

The Contemplative Mind in  
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## **The Contemplative Life and the Teaching of the Humanities**

by Brian Stock

This audience does not need to be reminded that meditation is enjoying a considerable vogue in medicine and psychology. There has also been a growth of interest in religion, which has taken the shape of reviving dormant meditative traditions (e.g., Roman Catholicism) or importing foreign ones (e.g., Buddhist practice into Judaism). Native, feminist, and ecological thinking has contributed to this renaissance. As a result, a good many people have been attracted to the idea of contemplative activity for the first time.

To date, the humanities have played a minor role in this discourse, despite the obvious fact that a humanities discipline, religion, is the source of all that we know about traditional meditative practices. In my view, this situation is unlikely to change in the short term. The "theoretical interest" of the humanities should ideally be "directed to human beings as persons, to their personal life and activity," as well as to "the concrete results of this activity." In practice, however, teachers of the humanities deal almost exclusively with the analysis of texts (or with source materials that can be discussed by means of literary theory). Opinions have changed radically over the years on what is the best interpretive procedure. But no major branch of contemporary thinking in the humanities is meditative in aims or style.

Edmund Husserl, whose definition of the humanities I have quoted, was persuaded that the disciplines dealing with culture had by his time entered a profound state of "crisis." Many teachers of the humanities in contemporary schools and universities would agree, while acknowledging that the issues have undergone considerable change since 1935, when his celebrated critique was written. Husserl was one of a handful of twentieth-century philosophers whose unified view of the humanities made a significant place for contemplative activity within a secular world-view. As the study of the humanities has become more and more fragmented, there has been an ever-growing chorus of voices calling for a comprehensive vision of some kind. What the critics are asking for, among other things, is a type of education that teaches the student how "to live as a person ... in a social framework, wherein I and we live together in community and have the community as a horizon ...:" They want the humanities to focus on "purposeful living, manifesting spiritual creativity in the broadest sense, creating culture within historical continuity."

The roots of this approach, which insists that education deal with the whole person, lie in ancient thought. It used to be fashionable to think of ancient Greek philosophy chiefly as a preface to modern logic and scientific method. Scholars nowadays recognize that it was also concerned with a wide range of contemplative issues, which included the creation of self-knowledge through intellectual or spiritual exercises. This interpretation is particularly accurate for the later ancient period, when Greek philosophy was enriched by Judeo-Christian themes. Linked to oral instruction, that is, to direct interchange between a master and students, this type of reflection achieved its aims through the consistency of its arguments as well as through its ability to address the moral and ethical needs of a community. The exercises by which individuals were prepared for this challenge were not arid and abstract, although they were intensely cognitive: they were intended to develop the intellect, and through this to transform a life.

There is little formal meditation in ancient thought. Nor is there much talk about it in the Old or New Testaments. Meditative practice really came into its own in the later ancient and medieval periods, reaching its high point of development before the twelfth century; it owes a great deal to the original thinking of the desert fathers and monastic authors. Plotinus, the last great pagan thinker (d. 270 A.D.), gave a prominent place to contemplative ascent within a neoplatonist scheme. His ideas were taken over by Augustine in an attempt to unite prayerful reading and contemplative activity; these methods in turn eventually influenced both Catholic and Protestant devotional practices. The typically Western format, which was consolidated by the fourth century, incorporated meditative practice into the study of scripture effectively making meditation part of a reading project, although remaining distinct within it. In the background of this epochal change were the study habits of Jewish Christianity and ultimately of Judaism itself.

It is frequently proposed that the breakdown of this approach to spiritual education occurred during the Reformation or the Scientific Revolution. In reality, the decisive changes occurred during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when the first European universities emerged from monastic and cathedral schools and undertook to complete a largely Aristotelian program in logic, the natural sciences, and theology. Well before Galileo and Newton challenged medieval scientific methods, serious students of the contemplative life had abandoned the universities of Bologna, Paris, Oxford, and Cambridge and sought refuge in a variety of institutions more congenial to their activities - mainly religious houses. Virtually none of the "mystics" of the early modern period men and women who led contemplative lives between the time of Meister Eckhart and Teresa of Avila worked within what was taking shape as the modern humanities, which, from the time of Petrarch, were increasingly dominated by the "humanist" concern with correctness of Greek and Latin as well as with the rehabilitation of a skeptical, textually oriented interpretive tradition in figures like Lorenzo Valla, Erasmus, and Scaliger. The appearance of the printed book in a standardized format completed this transformation (in part by favoring visual, silent reading over oral, meditative reading practices). By

the time of the Reformation, moreover, contemplatives, instead of withdrawing completely from society as they frequently did during the Middle Ages, sought occasions for contemplation within active lives. That is the typically modern situation.

When we talk about reintroducing the contemplative life into the humanities, therefore, we have to give some thought to what we are up against. Humanities methods have been extraordinarily stable over something like five centuries: all attempts to introduce alternatives have been successfully rebuffed. Periodic revivals of religious studies have not been able to dislodge entrenched ideas either. So a confrontational attitude would not be successful, even if it were advisable. Moreover, what one wants, ideally, is not an increased academic interest in meditation we already have that in specialist circles but the re-establishment of a tradition in which, along the model of some Eastern cultures, meditative practices and other intellectual activities are mutually supportive: a situation in which the person who meditates is not stepping out of the mainstream of his or her society, but is engaging in something normal and unremarkable, like keeping fit.

I think that the best way to achieve this goal is to begin with a concept related to the person's overall health. Let us call this the individual's "well-being." Many Americans have little understanding of what is meant by meditation. But they all understand sickness, discomfort, and healing. If they are persuaded that meditation will contribute to their health, they may accept the idea of pursuing a contemplative activity within their daily lives. Some students of meditative practices will complain that I am tackling a spiritual problem through physical means. But the two cannot be separated. If people are taught to meditate, sooner or later many of them will discover the spiritual dimension on their own. In traditional settings, the pursuit of the contemplative life normally takes place within an accompanying belief-system. The only equivalent of this type of faith in contemporary society may be the confidence displayed in science. If I ask a room full of Americans to meditate for cultural, religious, or spiritual reasons, I am likely to find myself in the midst of a heated debate about their emotional and intellectual loyalties. If I suggest that meditation may help them achieve better health, and ultimately, perhaps, a state of well-being, most of them would weigh the evidence before dismissing my arguments.

That evidence is slowly being assembled. Yet, the study of meditative practice cannot afford to stand still in this respect, the notion of teachings of "timeless wisdom" is somewhat misleading. We lack a sufficiently large and diversified body of experimental evidence proving that large-scale programs in meditation would deliver the benefits that they promise, despite encouraging recent progress in major medical institutions. We know that stress reduction techniques like meditation lead to a positive state of the parasympathetic nervous system, and meditation is used increasingly to help prevent and treat heart disease, auto immune disorders, chronic lung disease, headaches, diabetes, eczema, asthma, allergies, infertility, and gastrointestinal problems, as well as panic, depression, and hostility. But more studies are needed to

clarify the effect of meditation in relation to other mind/body therapies.

If we move from the clinical to the cultural aspects of the question, the difficulties increase. It may be easy to measure the effect of sustained meditation on blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, and stress reduction as contrasted with trying to determine its influence on nebulous issues like the sense of self and other, or the willingness to participate in family, community, and collaborative work. We do not know whether concentrated inwardness can fortify the individual against the commercial exploitation of the sensorium by the media; we have as yet to determine its effect on individuals' predilection for aggression, violence, socially deviant behavior, and the destruction of the environment. We have not come to grips with still more subtle relations involving trust, patience, generosity, confidence, and love. If some sort of scientific information is not built up on these and related issues, I do not believe that meditation will have a lasting role in American life and thought.

At the end of this long road lies what we mean by a humanities education for young adults in American society. If contemplative activity contributes to their sense of well-being and if it helps to put them in a frame of mind that enhances their ability to cope with a range of issues ranging from health to their sense of community, then presumably contemplative traditions should have a larger place in educational programs. And, if that is the case, we have to teach students what contemplative activity is all about. Among other things, they have to be instructed in reading meditative literature, not as they would read modern poems, plays, or novels, but as contemplatives read them, using texts as a means to an end and not considering them, as is the fashion in contemporary literary practice, as ends in themselves. They would also have to explore types of meditation that are unlike the Judeo-Christian tradition in not requiring the presence of texts, images, or other sensory supports. Beyond that, teachers of the humanities would have to use the renewed interest in the contemplative life to begin an exploration of what we mean by "the modern identity," that is, as a means of "tracing the various strands of what it means to be a human agent, a person, or a self." This implies broadening the discussion of ethics beyond the traditionally narrow confines of academic speculation and taking up a number of cultural connections religious history, gender orientation, ecological considerations, etc. Much contemporary moral philosophy, Charles Taylor notes, "has tended to focus on what it is right to do rather on what it is good to be, on defining the content of obligation rather than the nature of the good life; and it has no conceptual place left for a notion of the good as the object of our love or allegiance ...." Within the humanities, that is a major challenge.