

MEDITATION IS NOT WHAT YOU THINK

By Edward C. Abdill

“Meditation is the inexpressible longing of the Inner Self for the Infinite.” In those words, H. P. Blavatsky states the essence of meditation. Yet, there are numerous other practices called “meditation” that have nothing to do with Blavatsky’s definition. Many of these practices are quite useful. Some are not; and some may actually be harmful.

BEGINNING: QUIETING THE MIND

Before choosing a practice of meditation, we might ask ourselves, “What am I trying to do?” A number of common responses to that question are these:

- Feel more peaceful.
- Get over anxiety or grief.
- Overcome pain, physical or psychological.
- Improve my health.
- Break negative habit patterns.
- Become more sensitive.

Most would agree that all these goals are positive and helpful and that indeed they may be a consequence of meditation. Yet each one of them is essentially a desire for self-improvement.

Now let us suppose that the ultimate goal of meditation is to merge the Inner Self with the Infinite. That sounds very abstract, but is it really? “Our hearts are ever restless till they find their rest in Thee,” says St. Augustine. In other words, the lasting peace for which we all long is to be found only in the Infinite. If we expect that meditation will provide an instant fix to our problems, we’ll be sadly disappointed. But if we practice daily meditation, we shall soon know for ourselves that we have begun the great journey home.

To begin that journey, we may first consider the terms “Inner Self” and the “Infinite.” The latter needs little definition except perhaps to say that Theosophically speaking it is the Eternal, the ground of being, “That” out of which everything finite (including ourselves) springs. The Inner Self is our own individual root in the Eternal. It is the reincarnating Self, not the transient self that we are prone to call “me.”

The “me” wants to be happy, to experience pleasure, and to avoid pain. That is not wrong; it is inevitable, natural, and universal. Being so conditioned to thinking of ourselves as “me,” we are apt to approach meditation as a means to achieve personal results and spiritual pleasure. We seek it in the sensate. The “me” wants personal results.

Therein lies the great paradox of meditation. The sensate must and will be affected by meditation, but if we are motivated by a desire for sensate experience, we shall at best achieve only a transient and shallow result. “He who would lose his life for my sake shall find it,” says the Christian teacher. The phrase could well have been spoken about meditation. Applied to meditation, we might say, “He who would find the Eternal has first to lose the ‘me.’” It cannot be achieved at once, but every effort in the right direction has its consequences. In the words of *The Voice of the Silence*:

Learn that no efforts, not the smallest—whether in right or wrong direction—can vanish from the world of causes. E’en wasted smoke remains not traceless. . . . In the “Great Journey,” causes sown each hour bear each its harvest of effects, for rigid Justice rules the World. With mighty sweep of never erring action, it brings to mortals lives of weal or woe, the Karmic progeny of all our former thoughts and deeds.

How then should we make the effort to merge with the Infinite? No single method will appeal to all, but whatever the method, the goal is the same. Each method is simply a practice that may help us to awaken the Divine consciousness within.

To do that, it is absolutely essential that we first quiet the mind, and that is no easy task. Our initial attempts may not be very successful. Yet we can all at least quiet the mind to the extent that we reduce its roaring thoughts.

To some extent, this first essential step can be achieved by almost anyone who wishes to try. The following suggestions may be helpful.

- Sit quietly for a minute or two and take a few deep breaths. Become aware of any physical tension and deliberately try to release it.
- With the intent of quieting the mind, think of a tree or a mountain, or some place in nature that has made you feel peaceful. Try to feel that peace go through you and radiate out from you right now.
- When other thoughts intrude (as they will), simply notice them. Bring your mind back to the peace of nature and let the intruding thoughts die.
- If you are new to meditation, keep the session down to just five minutes. Otherwise, your mind may get restless.

If you do this little exercise every day, or even several times a day, you may well find after a few weeks that it has had a definite effect on you. In time and with practice, it may become easier to quiet your mind when you most need it. It is just a beginning, but it is a very important beginning in the long journey home.

CONTINUING: CENTERING

Quieting the mind is only a preliminary stage of meditation. It can have positive consequences in our daily life even if we go no further. However, to deepen our meditation, the mind must be relatively free of rapidly moving thought and our emotions no longer reacting to ideas and to events. To say that the mind must be absolutely still and the emotions perfectly calm in order to proceed would be foolish. Meditation is a holistic practice. In one sense it is sequential; in another, all aspects are practiced simultaneously. That is, we begin by quieting the mind, then attempt the deeper meditation when we have become as peaceful as we can for the moment. The deeper aspect of meditation, centering, will actually quiet the mind even more than we were able to do in the preliminary stage.

The first part of our meditation has been a focus on peace and sending that peace outward. We shall now attempt to turn our conscious attention inward. To do this, try to feel that you are consciously centered at the level of your heart. Instead of concentrating on sending out peace, say to yourself, "I am that peace." Be the source of peace rather than regarding the peace as something that is being sent out from you. Try to be absolutely still within yourself. Focus the mind on the innermost Self, the Eternal. If even slightly successful, you will discover that the mind becomes exceedingly alert, yet nonreactive.

One does not feel "other worldly" or leave the body during meditation. True meditation is integrative. It awakens the Inner Self and the whole person tends to become invigorated and harmonized. Whether we meditate in a group or on our own, the ultimate goal of meditation is the same for all, yet the path is unique to the individual. General pointers, such as I have attempted to give here, are useful, but no single set of verbal directions will speak to everyone.

For many, it is difficult to begin meditation alone. Yet even those who find it difficult to meditate alone can often meditate in a group. It is likely easier in a group because we affect one another, and those who are more proficient at meditation stimulate those who are learning by the radiating effect of their meditation. Sympathetic resonance is not only a physical phenomenon. It is also an emotional, mental, and spiritual phenomenon. Because a group is more than the sum of its parts, a group meditation can be extremely powerful. Starting the practice of meditation in a group is often the easiest way to learn. Yet long after the student has become proficient, group meditation still has its place and its usefulness.

When we meditate in a group, it does not really matter very much what words (if any) the group leader uses. However, if guiding words are used, they should be very few indeed—just simple reminders of the steps in meditation. Meditation is not what we think, and even more truly it is not what any group leader says. What is important

in a group meditation is that the participants make a strong effort at the beginning of the meditation to feel united as a group. Insofar as that is accomplished, the group will work harmoniously together. Otherwise, people are meditating alone even though they are sitting together. That is not wrong, but it is not a group meditation.

One thing is certain about group meditation: Those who practice it on a regular basis often bond together at a very deep level. This is why I believe that a group meditation before members' meetings is so important. It does not matter whether or not we approve of any words used. What matters is that we intend to unite together in good will. We may ignore the words so long as we unite and work together at the deeper, spiritual level. Proficiency in the art of meditation, alone or in a group, will increase so long as we are resolved to make the inner effort and always remember that meditation is "the inexpressible longing of the Inner Self for the Infinite."
