

On Meditation

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True meditation is a work of inner silence. Contact between the innermost I and the visceral energies is broken if words and concepts dominate. How does this silence come about? The mind must be occupied with a wordless question about its own nature. The mind itself is in question. It is as if listening. To listen evokes silence. The billion-year-old being-centers which are still the dominant part of human Being know this. The mind itself does not, it tends to think, a constant flow of words and images. But the mind becomes silent when the need to listen silences the lower centers, which it serves. It wonders “what am I”? It listens, yet too quickly finds something that passes for an answer.

True meditation is a private matter. A work of individuation. There is a question about the value of “group meditation.” Often this is a political exercise, an attempt to bring individuals into congruence with a collective purpose. This obviously goes against individuation, makes individuals into cogs in a machine.

To generate a field in which true meditation can take place is an art possessed by very few. A large group is not needed, in fact it is antithetical. I remember a strong impression. It was in a large Buddhist meditation hall in Nara Japan. Five monks were sitting off to the side, not too close to each other, not in a rigid formation. A tiny presence in the huge space. Their posture bespoke relaxation. Somehow these five filled immense space with silence and stillness. Tourists, like myself, were present. They seemed affected. They restrained their usual conversation and milling about. They entered, looked around, and soon left. Perhaps they were consciously aware of what was taking place, perhaps not. The monks remained.

Another impression, from a “group meeting” in a small room at Chandolin in the Swiss alps. The room was framed by massive ancient rough-hewn beams. As one entered, bowing as in a Shiva temple to pass the low doorway, Michel de Salzman was already there, sitting, emanating. A Shiva lingam in person. One silently found a place to sit. It was not comfortable at first, but one did not move, did not speak. A magnetic field was sensed, calling for an entire change of level. Words were few. One spontaneously felt the demand for true words, if any. It was real meditation. How different from the usual “group meeting” where the members file in, full of tensions, worries, ideas what to say! They fidget in their seats. Only later does the “leader” enter. It is already too late to break the chain of associative thought and feeling. Very seldom does anything real take place.

In true meditation the breathing becomes slow and shallow. The still body does not require much oxygen. Each breath is only a few tablespoons of air. One senses just enough air coming in to cool the sinus in the front of the head. The third eye. Oxygen is absorbed there and refreshes the front part of the brain. A response is felt in the solar plexus. These are the vibrations of “I” and “Am,” but without these words. Then the relaxation of the outbreath. “I” and “Am” dissolve back into the primordial, into warm nothingness. Then one senses a wordless impulse of need for another breath coming up from somewhere (from the hypothalamus? Latin, “below the wedding bed”).

A leader of meditation should not try to guide by words. At most quiet words of some ancient incomprehensible chant. I have received the Heart Sutra in this way, meditating with Zen monks at Tassajara (Spanish, “a place where meat is hung to dry”):

In emptiness, no form,
No feeling, thought, or choice,
No consciousness.
No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind;
No colour, sound, smell, taste, touch,
Nor what the mind takes hold of,
Nor act of sensing.

...

Gate Gate
Paragate
Parasamgate
Bodhi Svaha

And, in Zhikr, the Sufi ritual dance of “remembrance”

La illaha il al-lah
Arabic, “there are no gods, there is only the One Alone”