance and through what medium that is made possible.

Of course, such momentary effort of purely phenomenological experience is very far from the Zen *satori*, which is supposed to be a permanent change in our way of being, experiencing and thinking. The latter cannot be obtained by a mere effort of will, but requires some sort of complex exercise, which is presumably what the koan meditation consists in. But we can still convincingly philosophically assimilate the Zen idea of non-separation between subject, consciousness and object, as here done.

Supplements

A. From *Phenomenology*, appendix 1

Using Meditation

In the present essay⁴⁶, my purpose is to introduce the reader to what is meant by ‘meditation’ and how the practice of such introspection affects one’s philosophical positions. I illustrate below how phenomenological insights may be generated by means of observations and reflections during or after meditation. The conversations below are not intended as lessons in meditation. They were not made in a single sitting, but over many sessions⁴⁷. Of course, the result of my own

46 These reflections were written in 1998, and recently edited a bit for this publication.

47 For the record, my own first practice of meditation was in 1979, *zazen* with a Japanese monk known as Roshi who had a center on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. I remember once so exasperating this gentle teacher with my fidgeting during a sitting

meditations is not merely what is written below, but the whole of the present book. Many of the issues treated in it were really raised, clarified and resolved by such meditations.

Meditation is to a great many people something unknown or that smacks of mysticism. But, as the sample discourse below demonstrates, what goes on during meditation – in this case, the technique of ‘**breath-awareness**’ – is very down to earth and accessible to all. One is not turned into a zombie, but remains quite conscious and even active. Meditation for philosophical purposes obviously involves curiosity, asking questions, seeking answers. Notice the kind of detail one looks out for, and the kind of information one can draw from it. An effort is required, but the emphasis is on observation and memory, rather than on conversation (which can be done later).

I sometimes find it hard at first to get focused on the breath. So to try and generate and hold my attention, I may ask myself what my purpose and belief in doing it might be. But a mercantile attitude is counterproductive. One may think, to begin with, “I want to now meditate on my breathing,” so as to set

that he lost his cool and shouted at me: “DON'TA MOVE!!!” Over the next few years, I was taught some excellent yoga meditation techniques, including the lotus pose, *pratyahara* (accepting pain and other disturbances), inner silence and breath awareness, but all told practiced little. It is only in the last few years that my interest has intensified, and I practice a sort of Zen meditation daily. I cannot honestly claim to be very advanced!

oneself on course and avoid mental dispersion, but one should not hang on to this thought thereafter.

In general, meditation teachers recommend that we avoid using meditation as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. We are advised to go ‘above’ a mere pursuit of psychic rest, calm, serenity (which is what I often seem content with nowadays), or as here of philosophical knowledge (which can get nervous and verbose), or even of the greater ambitions of ‘illumination’ (the promise of oriental traditions that meditation leads to a radical review of reality).

This is also true with reference to a particular object of meditation, such as the breath. If I view breath-awareness merely as a technique (akin to a meaningless *mantra* or *mandala*) that will hopefully propel me into concentration and *samadhi*, then my interest in the breath itself is artificial. I therefore try to think of the breath as something special, on a biological and possibly on a metaphysical level (yogis regard it as in itself revealing as to the ‘nature of reality’).

The secret of success in breath-awareness meditation is to *enjoy* it. This is not meant in the sense of taking pleasure in it, but in the sense of having aroused one’s interest in it. Then one is able to patiently watch one’s breath *in all its details*, and persevere in this without especial effort for more than a brief while.

Breath-awareness is primarily a *tactile* meditation, in that I feel my body parts moving or the impact of air in different parts of my nostrils. Of course, one may experience other sensations, such as smells or sounds coming from the environment, or be subject to all sorts of imaginations and thoughts, but as one's concentration on the breath increases all these tend to fall away. Also, the end result of breath-awareness is more mental than physical.

There is, at first or sometimes, an allied sound component, in that I *hear* the sound of air passing through my nose; but as my state-of-mind gets to be calmer, my breath gets to be less and less noisy, till I cannot rely on its sound at all to remain aware of it, but must concentrate on the touch and motion aspects purely.

An error in such meditation is to accompany each in-breath or out-breath with an *internal sound* (i.e. a sound in the head, a mental sound). It is *as if* the will needs to 'play a tune' or 'sing a song' for the breath to happen. This is evidence that you are not observing natural breath, but are interfering with your will, and you do so in such case by mimicking the sound of breath, as a means of producing breath.

I currently meditate with my eyes closed, to limit sensory inputs and get more inward. But if I consider the experience with eyes open, certain visual factors must be added to the above. Primarily, I *see* the movement of my body with the breath (rise and fall of my chest).

Also, I *visualize* the breath going in and out of my nose⁴⁸ and/or my abdomen. Such mental seeing or imaging is perhaps less strong with eyes open than with eyes closed. But in any case it constitutes the equivalent in the realm of the visual, to the inner sound mentioned above. This too is an error of meditation, in that the will is interfering with the phenomenon, artificially adding things to it.

However, upon reflection, I must temper the above remarks on errors of meditation.

First, to say that such internally generated sounds and sights can themselves be taken as *objects of meditation*. If one can stop them dead by willpower, so well and good: the meditation is made easier by being limited to natural objects. Often this is not feasible, and one must let the mind gradually calm down: in such case, creations of the will are to be accepted as a kind of natural object among others, and observed without being perturbed, without ‘fighting’ them.

Secondly, it must be noted that such inner auditory and visual appearances may not-be the work of a perverse will. They may simply be a biological necessity, having to do with the *correlation between sense-modalities*. To the tactile sensations of breathing, in the absence of corresponding

48 It is worth recording that there are at least two perspectives for visualizing breath travel in the nostrils. The rougher way consists in ‘seeing’ the breath from the point of view of an observer placed slightly *on the side*. As my meditation progresses, I am instead ‘looking’ *down the tubes* of my nose, as if I am placed at their confluence (the “third eye” location?).

physical sounds one needs mental sound substitutes, and in the absence of corresponding physical sights one needs mental image substitutes. Such equivalences may be a natural product, a sort of ongoing 'dictionary' translating experiences in the one sense-modality into experiences in the other.

But I must add that in my experience this parallelism evaporates after awhile (in some cases it is absent from the start, in some cases it comes and goes); so it cannot be an absolute need, but rather simply a tendency; i.e. we must admit that pure tactile experiences are possible, without visual-auditory accompaniments whether physical or mental.

Also, the impression that the will is involved is often, though admittedly not always, quite marked; so we must not generalize either way, i.e. mental events are sometimes willed and sometimes not.

Third, it should be noted that some yogic meditations involve visualization or auditory imagination⁴⁹ as positive *techniques*, aids to meditation. Some such techniques may be inventions of charlatans, but I can claim personal experience of effective methods (e.g. in *ajapa jap*⁵⁰, imagining 'psychic' breath

49 I would like to propose the term "auditorization" for imagination of sounds (just as "visualization" is used for imagination of sights).

⁵⁰ I am referring here to Dynamic Meditation (and more advanced Kriya Yoga techniques) as taught in the Scandinavian Yoga and Meditation School by Swami Janakananda Saraswati and his disciples Swami Nityabodhananda (my first wife, Nina) and Hari Prem. For information, I am just an amateur occasional

going from the *muladhara* energy center to that of *agya* and back, and sounding *so* and *hum* as it does so). It follows that interference of the will cannot be regarded as automatically faulty, but may be used constructively.

In this context we must note that at least some Buddhists seem to regard the willed/mental and natural/external as ultimately one and the same. Their difference is an illusion; everything is ultimately mental or everything is ultimately physical, the distinction becomes meaningless. This may be an experience at deeper intensities of meditation or it may be a theory that seemed fitting to certain metaphysicians. In any case, it calls upon us to temper our reaction to the interference of will in meditation.

When I sit in meditation, I find it is best to ‘gradually become aware of the breath’ (as my teachers have taught me). For if I turn my attention to my breathing too suddenly, I produce a stir in it, it loses its natural regularity somewhat and becomes uneven. It is as if, almost inevitably, when we call upon our cognitive power, we awaken uncalled-for volitions. I infer that turning one’s attention is a very fine act of volition; if done heavy-handedly, the volition is too strong and has an impact on the object⁵¹. That is a defeat of the starting intention, to concentrate on the breath.

practitioner of these techniques, having in the past attended a few courses with those teachers.

51 It is a bit like the problem raised by Heisenberg with reference to physical observations.

We must therefore learn, by trial and error, to be more delicate, and will just enough for pure cognition and not so much as to affect its object. The modification of the object may consist in addition or suppression or a combination of both (alteration). The infusion of imaginary sounds or sights are examples. A more extreme example is *thought* about the breath, which may totally erase all perceptual awareness of the breath and carry us into some long discourse involving verbal and dream elements, which may after awhile have nothing to do with the original object of meditation (our breathing here and now).

This brings us into the complexities of conflict between thought and meditation. Ideally, meditation is free of the interference of thought; it is empty-minded, serene observation. In practice, one has often to contend with all sorts of mental disturbances, and the trick then is to somehow get into a position of observer of these ongoing thoughts. Perhaps the way into the observer's role is not so much to place oneself *above*, but to reserve a little place (a modest fraction of self) *adjacent* to the turbulent events. A commanding position is not easy to get into; all we need is to gain a foothold, to obtain a small observation platform. One should not fight the thinking or hope to smother the thoughts, but accept them and try only to at the same time be accepted by them as a curious spectator. After a while, thought may fade away, as if shy to be seen.

The above needs some further clarifications. The interference of will occurs especially when I try using the breath-counting technique proposed by certain Buddhists. This technique is useful, to force your attention on the breath immediately, after which you can hold it there more easily. It happens that such counting becomes divorced from the awareness of breath, but that is not the main problem. Rather, the disadvantage of such counting is that one usually (with very rare exception) gets involved in control of the breath.

- a) To make the breath *more noticeable*, one intensifies it or exaggerates it.
- b) There is also a tendency to *lengthen* one's breath, so as to make it healthier and calmer.
- c) To fit it into one's counting, one tries to make it *more regular*, i.e. to make each breath as a whole equal in length to the preceding (even if the in and out breaths are of unequal lengths).
- d) These distortions in tactile mode are exacerbated by inner sounds and sights that parallel the willed breath, helping to form it and direct it.

One must also avoid opposite reactions to these distortions, like trying to make one's breath more natural by making it *uneven*! The goal is always to observe the breath as it is, in as much detail as possible. If the breath is unnoticeable, that *absence* is good enough to observe.

For these reasons, I have personally stopped using the breath-counting method (though I am of course free to use it occasionally if I feel like it⁵²). I find it wiser to just let my mind calm down by itself, and then gradually become aware of my breath. This does not always work, it depends on my energetic state (how rested and well-fed I am, and so forth); but this dependence exists with the other method too. It seems illogical to me to disturb my mind in an attempt to calm it; it is like trying to stop turbulences in water or air by waving your arms about. Though sometimes, admittedly, jogging a bit improves one's walking.

What ultimately makes breath noticeable and natural is the increased concentration on it one eventually acquires. At first, one is 'distant' from one's breath; later, with skill, one is right there 'in the midst' of it. The sense of 'physical' distance between the observer and the observed is an expression of *mental* distance from one's meditation. As one's concentration on the breath increases, one feels oneself (the observer) to be placed in the nose or in the chest or solar plexus, where the breath (the observed) is being watched.

Watching carefully, one notices the differences between incoming and outgoing breaths. In my case (other people may differ), my in-breath seems usually somewhat rougher, louder and shorter than the out-breath. The former is more physical;

52 There may well be times when we are simply unable to calm our thoughts without use of such a technique. Just because I personally at this time find it more intrusive than helpful does not allow me to discard it for all times.

the latter is more mental. Furthermore, one should note the differences in air intake or outflow between the two nostrils. In my case, these are partly due to a broken nose; but yoga teaches us that the use of our nostrils vary with the time of day, for instance.

Note well the above remarks are not intended as a guide to meditation. My own favorite guide is: Shunryu Suzuki's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (NY and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1973).

B. From *Phenomenology*, appendix 2

Feelings of Emptiness

There is another sense of the term “emptiness” to consider, one not unrelated to the senses previously discussed. We all have some experience of *emotional* emptiness.

One of the most interesting and impressive contributions to psychology by Buddhism, in my view, is its emphasis on the *vague enervations* we commonly feel, such as discomfort, restlessness or doubt, as important motives of human action. Something seems to be wanting, missing, urging us to do something about it.

These negative emotions, which I label feelings of emptiness, are a cause or expression of *samsaric* states of mind. This pejorative sense of “emptiness” is not to be confused with the contrary “emptiness” identified with *nirvana*. However, they may be related, in that the emotions in question may be essentially a sort of vertigo upon glimpsing the void.⁵³

Most people often feel this “hole” inside themselves, an unpleasant inner vacuity or hunger, and pass much of their time desperately trying to shake it off, frantically looking for palliatives. At worst, they may feel like “a non-entity”, devoid of personal identity. Different people (or a person at different times) may respond to this lack of identity, or moments of boredom, impatience, dissatisfaction or uncertainty, in different ways. (Other factors come into play, which determine just which way.)

Many look for useless distractions, calling it “killing time”; others indulge in self-destructive activities. Some get the munchies; others smoke cigarettes, drink liquor or take drugs. Some watch TV; others talk a lot and say nothing; others still, prefer shopping

53 These emotions are classified as forms of “suffering” (*dukkha*) and “delusion” (*moha*). According to Buddhist commentators, instead of floating with natural confidence on the “original ground” of consciousness as it appears, a sort panic occurs giving rise to efforts to establish more concrete foundations. To achieve this end, we resort to sensory, sensual, sentimental or even sensational pursuits.

or shoplifting. Some get angry, and pick a quarrel with their spouse or neighbors, just to have something to do, something to rant and rave about; others get into political violence or start a war. Some get melancholic, and complain of loneliness or unhappiness; others speak of failure, depression or anxiety. Some masturbate; others have sex with everyone; others rape someone. Some start worrying about their physical health; others go to a psychiatrist. Some become sports fanatics; others get entangled in consuming psychological, philosophical, spiritual or religious pursuits. Some become workaholics; others sleep all day or try to sink into oblivion somehow. And so on.

As this partial and disorderly catalogue shows, everything we consider stupidity or sin, all the ills of our psyche and society, or most or many, could be attributed to this vague, often “subconsciously” experienced, negative emotion of emptiness and our urge to “cure” it however we can. We stir up desires, antipathies or anxieties, compulsions, obsessions or depression, in a bid to comprehend and smother this suffering of felt emptiness. We furnish our time with thoughts like: “I think I am falling in love” or “this guy really bugs me” or “what am I going to do about this or that?” or “I have to do (or not to do) so and so”. It is all indeed “much ado about nothing”.

If we generalize from many such momentary feelings, we may come to the conclusion that “life has no meaning”. That, to quote William Shakespeare:

*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.*

Macbeth (act V, scene 5).

Of course, we can and often do also react more positively, and give our life more constructive meaning. I believe this becomes possible *once we are able to recognize this internal vacuum when we feel it*, and make sure we do not react to it in any of the negative ways we unconsciously tend to react. Once we understand that this feeling of emptiness cannot be overcome by such foolish means, we can begin to look for ways to enjoy life, through personal growth, healthy activities, helping others, learning, creativity, productiveness, and so forth.

Regular meditation is a good remedy. Sitting quietly for long periods daily makes it easier to become and remain aware of emotional emptiness when it appears. Putting such recurring

bad feelings into perspective gradually frees us from them. They just seem fleeting, weak and irrelevant. Life then becomes a celebration of time: we profit from the little time we have in it to make something nice out of it.

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⁵⁴ First published by author in Vancouver, B.C., 1990.

⁵⁵ First published by author in Geneva, 1995.

⁵⁶ First published by author in Geneva, 2003.

⁵⁷ First published by author in Geneva, 1999. The first edition comprised only Phase I (Macroanalysis), whereas this edition also includes Phase II (Microanalysis).

⁵⁸ First published by author in Geneva, earlier 2005.

⁵⁹ First published by author in Geneva, earlier 2008.

