

A few Meditation Exercises

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0) Introduction

I wish to propose here a few exercises as a help for meditation. Let's make it clear: I'm not a teacher. What I propose here is inspired by my own personal practice and what I learned from teachers and other traditions. It is also enriched by my own spiritual path in general or my experience as incarnated human being. It is then far from being universal truth but I nevertheless believe that it can be helpful to share what, each of us, we have discovered through our own practice.

These are only exercises. It means this is not a teaching about meditation and the exercises are not a practice of meditation. They are only exercises that may help you to discover one or another aspect among many other important dimensions of meditation. They intend to give opportunities for direct experience rather than to provide more knowledge; it is more about getting obstacles out of the way and breaking down forms of resistance that we have in ourselves than about getting more knowledge. As Zen teaches us beautifully, all representations we have tend rather to be obstacles to the path; and yet they are nevertheless necessary as they guide us more or less in the direction we have to go. Each insight should bring us further than we were, but then it should be like a new threshold or a new starting point we leave behind, we detach from. We have to learn how to let go

of our insights and understandings; the path leads us forward and not backward.

Instructions about the practical technique and right position for meditation are given in many books that do that much better than I could repeat them here. Refer then to them. There are many forms of meditations and many forms of practice; some use concentration on breathing, other use a mantra (repetition of a word like “Maranatha” or similar). This is your choice, what you want to do. Follow also your intuition. The important is that the practice must suit you; yet it does not mean it is the easiest way; an effort is required but it should remain average. Buddha used to speak of the middle way as the just balance between extremes. Make an effort but not too much. The effort consists more in surrender than in achievement. We need to practice a gentle willingness but not wilfulness. Mindfulness is an important aspect of being present and aware of what is and what happens, but meditation is much more than mindfulness. It means it is more than what we do; meditation happens in us more than we do it, when we remove our resistance and diverse forms of attachment or illusion.

Meditation has no special purpose. It is mainly about being in the present and how to experience true being independently from our own representations. Becoming aware and observing the nature of our being: of our body, mind, spirit, emotions, pains, thoughts, etc. We tend to identify with our body-mind because they accompany us everywhere and we cannot be where they are not. But it does not mean that we have to identify with them. We can observe them as parts that seem almost detached from us, even if always attached! Thoughts and feelings and emotions happen in us and we can become aware of them as parts or events that happen in us but are not completely us. It means there is somewhere a point of awareness that can observe these happening. Am I this point of consciousness? Where am I? Who am I? It remains a mystery but we can try to delve in it. Meditation is probably the practice of this becoming aware of some partial facts and states of mind while consciousness concerns rather the wider picture. In general, in our practice, it is important to see that there is nothing to achieve through meditation. If we learn to observe we can become more peaceful and find a better union with the Ground of Being. But we do not achieve anything. All is given by Grace. The path consists rather in learning patience and surrender; it consists in letting go, in getting rid of obstacles and resistance.

In meditation there is a long tradition of search for enlightenment. As I personally never had any special powerful experience through meditation, I cannot talk about such experiences. For me meditation is a long term practice. I never experienced life changing revelations but yet meditation, as a general revelation about what life is about, changed radically my life and the way I live. The best, I would say, is not to expect anything striking. Meditation is a regular practice that can even sometimes be flat and monotonous, sometimes rich and joyful or luminous. Globally it is probably, in my sense, the richest way to progress in the discovery of life. Enlightenment is not a thunderstorm nor a lightening; it is, I believe, a deep change of mind, a metanoia (i.e. a conversion-repentance-change-of-mind as it is described by the Christian tradition) that transforms us fundamentally as well as it changes the way we understand the meaning of life and how we live. It is here important to make clear that repentance in the Christian tradition is not about sins and guilt; it is rather a very lucid way to consider who we are as we are; we have indeed to dare to see our deeper nature with all its qualities and flaws. When we dare to look at ourselves with total honesty, we are made free of our flaws and free to be ourselves, free also to see the world and to adapt to what it is because this world is perfect when we give up our will to control it. This is the true metanoia that repents and looks at the world in truth. Isn't it what Christianity calls judgement and justice when things are revealed without any veil. Truth is shown in all its reality... and nakedness and crudeness.

1) Breath and Body

This first exercise aims at focusing on what is part of ourselves that we ignore too often because we are so accustomed that it is always given. We are so accustomed to the fact we are breathing or that our heart beats and the blood circulates in our arteries and veins or that we have a skin, eyes, ears, nose, that we find it almost boring to consider them. Yet, by observing these basic functions of our biology, we become more aware of the flow of life that continuously animates us. We take it for granted but it is indeed in concentrating on these natural flows that we become aware of life as a miracle that happens at any moment. The miracle is breathing, feeling our skin, etc. or just being alive. Being is the key of life. The awareness of this miracle brings us back to the core of being, instead of being distracted by external events or finding escape into them. There is probably nothing else to expect from our experience of life than this flow of life and the awareness of it. All our projects and representations of what should be seem a bit insignificant in comparison with the depth of the mystery of this flow of life we experience at each instant. When we observe the nature of this flow of life we see how it is subtle and extremely mysterious and how it encompasses everything else. It is what makes us. It is the expression of the deeper essence of being that is at the root of life in general. It brings us in touch with the Ground of Being that is the root of everything that is.

Exercise

Concentrate on your breathing. Feel how the air is going in and out, how it lifts your lungs and your abdomen, how it tickles your nostrils, etc. or how it changes slowly, how it is influenced by the way you observe it, how it changes when you become more aware of it, etc. Observe each detail of it. Discard all thoughts. Come back to your breathing each time you go astray. You may try to count your breaths from 1 to 10, and then start again. Lucky in general if you can reach 10 without being led astray by thoughts, emotions, feelings, etc.

Or concentrate on the beating of your heart and on the flow of blood in your arteries. Feel it reach the end of your fingers or toes.

Or concentrate on your skin. Be aware how it wraps you all around.

Or look at the light of the candles and concentrate on it. Become the light.

Or listen to the noises inside (breathing) and outside you (birds songs, any noises, the mower of the neighbour, etc.). Or even a gentle music you choose. Be aware of them without judging whether they are pleasant or not, whether they disturb your peace or not. If it is helpful, you can label them: sound, bird, etc. Become the sound itself. They are just noises around you, and you are the observer. Or listen to the silence: it is impossible to grasp it.

When you sit for a longer period of time, you can feel discomfort in some parts of the body, or even pain. Try to focus on the pain and find where it is anchored. You'll observe that it is difficult to locate the pain. It moves, it escapes your observation and seems not to be graspable.

Commentary

It is important to understand that the concentration on the breath (or similar) is a means not to be distracted by thoughts and feelings. When one concentrates on one of the mentioned parts or functions of our body or mind, one remains better in the present, in mindfulness, because breath is so central to our being alive (one say: to give out a last breath = to die). Yet mindfulness is only a necessary minimal condition. It is not the final purpose of meditation. What is important is to be aware that Life is an energy that animates us. It is a Mystery. In this mystery a Presence is acting.

So, when we are present to the present moment we are better in touch with this source of life. Breathing in, as the flow of Life, breathing out, as our own surrender. The less we have a representation of this Presence, the better. We can then better surrender and open to what it is and let it be what it is and act upon us. But this awareness and “feeling” of the Presence are not depending on us. First it is very discreet and hardly perceptible. Second it is not the fruit of our effort to be mindful, but it is given by grace to us. Remember, there is nothing to be achieved in meditation. It is only about being. Meditation is not the fruit of wilfulness. Yet a benevolent and wide open willingness is necessary.

2) Qualities of Awareness

The aim of this next exercise is to investigate the different qualities of awareness.

(The following text is an extract from Gerald May: *Will and Spirit*)

In Zen there is a specific form of meditation called *shikantaza*, or “just-sitting.” This is the most utterly simple form of Zen meditation, but because it is so simple and involves so little “doing,” it is very difficult to maintain for any length of time. But if such an exercise is attempted briefly, it can help one observe the openness and alertness qualities of awareness. Read through the following exercise and then give it a try. It should take no more than five minutes.

Exercise

The only task is to sit on a chair for five minutes. Your eyes can be open or closed. If awareness remained open and clear throughout these five minutes, you would simply sit there. You would constantly be aware of sitting, of the chair, of the room, and of your breathing. You would also notice thoughts come and go, and all of this perception would be constant. But you will find that this is not the case.

Commentary

Two things happen that will interfere with a clear, constant perception of just sitting there. First, certain thoughts or images will take your attention “off” or “away” into something other than just sitting there. This is how awareness becomes preoccupied and turbulent, restricted and less open. For when your attention is taken “away” you will lose touch with sitting, with breathing, with the room, even with thinking. Not all thoughts will do this. Some will just come and go, and be a part of just sitting. But others will kidnap your awareness by making you pay attention to them. With this exercise you can easily see how this kidnapping causes awareness to become preoccupied and less open.

The second thing that happens is a kind of dullness or drowsiness that will come over you and cloud your awareness of just sitting. This is how awareness becomes less wakeful and alert.

In this exercise it is especially important not to work at keeping or holding your awareness on just sitting - to do so would be to restrict awareness right from the outset. Instead, just watch what happens. When you notice that your awareness has been carried “away” from just sitting, simply call it back. Similarly, when you notice that it has become dull and lethargic, gently wake it up. Do not try to hold or maintain anything. Just keep bringing yourself back whenever you have strayed in either direction.

In this exercise, most people find that the first thing that happens to the awareness of just-sitting is that some thought or image carries them away. During the first minute or two they find it relatively easy to notice this and bring awareness back. As time progresses however, these divergences occur more frequently and last longer before they are noticed. About halfway through the five minutes, most people begin to identify some moments of dullness and cloudiness, and later on begin to recognize that dullness and distraction are often occurring simultaneously, creating moments that seem to have a sleepy, dreamlike quality.

Whatever your experience, think back on it in terms of the following water metaphor. For a while, especially at the very beginning, awareness was quite clear and calm. Then some turbulence arose. At certain other points awareness became muddied and dulled. And probably later on there were times when it was both muddied and turbulent.

Many people who try this find that one of the thoughts that most preoccupies them is the idea that they “should” somehow be able to keep their awareness calm and clear throughout the five minutes. For some, this self-imposed demand becomes so central that they spend the entire time struggling and find it difficult to observe even the most obvious changes in awareness. Sometimes people will even presume that this exercise is one of trying to keep thoughts from entering awareness. I know these problems very well, for I have had to struggle with such needless self-imposed demands as much as anyone. It is a sign of our addiction to wilfulness that, in the absence of demands placed upon us from the outside, we create them for ourselves.

It is extremely difficult for most people to become aware of anything without feeling they must meddle with it in one way or another. A classical paradigm for this can be experienced simply by watching your breathing for a few moments. See if you can be aware of your breathing without altering it. Breathing and thoughts are, after all, intimately connected for the contemplative. Kundalini Yoga has long maintained that thoughts and breathing were utterly dependent on each other; a pause in one is a pause in the other. William James in his “last word” on the subject, came to equate thoughts, breathing, and consciousness:

“But breath, which was ever the original of “spirit,” breath moving outwards, between the glottis and the nostrils, is, I am persuaded, the essence out of which philosophers have constructed the entity known to them as consciousness.”

Many things in life demand our intervention. Willingness may demand strong action. But as a culture we have become so habituated to wilfulness that we lack the flexibility of being able to “let something be” even in those few precious moments when nothing really is demanded of us. For many people, life thus becomes a long, tense, and tedious process of almost constant meddling.

This wilful meddling is the most universal obstacle, the most frequently encountered blockade to surrender. Our addiction to wilfulness constantly pulls us away from direct, pure experiences of consciousness, being, and mystery. But addictions are sometimes sacred gifts. Sometimes wilfulness takes us to a “rock bottom” in which it burns itself out in the fires of its own energy. Then we can be opened to the possibilities of willingness. But something else may happen as well. Now and then to every human being priceless moments are given in which wilfulness stops, spontaneously and totally without intent. At these times, awareness reflects everything with total clarity and brightness, and one’s whole attitude toward life is at least momentarily transformed. Will and spirit become one.

These are moments of unity. Sometimes they are called peak experiences. Sometimes they are seen as religious. They are certainly mysterious. And they are inevitably spiritual.

3) Mind – Body – Memory

This next exercise aims at focusing on the mind and how it works. We usually tend to identify with our mind and body and memory because they all accompany us wherever we go and we cannot be where they are not. So, we think we are the body and the mind and the memory. But they are only parts of ourselves. We can observe them. In the same way as we can know we are not the hand because we can observe it, so we can also know we are not the body or the mind or the memory because we can also observe them. The eye cannot see itself, the observer cannot observe him/herself. This means that we are the observer and the body / mind / memory are also parts of us but we should not identify with them.

Our mind is a strange instrument. It never stops working, ever producing thoughts without interruption as the movement of the needle of a sewing machine that never can stop moving up and down. Yet the thoughts are not always trustworthy. If one hear a rooster crow, immediately the mind produces the image of a rooster. It does not know in fact whether the rooster that crows is white or red but it nevertheless produces an image without caring whether this image is reliable. The mind has void in horror. It is ready to invent anything to prevent us from doubting its capacity to solve any problem. Yet this capacity is indeed strongly defined by our own past experiences and it can only delve into the stock of memories it has accumulated. If it does not find the necessary material, it will invent anything in order not to be discovered as a cheat!

Exercise

Focus your attention on breathing. Each time a thought emerges, observe its nature. Do not focus on it. Let it drift through your mind as a cloud through the sky. Do not struggle against it but be aware of its presence without being seduced by it. Observe how thoughts pass through, how they arise and die out. We can be the observer of all what happens in us. Thoughts seem to have an independent existence from us or from our control, like clouds in the sky do: they do not depend on us. Thoughts seem to happen in us more than we actively think them. They seem to arise by themselves and try to catch us! Observe also how moods arise and vanish: sadness, anger, impatience, boredom are inner waves that we do not control or even generate. Marvel at all the creativity of the mind to generate this firework of rather meaningless events that exist only in your mind.

In a similar way, when you practice walking meditation, observe the behaviour of the body: how you lift the foot, how it is hanging in mid-air, then moves forward and touches the ground, first partially, then fully with the whole weight of the body on it. Observe how the weight of the body moves from one foot to the other and back in a movement of the hips and of the whole body. If you observe in more detail how the foot moves forwards, you will see how the movement is in fact not unified or continuous; it appears truly broken into many mini-movements generated by many muscles that act one after the other in a certain discontinuity; they are made of many antagonistic pressures that look a bit uncoordinated. Each movement is indeed decomposed into many tensions that succeed each other. Like ants in a queue: this is not a continuous thread but an addition of small particles (ants) that follows each other, each one in their own, and sometimes contradictory ways. One becomes aware how each movements is indeed not one but a burst of many jolts. The same can be said of our thoughts that are not coherent as we believe they are.

Commentary

These different forms of observation teach us how our mind is little reliable and how our body is very awkward. Similarly we can observe how our memory creates past, present and future. But indeed there is only the present. The past is in fact a reminiscence and interpretation of what has

happened, but it is in the present and it is distinct from the event because it has processed the fact to make it more suitable to whom we are now and not to disturb how we see our environment and how we are aware of ourselves (self-image). We can see also that there is no future as such but rather the projection into the future of our expectations, hopes, fears, etc. now in the present. It means past and future exist only in the present. There is only the present moment.

We will also feel emotions rising in us. Slowly they take shape and amplify and become a wave that takes us with them. We then follow them and surrender to their energy. Let's try rather to observe the phenomenon of each emotion rising and then dying, how this energy that shapes it is like a wave. We tend to label it and to be caught into turmoil by it; then we tend to evaluate how we behave in reaction to it. Evaluation means judgement and often guilt feeling or frustration to have been caught will arise. Let's try rather to be the observer and to see how the wave amplifies and breaks and crushes and rolls and dies out, as we would observe it on the beach. Let's try not to be taken by it, but be a witness of it. It is indeed a beautiful piece of cinema! And if we are taken by it, let's observe how this happens, without condemning our "failure". No, there is no failure; it is just what is.

There is something strange in these waves of emotions. It seems sometimes that we can more or less control them or orient them; we can then control whether they amplify or whether they vanish, or even how they awake other types of emotions. And other times (in most cases) we feel completely powerless and our effort consists in resisting or trying not to be swallowed, and even that seems an impossible task. Sometimes even there is no special distinct emotion rising and yet there is a sort of heavy background of sadness or depression or anger or anything similar that stains our whole being (and time of meditation) and that we cannot get rid of. It seems to be a kind of latent energy that does not rise in a clear way (as the wave does) but paralyses us, like a muddy swamp, and we feel powerless to escape it. We have then to sit and observe how it remains present, even when it is inactive in a certain sense, and wait that it dissolves by itself. Observation becomes then probably the best way to dismantle this kind of negative climate; an observation that witnesses what is without judging it: just pure observation. Under sharp observation it usually vanishes as if it could not resist clear identification. If not, patience remains the last refuge. We can experience how recurring emotions or trends slowly dissipates with time, when one observes them. It can take many months to dissolve recurring obsessing emotions, but they usually do not resist regular examination if we are willing to be free of them.

The conclusion is that our mind is not reliable, and our body or memory either. But they are not less valuable for that reason. They remain the source of wonder they are. These three forms of observation show us how much we create our own reality through many projections: the thoughts override reality; the past is falsified, the future is predefined by fear of it, the present is denied in its presence when it is mastered by our mind that defines a content that is non-real, etc.

4) The Actor and the Observer

This next exercise aims at focusing on the role of the observer. We believe that we are one but we are indeed made of so many parts (body, mind, memory, thoughts, emotions, feelings, self, ego, soul, spirit, etc.). But, as we saw in the previous exercises, we can be the observer of all what happens in us. As we have observed, thoughts or emotions happen in us more than we think thoughts or generate emotions. They seem to arise by themselves. Our body seems also to have its own independent life that we do not control.

Yet somewhere there is someone (we call this someone "I") that observes what happens. When we

become aware of this observer, we learn to become a witness to everything that happens to us and in us. This observer is neutral; s/he just registers what happens, if possible without judging. It takes in what is and accepts what is. S/he is without judgement and likes what is. We are all the time used to have second thoughts: I wish he could..., I believe he should..., I'm expecting her to...; but in becoming the detached observer we just learn to love what is, as it is, without changing it; and marvelling about it. Life is nothing else than a fascinating show!

In fact there is an actor and an observer. The actor is the "I" that acts in life, moves, talks, hears, is moved, feels, thinks, chooses, etc. and the observer is the one who watches all that as if it were sitting neutrally in a seat in a theatre, as a distinct observer that is not at all involved in what the actor does but is the witness that sees reality as it is. S/he observes the moves, the acts, the feelings, the emotions, the thoughts, the frustrations and deceptions, etc. Both are necessary: there cannot be any observer without the actor, and reciprocally.

When we sit in the seat of the observer, we are at the core of our being. What the actor does is not insignificant. It is serious because it is the experience of life and it is the way we may discover what life is about. It is also the expression of our deepest self. As such it is important. But it is also all the illusions we create, all the projections of our self importance, all the plays of the ego. It is in any case just a temporary stage of being in our time of incarnation that expresses itself into the world. In that way it is anecdotal, because it is temporary acting and not pure being. But we are incarnated beings and the way we go in the world is our true material expression of what we understand life to be. Yet only our true being remains primordial, as the observer in the seat who is aware of what is and loves it, whatever it is.

Exercise:

Be the witness. Look at yourself as an actor as if this actor were completely distinct from the observer you try to be, like another person. In the same way as you may observe pedestrians in the street who come and go, without you being involved except as neutral observer. Adopting this distance (yet compassionate), observe everything that rises as it has been described in the earlier exercises: body, moves, pains, emotions, feelings, thoughts, etc. Again here, this is great cinema!

Commentary

In order to make this description of the observer and the actor more understandable, I will describe a short anecdote that may serve as a metaphor: Once I went to Prague where I went to the theatre and saw a show made of a mixture of acting and cinema. Prague is a beautiful and lively city with a very hilly part on one side of the river Vltava, with many steep and narrow streets and stairs, up and down the hill. The show by the Laterna Magika consisted in a normal bare stage with two actors and, as only stage setting, one screen in the background on which a film was projected that showed, in a constant movement, these steep streets and stairs of the old Prague called Mala Strana. The two actors on stage were an elegant couple dressed in colourful clothes, on roller skates, sometimes truly on the stage, and sometimes as figures in the film that was projected on the screen. It means that sometimes they were truly, in bones and flesh, playing on the stage, and sometimes it was only their images in the film on the screen, in both cases playing as a couple that was rollerskating down these streets and stairs. It was amazing how one could hardly notice the passage from one (the stage) to the other (the film) because they had of course the same clothes, with the same roller skates, whether acting on the stage according to the constant changes in the film as a background (a constantly moving backstage) or only as an image on the screen where one saw them really rollerskating down these steep streets and stairs. And, on one of the theatre seats, there was me in my armchair watching the show. Now let's describe the metaphor: the spectator, the actor and the

screen are the three aspects of the same person at the same time. 1) The spectator, me as an observer, is the one who is aware. 2) The actor is me in my everyday life, acting, doing, feeling, etc. 3) The screen is a projection of my representations and desires that guide me. We are at the same time the actor and the spectator, and we are all the time more or less aware of the screen in the background (our intuitions or representations) to which we adapt constantly in an acrobatic exercise. The three processes are simultaneous: they happen at the same time and in the same place. The spectator is consciousness (witness of what is); the actor is experience (action and reaction in the world); and the screen is perception (representations of and projections onto reality). I let you now examine this metaphor and what it means in the proposed exercise; and essentially in our daily experience.

5) Split second Vision

The aim of this next exercise is to investigate consciousness-without-content.

(This text is also, as above, an extract from Gerald May: *Will and Spirit*)

While it is not absolutely necessary to know the state of consciousness-without-content, it certainly would help [to better apprehend what it is]. Therefore I offer three brief exercises, one or more of which should give almost everyone at least a hint. They are not recommended for protracted practice (see my *Open Way* [New York: Paulist, 1977] or other books on meditation and quiet prayer for true practice methods), but they can provide glimpses:

Exercise 1

Sit quietly and look at an object. Stare at it and concentrate on it until it seems very clear. When it does, suddenly close your eyes.

Exercise 2

Or sit quietly with eyes shut, concentrating on the darkness. When you feel relaxed and at ease with this, suddenly open your eyes.

Exercise 3

Or sit quietly with eyes closed and concentrate on your breathing. Follow it in and out with your attention. When you are carefully attending to your breath, pause in the breathing for a moment.

Commentary

At the shutting or opening of the eyes, or at the pause in breathing, there will be an instant in which awareness is wide-awake, open, clear, but totally free of "content" in any form. Everything is there just as it always is, but without any identification. Further, there is no sense of "me." Very quickly some identification, reaction, or thought will come. The moment has passed.

6) I Am

The aim of this next exercise is to focus on the question: Who am I?

I know I'm not my body, I'm not my mind, I'm not my emotions, I'm not my thoughts. They are all parts of me but none of them represent what I am. I'm rather in the observer that sits and observes the actor, as in one of the previous exercises. Yet who is the observer? Who observes what happens on the stage? Who am I? Am I just a point of consciousness that can observe what happens in the body, in the mind, etc. and become aware of it, while everything that happens seems to be like exterior to me, or happening in separate parts of my being-in-the-world? How am I involved in the world?

Consciousness is wider than awareness. Awareness concerns what is here and now. Consciousness situates it in a wider context, in a wider frame. It is not an intellectual understanding; it is a contemplative insight how it fits into the cosmos. Where stands the witness between these two states?

Exercise

Sit in meditation. Be aware that you are. Ask the question: who am I? Do not look at the question as an enigma to be solve with your left brain (rational thinking) but embrace the ontological interrogation with your right brain (intuition) like a koan. Observe that everything is perfect as it is. Life is a miracle of each second. Perfection and harmony are given here and now. You do not need anything else, or anything more. Learn to love fully what is, as it is. Marvel at all what is. Marvel at the creativity of your mind to produce these never-ending and not so reliable thoughts that run through your mind as clouds through the sky. Do not attach at anything you observe. Let it flow, let it go. Just be aware and wonder. This is like a firework! The witness of all this is like a point which is not physical and which seems to have no form. Who is this "I" that is witness? Who is witness?

Commentary

You will observe that it is difficult to be a witness without being aware of oneself. We all the time tend to go back to our self-identification and to think of ourselves as a distinct physical being. But the attempt to become the witness requires that this self-identification dissolves. We have to become a point of awareness without content: a witness that only witnesses. This is a form of complete detachment without indifference. Now, once again, there is nothing to achieve. Too much wilfulness to become the witness is counterproductive. But nevertheless slowly we learn and progress on this path, especially when we become conscious that this self-identification is not real because it identifies with our envelop more than with our true self.

7) The Other as Myself - Love

The aim of this next exercise is to focus on how we relate to others and how we are related to them.

As we identify with our physical envelop, we feel we are distinct from others. Are we truly distinct beings as it appears to be from the physical point of view? If we are linked in a certain way, how can we perceive the link that relates us to them? Are they just separate entities and we sit side by side, like eggs in a basket? Or are we all parts of a same body rooted in the same essence? Is not

community a further stage of our evolution where we start to become aware of the wider body we form as parts of a same whole?

In essence we are all very similar, despite the differences of culture, age, gender, etc. We are all generated and shaped by the same essential energy of life. Certainly our life conditions (personal and collective history) has impacted on us. We have been shaped in positive and in negative by our culture and religion. Yet many facts and interpretations separate us one from another. If he or she is not a chosen friend or relative we tend often to perceive the other as a threat. But it is mainly projection from our side. And if the other behaves in a hurtful way (whether by intention or by ignorance or awkwardness) there are generally reasons why he or she does so. Not necessarily reasons that justify the behaviour but nevertheless reasons that explain it. Who truly decides to behave in an asocial or criminal way just for the pleasure of it? There is always, in each of us, dark motivations that surface. We all have a connivance with evil, whether we like it or not, whether we accept it or not. The more we see this, the more we see that, in our flaws as in our skills and qualities, we are then all very similar in essence. Yet there are also fundamental differences in energy, in attitude, in openness to others, etc.

Exercise

Sit in meditation and embrace the others with compassion and without judgement, accepting who they are. You can focus on a special person with whom you feel in a troublesome relationship or you can just welcome the other in general as a stranger or focus on a special group of people who are going through a time of (extreme) suffering. It can be one single person or a whole nation. Open your heart to them, as if they are other yourselves. Observe how we are all very similar and rooted in the same Ground of Being. Breath in and out, breathing out some peace, breathing in some acceptance of the other (or breathing in some of their own suffering in a compassionate way). If we may remain in this form of all-encompassing compassion we open to the others and embrace their being, whatever it is.

Commentary

There is, in the Gospel of John, this fascinating dialogue between Jesus and Peter which is always badly translated because translations never express the gradation that constitutes an essential aspect of the original text in the terms that define LOVE. Note that, in Greek, there are three different words for "love": EROS (energy of desire), PHILIA (friendship) and AGAPE (father's love):

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter: "Simon, son of John, do you love me (AGAPE - father's love) more than these?"

He said to him: "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you (PHILIA - friendship)."

He said to him: "Feed my lambs."

A second time he said to him: "Simon, son of John, do you love me (AGAPE - father's love)?"

He said to him: "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you (PHILIA - friendship)."

He said to him: "Tend my sheep."

He said to him the third time: "Simon, son of John, do you love me (PHILIA - friendship)?"

Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me (PHILIA - friendship)?"

And he said to him: "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you (PHILIA - friendship)."

Jesus said to him: "Feed my sheep."

Let's now look in more detail at these three expressions or meanings of LOVE:

EROS is an egocentric form of love. It is centred on ourselves, on our own needs and perceptions. It is focused on our own desires. It does not consider much the other. There are different forms of

desire:

The most basic ones concern our needs for food, drink, shelter, pleasure, sexuality. They are part of our life, they are even a necessity for our survival. They are helping us to get what we need, but they become most of the time a kind of imprisonment, because they make us needy, chasing these objects of our desires and looking for pleasure all the time. Desire becomes attachment. Pleasure reinforces attachment and dependency. Attachment is not love, it is only dependency. Often we confuse love and attachment. Detachment is the way to freedom; it does not mean indifference.

But our passions and desires can also lead us to search for truth, to search for God. There are three degrees of desires: the one which is attachment, the one which is desire for healing and the one which is desire for God. Love as EROS can also lead us to God in a certain way, because it can be a deep need for being connected to our Source. As EROS helps us to satisfy our basic needs, it guides us also to answer this deeper and basic spiritual need to find who we are, in our self. It seems contradictory, but EROS and search for God do not exclude one another. Nevertheless EROS is never a complete love, it is only the first step towards God, because of our basic needs for this deeper Reality.

PHILIA (affection, friendship) is a form of love where we are more attentive to the needs of the other, but we nevertheless choose to be friends with the ones we love because they are nice to us. PHILIA chooses its own friends. Love is also a decision: we have to choose the ones we want to love, either because we like them already for what they seem to be or because we want them to become our friends. If we can choose whom we want to love, we can also choose to love in general. It is why love is a decision. We know we have this power of decision about whom we want to love and that we can make it happen. Because of this ability to decide whom we want to love or to love in general, PHILIA is more than EROS.

We are all needy for love; we are usually looking for the ones who can provide us with love before we can give love to others. How many couples are bound by this kind of needy selfish love? It is only EROS. As long we are looking for love for ourselves, it is difficult to find it, because love happens when we can give it to the other. First we have to give love. It seems impossible to provide love as long as we feel dry and in need for love. But when we discover that the universe is harmony, that God is the source of love and that we are already loved before we start even living, then it transforms our life; it provides us with this energy and strength to love the other before s/he loves us. Love can flow through us out of this mysterious source which is God.

PHILIA is this choice for love; it can be very generous when it recognises that God is the source of love in me. But it concerns in general only the ones I have chosen. In the Gospel of John, Peter recognises that he loves Jesus (PHILIA) because Jesus loves him (AGAPE). How could he love Jesus differently?

Our own will means choice and selection, but in this sense it means also exclusion.

EROS, PHILIA and AGAPE are like three boxes, one in each other; AGAPE contains PHILIA which contains EROS. In our growth we learn to grow from the smaller into the next "bigger box", as a further stage of development. And these three forms of love are always mixed one with another. They need each other to express themselves, especially the outer boxes need the energy of the inner boxes. AGAPE needs EROS. PHILIA needs EROS.

AGAPE is the form of love which does not select. It is the father's or the mother's love. It embraces the whole universe without distinction, as the rain falls on everything and everybody, the good and the bad without acceptance of the person. This form of love is real compassion, it means it is able to suffer with the other. This form of love accepts not to be reciprocated. It loves but does not need to

be loved; it can love in secret as God does when we ignore him. We can love our husband / wife, our son / daughter without them knowing even we love them. We can love our brothers and sisters in Christ, it means every human being, every living creature, every sentient being, without need for return.

Love is not always “nice”. It is our strongest energy in life; it is firm, it requires a lot from us, it is disturbing because it is all the time on the move. It is peaceful, but it never settles. God is a mother / a father. We can find refuge in her / him. But it is not a cuddle. It is a true security because it is true love which allows us to find our true self, but it is not a form of regression, it is very challenging. It takes us out of our comfort zone. The cross is unavoidable, it is a harsh reality of our life. Love brings inevitably suffering if we are true to God, although suffering is of course not equivalent with love. Love is the main stream in our life, suffering is only the conflict which love brings us into, too often, in our chaotic relationship with the world which does not recognise God as its way to justice. Love is peace but only when our joy can embrace our suffering, i.e. when the joy of love is stronger than anything else.

8) Koans and Enigmas

This next exercise aims at focusing at a special enigma or issue in our daily life. It can be a challenging situation we encounter regularly or a decisive choice we have to make in a near future.

In Zen tradition there is a practice of what is called koans. These are enigmas that ask impossible questions, or questions that cannot be solved by our intellect because they challenge our rational mind and common sense. Among the most famous koans there are: “what is the noise of the clapping of one hand?” or “What was your face before your parents were born?” In the practice of Zen these koans are intended to be meditated upon, but not in a rational way, not with our intellect, not with our rational mind. It is then important to let the question sink into our heart-mind and let the answer arise, that will most often be expressed rather under the form of a gesture or a short word than by a long explanation. As I never could or did not commit to really enter this practice, I will not comment it further. But we can be inspired by this practice and extend it to the enigmas of our own life, to our own koans. This is much more familiar to my own practice. For instance if we have to take an important decision or if we live in a situation of conflict in our daily or professional life, we can meditate on this situation in the same way as it is done with koans in Zen practice, i.e. without focusing on the problem in a rational way (with the left hemisphere of the brain) but in letting the solution surface naturally, by our deeper intuition, whatever this mysterious faculty may be.

Exercise

Sit in meditation. Concentrate on the situation you want to examine. It can be a conflict with a person you meet regularly, or a decision you have to take or even a metaphysical question that intrigues you, even a scientific enigma! Do not think rationally about it but try rather to visualise and to feel what it is; make it real and present in you, in your heart-mind. Then meditate on it without focusing on the topic but keeping it present in yourself. Find indeed your personal best way to do so. It is impossible to propose a simple recipe. You have to discover your own way through your own practice. And let the response surface. Of course meditation is not a practice that intends a result; it is not an aim oriented activity. Hence do not expect great revelations nor definitive solutions to your enigma. But let it ripen slowly. And your own feeling about what may arise will indicate to you how trustworthy it is. There is no magic; this is rather a way of letting arise what we

maybe already know, or it is the inspiration by the Spirit or something like that. This exercise makes you aware how we are connected to a deeper Ground of Being that acts in us in a mysterious way; we can call it morphogenetic fields, memory of the Universe, action of the Spirit, etc.. It is not us but it is acting in us.

Commentary

You will notice that, if an intuition arises, you will tend to concentrate on it and to grasp it with your rational mind. What the right brain hemisphere produces is generally then processed by the left brain hemisphere. When we try to grasp the content of intuitions with our rational mind, it is a bit like catching the butterfly; it is beautiful when it flies freely but we destroy it and its beauty when we try to catch it; we break its fragility and freedom. Intuitions are similar; they need to fly freely and be all the time on the move; nothing can stop them, or they die. The fact that, in this exercise, you tend to return to your rational mind means also that your mind will produce new thoughts and the meditation process will be broken. You will be back in your thinking mode. In such a situation it is probably precious to register the intuition that has arisen. Take a short note of it on a piece of paper and then try to come back to the meditation process or to your koan practice.