A PHILOSOPHER'S INITIAL ATTEMPT AT MEDITATION

by

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There is a thoroughly practical element in Buddhism, a certain lack of pretension and an unwillingness to make extravagant claims either about this life or a life hereafter. There is little if any attachment to dogma or doctrine, and no concept whatsoever of personal immortality or a living God. The Buddha is said to have maintained a "noble silence" on those occasions in which a disciple asked about the existence of a Deity.

Students of comparative religion are often surprised to discover that Buddhism is an atheistic tradition, atheistic in the sense that it acknowledges no occult Being endowed with the characteristics of personality, namely mind, will, and emotion. The task of the practicing Buddhist is to retrace in his or her own personal experience the steps which led Gautama, the Sakyamuni Buddha, to enlightenment. If these steps fail to work, find another path that does.

It is further recognized in Buddhism that our finite human existence does not ultimately make any rational sense, and that each one of us is rather remarkably insane. A person might spend a
lifetime trying to find a rational, intellectually satisfying explanation of human existence. The Buddhist recognizes the futility of any such cognitive quest and seeks instead the fullest possible appreciation of the passing moment; hence the laughing Buddha. To understand the utter irrationality of life is at the same time to be supremely rational. The paradox is only an apparent one: rational religion, faced with the absurdity of death, denies the finality of it all by inventing another world, a supernatural domain in which the ultimate answers denied us in this life will be (rationally) provided in the next. Buddhism makes no similar claim; a person need feel no sense of sin or deficiency, of having been born under the conditions of the Fall. There is only the need to look within oneself to find whatever meaning life has to offer. The practical element is this, that Buddhism provides step by step guidelines to the realization of one's inner spiritual potential. The path is meditation.

I never had much luck with prayer. It always seemed too contrived, a projection of myself in the general direction of the Absolute, in the desperate hope of a responding Object who could presumably be bent to my will if I could ever get the formula right. At first glance meditation seemed even more contrived, a form of escapism employed by people who lacked the ingenuity to face life's day to day problems. So when a friend loaned me a copy of The Three
Pillars of Zen by Philip Kapleau it aroused only mild interest. As I leafed through the pages, however, it became evident that what I was looking at was a practical manual of style for meditation. The step by step procedures were outlined, along with for directions for how to sit, what to do with the hands, and so on. In addition, the text indicated specifically the expectations one should entertain about the effects of meditation on the mind and body, effects such as hallucinations, euphoria, tranquility, and the like. The directions were pragmatic and empirical, and the results would be testable, that is, subject either to confirmation or falsification within my own subjective experience. The beginner was advised to assume a proper posture and concentrate on the counting of the breathing in and breathing out. So I thought, why not? I will become spiritually radiant and impress my friends at parties.

I quickly found I could assume none of the traditional Oriental postures, such as the lotus positions, and had to resign myself to sitting on the edge of the bed. An ignominious start. It was possible to budget twenty or thirty minutes each morning for this experiment, and definite patterns began to emerge within the first few days. Often it was impossible to concentrate; there would be the continual distraction of other thoughts rushing in, and regardless of the effort I could not count as far as ten. Coffee
turned out to be a contradiction; there would be a mild jangling rush from even a small amount. Often there was the feeling of not being really serious about meditation, of simply playing around with it. And yet I could almost invariably count on a tranquilizing effect, however mild, and there was an emerging tendency not to become irritated at situations which normally would irk me. My set of expectations gleaned from reading the book were gradually being realized.

One morning in early Autumn, after an uneventful half hour of concentration, I drove to work. Birds were singing and the fleecy clouds against the sharp blue sky held out the promise of afternoon showers. Driving along the street it suddenly occurred to me, to my surprise and momentary alarm, that I was not watching the road. With great effort I could force myself to stare at the roadway ahead, but the moment I relaxed, my gaze would inevitably drift right back up to the sky. Then, incredibly, it dawned on me that I was aware of everything happening in my field of vision, from periphery to periphery. While staring at the sky I was at the same time alert, vividly so, to all the variables one has to keep in mind in order to drive safely. It was a complete radial immersion in my perceptual field, accompanied by an overflowing euphoria. Nor would the mood go away. It persisted at work and turned out to be contagious. I felt extremely accepting toward everyone, and could
witness the subtle changes which this attitude effected in people around me, strangers as well as colleagues; they became more accepting of me, which in turn enhanced my own self-acceptance, the opposite of a vicious circle.

That evening I went to a football game. My unfocused gaze drifted naturally and spontaneously to some point around midfield and remained there, yet it was possible at the same time, radially, to envision the entire stadium and to keep track of the mechanics of the play as the teams paraded back and forth across my field of vision. A fight broke out in the row immediately in front of me. There were bitter words and flashing knives. My whole environment was boiling. I continued to contemplate the point on the field, and yet at the same time I was quite aware of all the steps which would have to be taken in order to make an escape. Then just as quickly as it had flared, the fight subsided and tempers were soothed, no damage done. My mood remained the same. Some time thereafter I ordered a beer, and with literally the first sip I returned to a state of ordinary consciousness. My natural high was over.

Reflecting later on the events of the day, it seemed increasingly clear that my experience was distinctively Buddhist in character, rather than merely psychedelic. It was at least psychedelic in the more literal sense of the term, inasmuch as the
ordinary intensity of my sensory perception was deeply expanded, accompanied by an almost overwhelming euphoria. But it went beyond this. The ultimate goal in Zen meditation is satori, the awakening flash of insight into the emptiness of one's true inner Self or Buddha-nature, and the proper place of that Self in this illusory world given to the senses. To become enlightened is to transcend the duality between Self and the world, and to have an actual experience of the underlying unity in which particular phenomena are grounded. I have little doubt that I had a satori experience of sorts, probably at around the modest level of the second Oxherding picture, "Finding the tracks." It was enlightening, and it pointed in a direction.

Reflecting still further, it occurred to me that meditation had in no way caused my experience; it simply allowed it. I believe that there are many immanent states of non-ordinary consciousness which lie dormant within us. These are natural and normal and are most clearly seen in small children at play, if we are attentive. As we grow older we become socially conditioned; but the states can be remembered, so to speak. Meditation is one way to unblock our conditioning and open the maieutic door to renewed awareness. To become suddenly aware of a non-linear immersion in one's perceptual field need not be frightening, for the world is then compresently experienced not as an external adversary but as an environment one
blends in with, in harmony with the natural flow of the processes of which we are now a part and with which at last we merge.