

MEDITATION IN WESTERN MYSTICISM

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MANY YEARS AGO, when I was preparing for a thirty day retreat, The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius, I was told that the word 'meditation' comes from the Latin '*me ditare*', speaking to myself. It meant an inner monologue. For example, it might mean interrogating oneself about one's conduct. That is one meaning, but more often it just means thinking. One may be meditating about a parable of Jesus, attempting to define the point of it.

Today, thousands of Australians attend meditation classes every week, but they are not being coached in Ignatian meditation or silent thinking. They are doing yoga. The aim is physical and mental relaxation. To this end, they do physical and mental exercises. The latter involves a gradual process of mind emptying until the empty mind contemplates itself. This results in a feeling of peace.

There are two routes to meditation in this sense in the Christian spiritual tradition. In monasteries and other religious houses it is customary to keep the Grand Silence, that is no speaking, from about 5.00 pm till after breakfast. Some generous people went a step further. Why not keep an inner silence to correspond with the external silence? This question was asked by a twelfth century Cistercian, Guerric of Igny, who had been a monk of St Bernard's at Clairvaux. Guerric did not know it, but he was practicing yoga meditation. If we do that, he wrote, we may find the all powerful Word flowing into us from the Father's Throne.

Another route to yogic meditation in the Christian tradition, more characteristic of Eastern than Western Christianity, is the constant inward repetition of the Jesus prayer. This was originally repetition of the word 'Jesus', and was later lengthened to 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.' In the yoga tradi-

tion, such inward repetition is called a mantra, and is used as a mind emptying device.

The argument of this essay is that the western mystical tradition has a meditation component arrived at by following practitioners who had written about it. By 'meditation' is meant the elimination of mental states, followed by introversion. And that is yoga. It involves primarily stilling the thought stream. The great Hindu writer, S.N Dasgupta, expands usefully: 'yoga concentration ... aims solely to stop the movement of the mind and to prevent its natural tendency towards comparison, classification, association, assimilation and the like.'¹ As thousands of people are now reminded every week in yoga classes, the point of meditation is to still the monkey mind.

If the yoga practitioner persists, something else may happen:

'[he] steadily proceeds towards that ultimate stage in which his mind will be disintegrated and his self will shine forth in its own light and he himself will be absolutely free in bondless, companionless, loneliness of self illumination.'²

'His mind will be disintegrated.' Can Dasgupta, the author of a famous five volume history of Indian philosophy, really mean that? What does he mean? He means that the discursive, thinking mind will be disintegrated. However, he doesn't mean that it's destroyed forever. He means that continual practice at meditation enables the practitioner to lay it aside temporarily, which may permit something else to come to light. On the next page:

...as a result of the gradual weakening of the constitution of the mind, the latter ceases to live and work and is dissociated forever from spirit or the self. It is then that the spirit shows forth in its own lonely splendor...³

And the spirit is revealed as having splendor. It has a 'self- shining which is unique.' And

that is enlightenment.

Zen Buddhism is in fundamental agreement. Thus a Zen master, Rosen Takashina in 1954, advises us to be without thoughts. That is the secret of meditation:

It means to cut off at the root and source, all our discriminating fancies. If we really cut them off at the root, then of itself the freedom of thought will come, which means that our own true nature appears, and this is called enlightenment... the radiance of the Buddha heart breaks forth from ourselves. We come to know that the majesty of Buddha is our own majesty also.⁴

How meditation got into the western mystical tradition is a curious story. The key figure is the philosopher Plotinus [205-270 A.D.], a Greek speaking Egyptian who taught the Roman elite. He was interested in Indian thought, so he decided to go to India to find out more about it. To that end, he joined the military expedition of the emperor Gordianus against the Persians, but it was defeated in what is now Iraq, and Plotinus returned, with great difficulty, to Rome.

Recognizably Indian practices, especially deliberate mind emptying, figure importantly in his philosophy. In his great work, *The Enneads*, he advises his reader to 'sever the agent [the self] from the instrument, the body', which it does by eliminating 'the desires that come by its too intimate commerce with the body, emancipated from all the passions, purged of all that embodiment has thrust upon it, withdrawn, a solitary, to itself again.'⁵

When you are 'self gathered in the purity of your own being,' you may notice a light not of a spatial nature:

When you find yourself wholly true to your essential nature, wholly that only veritable Light which is not measured by space, not narrowed to any circumscribed form nor again diffused as a thing void of term, but ever unmeasurable as something greater than all measure and more than all quantity...⁶

And there it is, all the way back to Hinduism. Plotinus was a 'pagan' *i.e.*, he was not a Christian. His school was read by another pagan, Augustine of Hippo, who was interested



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in becoming a Christian, but was impeded by two intellectual difficulties, one of which was that he could form no idea of a spiritual, as opposed to a material, object. Their books solved that problem for him:

These books served to remind me to return to my own self...I entered the depths of my soul [and]...and saw the light that never changes casting its rays ...over my mind. It was not the common light of day that is seen by the eye of every living thing of flesh and blood, nor was it some more spacious light of the same sort, as if the light of day were to shine far, far brighter than it does and fill all space with its brilliance. What I saw was something quite different from any light we know on earth.⁷

As St. Augustine was by far the most influential of the Fathers of the Western Church, and as *The Confessions* are among the most accessible of his books, this passage ensured that meditation was transmitted to the western mystical tradition.

And it keeps on turning up. Thus in England, St Edmund Rich [1180-1240], an Archbishop of Canterbury, is instructing the soul on the third step of contemplation which is to strive to see two things 'its Creator and His own nature':

But the soul can never attain to this until it has learned to subdue every image, corporeal, earthly and celestial, to reject whatever may come to it through sight or sound or hearing or touch or taste or any other bodily sensation, and to tread it down, so that the soul may see what it itself is outside of its body.⁸

Plotinus lives in mediaeval England! And there are traces of him in Eckhart. In the twentieth century, Meister Eckhart [1260-1329], known to his contemporaries as 'the man from

whom God hid nothing', attracted two studies comparing him to eastern mystics: Rudolph Otto's *Mysticism East and West*, and Suzuki's *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist*. Otto points to a position shared by Eckhart and the Indian mystic Sankara:

Thus withdrawn inwards, free from inclinations and attachments, stripped of all sense impressions and thoughts...the atman [inner self] shines forth in its own light as pure consciousness.⁹

When writing about Plotinus and Eckhart, it is customary to mention that they were neo-Platonists, as indeed they were. Both adopt the neo-Platonic metaphysical scheme of emanation from the One and return to it. Both use neo-Platonic concepts. But there is no special neo-Platonic experience. Insofar as neo-Platonism is experiential, it derives from meditation.

Finally, there is St. Teresa of Avila [1515-1582]. In some ways she is the most interesting of all western mystics, since she has the greatest variety of experiences. Here is the meditation component of her preparation:

The words of the Lord are like acts wrought in us, and so they must have produced some effect in those who were already prepared to put away from them everything corporeal and to leave the soul in a state of pure spirituality, so that it might be joined with Uncreated Spirit in this celestial union.¹⁰

One of St. Teresa's experiences, a trance experience in which the body grows cold, has Western commentators scratching their heads. They recognize it in India. Thus Paramhansa Yogananda, in that challenging book, *Autobiography of a Yogi*:

[some] Christian saints have been able to enter

the breathless and motionless trance [Sabilka Samadhi], without which no man can attain God perception... Among Christian mystics who have been observed in Sabilka Samadhi may be mentioned St Teresa of Avila, whose body would become so immovably fixed that the astonished nuns in her convent were unable to alter her position or to arouse her to outward consciousness.¹¹

I conclude that meditation has been frequently used by western mystics. But for all that, it remains a side stream in western mysticism, the mainstream of which, is a mysticism of prayer. And the mystical experience attendant on that is an experience of God's love. As a result of this experience, the mystics love God and the things of God, the world and the people in it, and want to do them good.¹² Hence the experience inspires social action, which, it seems, the meditation experience identified by Dasgupta does not. However, it is possible to be both kinds of mystic, as St. Teresa was. Its lack of social import does not mean that meditation is without value, for it is capable of disclosing a spiritual reality, and that is of perennial value, especially in a materialistic society like ours.

It is noteworthy that meditation, as with the mysticism which depends on prayer, has, as a pre-requisite, careful attention to virtue, or, as we would now say, good character formation. Meditation can help prayerful mysticism in two ways. Firstly, the mental discipline which meditation develops can help in ridding prayer of that old bug-bear, distractions, and secondly, the inwardness which it fosters can help make prayer less superficial.

NOTES

1. S.N. Dasgupta. *Hindu Mysticism*. Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, New York. 1973. p.71
2. *Ibid*. p.80
3. *Ibid* p.81
4. Edward Conze [trans] *Buddhist Scriptures*. Penguin Books. Harmondsworth. England. 1971. p.139.
5. Plotinus. *The Enneads*. Stephen Mackenna [trans] Faber and Faber, London. 1956. [Fourth Edition]. 1.6.5.
6. *Ibid*. 1.6.8
7. Saint Augustine. *Confessions*. R.S. Pine-Coffin [trans] The Penguin Classics. Harmondsworth.

- England. 1961. p.146
8. Elmer O'Brien. *Varieties of Mystic Experience*. Mentor Omega. New York. 1965. p.114
9. Rudolph Otto. *Mysticism East and West*. Macmillan. New York. 1972. p.100
10. St. Teresa of Avila. *The Interior Castle*. Double Day Image Edition. 1961. p.216
11. Paramhansa Yogananda. *Autobiography of a Yogi*. Rider and Company. London. 1974. p.200
12. A developed account of this may be found in my paper 'Mysticism and the Kingdom of God', this journal, 2010 No.2.