

The Contemplative Mind in Society
Meeting of the Working Group
September 29 - October 2, 1994
Pocantico, NY
Sponsored by The Nathan Cummings Foundation & Fetzer Institute

Meditation and Education: Buddhist India, Tibet and Modern America

by Robert A. F. Thurman

I: What is "Meditation?" What is "Contemplative Mind?" When we feel we've lost it, need more of it, can improve our health with it, can generate well-being with it what is this "it?" How did it get lost in the West and the modern world? Who was for it, who against?

It is fair to say that classical Indian civilization incorporated the contemplative far more than any other, then or now. The contemplative marked that civilization in every way. It caused it to develop unparalleled "inner sciences," as they are called, shared among the various religions. The Buddhist inner sciences were the most broadly developed, since their monastic institutions of higher learning were the most numerous. So we can conveniently use a Buddhist analysis of meditations as typical for our general discussion.

"Meditation" translates from the Sanskrit *dhyana*, *bhavana*, and even *samadhi*, which all designate organizations of the mind-body complex considered different from sensory and intellectual receptive states (as in learning) and intellectual reflective or discursive states, though they include these states sometimes. There are usually said to be two main categories of meditation: *shamatha* (calming) and *vipashyana* (seeing-through, insight, or transforming), with both again dividing into critical and creative types.

Calming meditations are deep concentration states, culminating in one-pointed trance, usually devoid of all sensory awareness or mental flow, though also able to entertain with great stability a fixed picture or even a full environment. They produce marked physical effects, and equip the mind with tremendous fitness and fluency in executing whatever tasks it addresses. When our health researchers note and study effects of meditation, they are almost always referring to calming, one-pointed, thought-free meditation, with or without images. Calming benefits health and empowers the mind; but by itself it is not thought to produce in a person either positive or negative evolutionary (that is to say, long-term and multi-life) transformation.

Seeing-through or transforming meditations are also quite numerous. They range from basic scanning mindfulness meditations, through critically penetrating insight meditations, up to imaginatively creative visualizing meditations. They are considered most important in psychological, intellectual and spiritual development. They have been studied relatively little. They are closely related to reflective states.

Both these types of contemplative mind exist in all cultures, even the simplest: naturally, hunters and mothers cultivated the most one-pointed mind-states, and the maker, the shaman/ess and the poet/ess the most transformative. I think it is slightly misleading to speak of our culture as lacking contemplative mind. When we feel that, we are rather lamenting the deplorable contemplative states within which the common mind is absorbed. Peoples' minds are absorbed in continuous reverie almost all the time. When they sleep, they experience a withdrawal from sensory stimuli, though they identify that as a state of unconsciousness. Education in any particular culture builds up a world picture, constantly reinforced by symbols and images and contemplated (creative fixating and discursive contemplations combined) life-long. Television, modern culture's peculiar contemplative shrine, supplies a contemplative trance to millions of people, for hours on end day after day year in and year out. It is unfortunately a trance in which sensory dissatisfaction is constantly reinforced, anger and violence is imprinted, and confusion and the delusion of materialism is constructed and maintained.

Thus, when we talk about seeking to increase and intensify contemplative mind in our culture, we may really be talking about methods of transferring contemplative energies from one focus to another. We want people to contemplate disidentification, detachment and contentment, to cheer themselves up by becoming less greedy and needy. We want them to contemplate tolerance, patience, nonviolence, and compassion, to unstress themselves by feeling less angry, irritated and paranoid. We want them to develop more wisdom, more freedom, more capacity for responsibility and creativity, by seeing through the constructed realities in which the materialist culture has us enmeshed. It is important that we recognize the value choices implicit in our esteem for contemplation. Only by doing so can we understand the opposition we are encountering, deriving from other value choices.

Commercial interests with their advertising industry do not want people to develop contentment and less greed. Military interests in economic, political, ethnic or nationalist guises, do not want people to develop more tolerance, nonviolence, and compassion. And ruling groups in general, in whatever sort of hierarchy, do not want the ruled to become too insightful, too independent, too creative on their own, as the danger is that they will become insubordinate, rebellious, and unproductive in their allotted tasks. Therefore,

in Asia, contemplative institutions got their licenses from the governments sometimes by creating a second society, ritually outside the ordinary society, wherein contemplation in the directions we consider positive was encouraged, and by tacitly promising not to interfere too much with the dominant culture's ongoing contemplation of its own necessity. In the community (Sangha) outside the mundane society, calming and insight could be valued even by the ruling elite, as a sort of safety valve activity for unsocializable individuals.

The fact is that developing either contemplative capacity calming or seeing-through greatly empowers an individual, the combination even more so. Civilizations that suppressed these capacities had reason for wishing to disempower their individuals: they tended to be collectivistic, persistent in regimenting their people, due to their insecurity with respect to the environment and their neighbors, and usually warlike. Though we Euro-Americans like to think of ourselves as primarily individualistic (even when we simultaneously consider too much of that a bad thing), Western societies tended to suppress individualism over the millennia. Socrates finally was given the hemlock cocktail for corrupting the potential soldiers with critical thought, and Sparta was the dominant model, not Athens. Therefore the kind of humanistic and humanizing contemplative orientation we seek to further now was systematically suppressed all along.

So we must not be surprised if commercial and military influences, and conservative ruling groups currently still active in our society set themselves against any contemplative movement even today. On the brighter side, if the liberal education so essential to a modern democratic society really wants to empower the individuals who must constantly re-create democracy, then it needs to incorporate contemplative dimensions in its curriculum: for liberal education to fulfill its responsibility, the teaching of contemplative skills is a necessity, not a luxury.

Today, our society has entered a very complicated and ill-understood time, the so-called post-industrial and post-modern age. Democracies are meritocratic in ideal, and so are compelled in principle to try to provide each individual with the opportunity and ability to rule the whole. Individuals have the responsibility to make crucial decisions, and the technological power to cause immense destruction if they make deluded, greedy, and angry choices. It is a sort of situation in which we must oscillate between terminal, doomsday pessimism about our chances of surviving as a species at all, and apocalyptic, utopian, optimistic visions about how the entire society must become a contemplative community, in order to survive and thrive. I try to stick to the latter kind of positivity, while not blinding myself to the dangers of negative outcomes, remaining fully aware that those who think the future hopeless and try to turn back by whatever means will not support, and will actively oppose

the attempt to create a more positively contemplative community. I personally consider broad-scale individual development of contemplative insight to be necessary for survival.

There are many ways to make our society more contemplative. Joyce wrote *Finnegan's Wake* to make unthinking embeddedness in words more difficult. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi from Transcendental Meditation tried to organize contemplative SWAT teams to travel to trouble spots to send out mass meditation waves to calm groups caught in the flames of fury and violence. Contemplation is taught in thriving Eastern-based centers, Cistercian monasteries, and hospitals, and should be taught more widely through every available medium. I have chosen the liberal arts and sciences university as the individually liberating institution left over from our Western extra-social contemplative communities, which has however been too much co-opted to empower and train the individuals who are destined to serve as the ruling elite of the materialist, modern unified society. I see the technological media as branching out, however clumsily, from this university complex to enfold the larger society within it. Therefore, if our concern is to heal, enlighten, and empower individuals to live better and create a better society by learning how to manage their own contemplative energies, the academic community is the very opposite of academic. It is the vital arena within which the future is being determined.

II: What is the Buddhist take on contemplation and meditation? How was it used in Buddhist civilizations? Can that be relevant to us?

The essence of the Buddha's awakened vision of life is that its purpose is evolutionary: beings naturally seek happiness and can effectively evolve into a condition of perfect happiness through awakening to the reality of the world. The cause of suffering is ignorance, an active misknowing of unreality as if it were reality. The cause of awakening is the antidote of misknowing superknowing, insight, or wisdom. The human life form is already immensely evolved toward awakening, more so even than most deity forms. The ideal occupation of a human lifetime, therefore, is disciplines and practices that enhance and accelerate evolution toward awakening. Since wisdom is the ultimate cause of awakening, of liberation from ignorance, then these disciplines and practices are educational in the classical sense. One person cannot awaken another. No God can awaken someone. No belief can awaken someone. No meditation can awaken someone. The individual's transformative understanding is their awakening. Realistic beliefs, helpful and skillful others, meditations and practices, all these can help by supporting the process of education. But the realistic understanding that liberates is the individual's own process and attainment.

Therefore, the Buddhist civilizations developed institutions and curricula that empowered individuals. India became the most individualistic of all civilizations after the time of Buddha. Buddhist India was the first to develop cenobitic monasticism, and that monasticism developed into a network of universities with a liberating curriculum.

The Buddhist curriculum always cultivated contemplative mind, both for empowerment and for liberating transformation. The Buddhist tradition should thus be viewed essentially as an educational tradition. In its essence and beginnings, it is not too religious in the usual sense of that word, i.e. focused on the transcendent, the sacred, concerned with ultimate realities, warrants of meaning. Its goals are liberative and evolutionary. The Buddha broke with the dominant religious system of his world, the powerful religious atmosphere of the Vedic Brahmins. He found it misleading, not liberating, and not necessarily evolutionary in a positive direction. It wrongly submerged the individual in the collectivity, reinforcing the sense of social duty at various levels with ultimate sacred sanctions. It relied on deities: Buddha did not question their existence, but thought their powers to be not as believed by the Brahmins. He thought the gods had great mundane powers but not the power to liberate individuals from suffering, or even themselves from their own devastating agonies. And the Vedas enjoined rituals of sacrifice that cause suffering and death to many animals, which had the opposite of the desired effect, not leading sacrificers to heaven as a result of giving but sending them to hell as a result of killing; in any case, turning their evolution in a negative, not a positive direction. The Buddha rejected all this, and set forth the following:

- (1) the individual has to take charge of his or her own evolutionary destiny, not relying on gods or any others;
- (2) a person has to face the fact that all life bound by delusion and driven by egocentric passions is inevitably frustrating and ultimately miserable, and place hope in the realistic accessibility of liberation by overcoming delusion through wisdom; and
- (3) positive evolution has no limits, and a person can really participate in creating a world of happiness for all instead of the unenlightened world of universal suffering.

I want to emphasize again that in Buddhist and consequently Indian thought in general, delusion is the root cause of suffering, and wisdom is the antidote for delusion, hence the root cause of liberation. Wisdom (prajna) is not accumulated instrumental knowledge, but is a special kind of super-knowing, a knowing by becoming the known, by transcending the subject-object

dichotomy. Thus, liberation is achieved not by believing, not by participating in any ceremony or belonging to any group, but by understanding in the deepest possible way. The cultivation of such understanding naturally became the task of the Buddha's teaching, and the mission of the Buddhist tradition. Contemplation was an indispensable discipline for deepening and empowering this understanding.

The path to freedom was said to have eight branches, eight channels of realism to gradually overcome the massive unreality generated by beginningless instinctual delusion. These eight are called: realistic worldview, realistic attitude, realistic speech, realistic action, realistic livelihood, realistic effort, realistic mindfulness, and realistic meditative concentration. These eight are grouped into the Three Spiritual or Higher Educations (adhishiksha), the Higher Educations of Justice or Morality, Meditation, and Wisdom. The Buddha found he was unable to liberate people by the sheer force of his own wisdom or compassion. He could only help them to open their minds to a new understanding of self and world; he was forced to channel all his wisdom and compassion into the educational art. So it is that the Buddhist tradition has always focused on spiritual education. The Buddhist monastery was not primarily a place of solitude, but was rather a place of cultivation. Wisdom, the engine of liberation, was cultivated at three levels, by learning, critical reflection, and contemplative penetration. First, one learned the Dharma, one moved away from one's inherited deluded mind and into the Buddha mind by engaging with the enlightened speech recorded in the Sutras and their elucidations. Having understood the teachings at the surface level, one then had to pit one's instinctively deluded mind against the new, inferential and relatively delicate understanding of the verbal Dharma, and struggle back and forth, cultivating doubt intensely through critical reflection that seeks to delve below the surface to find the deeper meaning. When this process is pursued with great energy and determination, critical reflection becomes penetrative concentration upon the cultivated, doubt-deepened understanding. This concentration draws energy away from instinctual misknowledge and pours it into the liberating insight of transcending wisdom, until wisdom's realistic understanding becomes intuitive and instinctual. Wisdom becoming intuitive, the self realizing its selflessness, and the person enjoying liberation all happen at the same time.

This kind of core curriculum was maintained for more than ten centuries in hundreds of Buddhist monastic universities all over India, and many more that developed in various other Asian countries, though India's abundant economic situation, its special gentleness and its tolerance of individual liberation were not easily duplicated in other countries where conditions were harsher. After the Indian classical civilization was utterly smashed by the Muslim invasions at the end of the first millennium CE, this curriculum was most faithfully

preserved and implemented in the high mountain refuge of Tibet, where so many of the great Indian masters fled. So it is that fragments of the full educational program of the global Buddhist movement has only begin to emerge fully since the opening of Tibet.

III: What are we doing in liberal arts colleges and universities to provide humanistic education? Can it be furthered by inculcating a more contemplative bent in our faculty and students?

What we do is try to liberate critical intellect, emotional stability, aesthetic sensitivity, and moral decency. Supposedly, natural sciences develop intelligence and knowledge of reality, social sciences develop awareness of the social dimension, and humanities provide emotional and aesthetic sensitivity and mold a sense of moral decency. Religion was originally driven away from the humanities, its content divided between literature, history, philology, and philosophy, because the scientific that is, wisdom-oriented study of religion could not proceed effectively, humanistically, as long as it was dominated by a particular religion. This tradition was born of the Renaissance through Enlightenment's impulse toward awakening the full powers of the human. The new notion was that the purpose of human life as being to move beyond the worship of reality (conceived as a mysterious all-powerful God) to the understanding of reality, assuming responsibility for the self and the environment, the whole existential situation. Therefore, it is natural that religion should be regarded with suspicion by the humanistic academy today. However, without the assistance of religion's deepest disciplines, contemplative as well as intellectual, the liberal arts and sciences are effectively prevented from becoming liberating arts and sciences. People are informed and certified but not properly prepared to exercise the responsibilities humanism imposes on the individual. It is not that religion can make this contribution because of the efficacy of one belief or another, or one practice or another (including the practice of meditation). Religions concern themselves with humans' ultimate orientation, with their ultimate aims, and so possess a wide repertoire of arts and disciplines, enabling individuals to integrate their entire beings their physical, ethical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual elements. While no particular religion could, or should, dominate the academy again, the moral, psychological, contemplative, and philosophical disciplines embedded within the religions must be made available to faculty and students if education is to go beyond being informative, to become transformative.

Fortunately the study of religion in religious studies departments has returned to the humanistic universities. Study in these departments labors under the handicap of the suspicious regard cast upon it by scientists, natural and social, and other humanistic scholars strongly mindful of the prevailing canonization of

secularity. Nevertheless, religion departments are able to restore to the curriculum, and provide students with the opportunity to avail themselves of, the resources of the world's great spiritual traditions for self-exploration, self-cultivation, self-liberation, and self-integration. Here comes the tricky part. This must be done in an impeccable manner, due to the surrounding suspicion on the negative side, and on the positive side, due to the special measures that must be taken to insure pluralism. No one particular religion can again become normative, its resources dominant, its approach controlling others. So a modern religion department must have equal access to courses in all the major traditions.

In this context, we can approach with clarity the issue of contemplation and the contemplative mind. We have seen that contemplation fits in the traditional inner science curriculum at the highest level of the cultivation of wisdom, first learning wisdom, then reflective wisdom, then contemplative wisdom. Therefore, it is virtually indispensable if wisdom is to become fully transformative. The question then for academic, especially liberal arts, institutions, is not a question of adding a desirable frill to their vast smorgasbord of offerings. It is a matter of their effectively fulfilling their duty to provide a liberal, i.e., a liberating and empowering, education. The ideal pedagogical process is first to learn something really well, using memorization as well as broad study, then to reflect upon it internally, assisted by energetic debate and discussion with teachers and other students, and finally to meditate upon the first tentative understandings in a sustained and focused way, in order to integrate insight to transformative depth.

IV: Suggestions for programs that would gradually make contemplation a normal part of a realistic education.

First, we should recognize that we already do provide contemplative opportunities to our students off campus, of course, but provided by us in the sense that we give leaves of absence, years abroad in Thailand, India, Tibet, Nepal, Shri Lanka, and so on. We are also aware, though institutionally it is an uneasy awareness, that our students join meditation centers, go on retreats offered by all religions, though primarily the Eastern ones, which offer these most frequently. There are also student groups on campus, usually fundamentalist ones, that offer opportunities for participation in their rituals, chanting sessions, prayer meetings, and confessional activities of various kinds. And finally, on the therapeutic or athletic model, there are stress reduction clinics and yoga classes at the gym.

The point of reciting these ongoing activities is to remember, before we consider other methods, that we should reinforce those activities that are

already performing valuable service. Other strategies include:

(1) Encouraging the establishment of contemplative centers on campuses such as that proposed but not yet implemented at Middlebury by Steven Rockefeller. Harvard's Center for the Study of World Religions was set up by its donors with such a purpose in mind, though, significantly, its meditation room was eventually turned into a library. Colgate's Chapel House was set up by the same donors, and has provided some contemplative relief in its undergraduate center over the years. At Columbia we would have the opportunity to set up such a center at Earl Hall in the University's pluralistic religious group meeting spaces I have had the opportunity for some time, but I simply have not had the time or resources to accomplish it successfully. Amherst, Williams, Wesleyan, Hampshire, Mt. Holyoke, and Smith Colleges, I know from personal experience, have chapel spaces that can be expanded, pluralized, and contemplativized, depending on the availability of motivated faculty willing to work on it. I'm sure every liberal arts college and university has the seeds of the kind of center and process we would like to see available for the students and faculty already there within it.

(2) Encouraging departments to introduce contemplative experience and expertise in whatever tradition as a recognized and rewarded accomplishment in the professor and the student. Just as knowledge of a particular text, ritual, doctrine, historical era, institution, individual, and so forth, expressed in a thesis or other demonstration, is evaluated and rewarded, so knowledge of a particular meditation practice, gained by study of texts, exploration of institutions, and personal experience of the practice, expressed in a thesis or other demonstration, should be evaluated and rewarded.

(3) Encouraging individual scholars in the natural and social sciences to expand their researches into physiological effects of various meditative disciplines, into institutions affected by the centrality of meditative experiences, and so forth.

(4) As importantly, encouraging scholars in religious studies to research, translate, and publish more of the contemplative literature, technical as well as evocative, born of the contemplative disciplines, from all traditions, but especially the Indian traditions. As I have said elsewhere, here in the area of contemplative development we should not make the industrial mistake of going crazy for the hardware possibilities and neglect the software already developed over millennia by contemplative cultures and traditions.

(5) Encouraging media productions that inform about and instruct in the practice of contemplation, thereby reaching a wide audience, de-mystifying contemplation, and creating greater public acceptance of contemplation in the

educational arena.