

ZEN MEDITATION

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Teachings on meditation generally border upon injunctions which require the seeker to practise a withdrawal into what may be called a sort of inwardisation of one's own self, implying thereby a setting aside of certain characteristics as not pertaining to the features of meditation. There are features in the world which do not go hand in hand with those features which are regarded as coincident with the meditative process. This is an outcome of the general teachings on even mystical meditations of the larger category: a detachment preceding an association with another set of characteristics which are considered as more real than those which are set aside as either unnecessary or sometimes even as unreal. Those realities of life which are considered as irreconcilable with meditation are given a secondary importance, and the primary importance is given to selected characteristics associated with what is called the object of meditation. We will find this feature prevalent in all the religions of the world. Whatever be the denomination or the nature of the faith of the religion, there is an ascetic tendency present in injunctions on meditation.

A discipline of the self is often identified with the process of meditation, and the very word 'discipline' suggests to our minds a segregation of selected characteristics of our personality or environment as apart from the generally prevalent characteristics in the world. Every discipline is a kind of segregation from the generally prevalent features of human society or the world as a whole. It is not a natural movement with nature. There is a sort of necessity made to be felt in the mind of the seeker to reject certain features as obstructive, unreal, or sometimes even undivine in their nature. The object of meditation and all the features associated with meditation are considered as divine in some degree or in some sense, and therefore everything that is not capable of being so associated with meditation goes by the name of the undivine; and inasmuch as we are told that the divine is the real, the undivine goes into the limbo of unrealities.

There is some great point in this teaching, and also a great problem arising from it. The essentiality and the meaningful point of this teaching is that there is a transcendent impulse operating behind the urge for spiritual meditations of any type. One may not even understand the meaning of the word 'transcendent', but even without having any idea as to the connotation of these ideologies, there is an impulse from within the seeker to rise above the prevailing conditions of life. This placing oneself, or even a desire to place oneself, in a condition which is other than the prevailing conditions of life is the transcendent impulse. 'Transcendence' is a well-known word suggesting a novel meaning: a wrenching of oneself from the conditions in which one finds oneself. This wrenching is done in a peculiar linguistic manner; that is why it is transcendence, and not merely an ordinary wrenching process. It is a rising above, in a sense.

Transcendence means rising above. This definition of the term 'transcendence' as 'rising above' is also to be explained a little further because when we travel in an airplane we are rising above the surface of the Earth, but we are not transcending the Earth. The airplane does not transcend the Earth merely because it is rising above it. So,

transcendence is not simply rising above in the ordinary visible, empirical sense. It is a peculiar kind of rising from a lower degree of reality to a higher degree of reality, such as when we recover health after a period of illness we may be said to transcend a condition of our body into a higher one. The ill or sick condition of the body is transcended by health. It is transcended because it is higher and superior in every sense of the term.

Meditation seekers and teachers have sought to bring out the essential of the teaching that the world is to be transcended in meditation. Often, we are told to meditate on God. All novitiates in meditation say this: "I try to meditate on God." As everyone thinks that God is not in this world, therefore to think of God would be to contemplate a transcendent circumstance, due to which necessity seekers try to isolate themselves even empirically by a makeshift transcendence. Even when you leave your home and come to an ashram, you imagine you have transcended a sort of bondage in which you were earlier. Whether or not this is really transcendence is a different question. When you free yourself from all associations with hearth, homestead and chattel, as they say, and enter a church, a holy temple or a monastery, you seem to have transcended the earthly pulls of the human personality.

This suggestion given to the mind is the reason behind the great teachings of religions in regard to meditation, that the object of meditation is to be visualised in the mind, or one's consciousness, as dissociated from empirical complexes of every type. Gradually we are tending towards the acceptance of the definition of meditation as a pursuit of an otherworldly ideal. Though this may not be the teacher's intention, the suggestion goes to such depths that one is likely to regard meditation as a pursuit of that which is not in this world. Therefore, there is a simultaneous unthought-of dislike for everything in the world. Though the dislike is not a part of the instruction, it follows naturally on account of a suggestion that gets introduced into the mind on account of the impulse for transcendence.

With this little introduction concerning the usual techniques of meditation enjoined upon seekers by the religions of the world, we may bestow some thought on another type of meditation, which is not very much known in India. It was prevalent as the most powerful movement in China some centuries back, and later on in Japan. There, as a consequence of what they learned from teachers who are said to have gone from India to Tibet and those regions, the sages of those areas developed a novel type of association with Reality, converting the whole of life into a meditational practice.

It originally started with a great teacher called Lao Tzu who wrote a famous text called the Tao Te Ching, and his gospel is generally known as Taoism. We know only the terms, but their meaning is difficult to grasp. It cannot easily be translated. The Tao simply means the way of living or, rather, 'the way'. The Tao is the way. It can be the way to our destination, it can be the way to freedom from thralldom of every type, it can be the way in which we have to conduct ourselves in life, it can be the way in which we have to think and speak, or it can be the way to anything in this world. The Tao is simply the way. Well, in one single word everything that is expected of man is comprehended and compressed.

We can exercise our minds a little in understanding what they intended by these methods of meditation. We can quote one or two instances of the way in which these Masters used to instruct their disciples. The meditations on Tao were sometimes called the Ch'an methods in Chinese. It is called Zen in Japanese. It is *dhyana* in Sanskrit. *Dhyana* in Sanskrit becomes Ch'an in Chinese and Zen in Japanese.

There was a unique way of teaching by the Zen Masters, or the Taoist mystics, which would startle any student the moment he went for instruction.

“Master, teach me Zen.” With humble obeisance, the seeker goes to the Master.

“Yes, have a cup of tea.” And the Master goes out, without looking at the face of the disciple.

If today any ardent seeker of the art of meditation goes to a Guru and implores the Guru to be taught the technique of meditation, and if the teacher simply says “Take a cup of coffee” and goes away, we would not know what to make of this person. The statement makes no sense. It is totally irrelevant to the purpose for which the student came. Either he would think the teacher is crazy, that he had made a wrong choice, or, of course, if he were wise enough, he would humbly accept that he cannot understand the teacher’s mind.

Many of these teachings were of this type—statements, sentences, instructions which would convey no meaning at all—and often these enigmatic teachings went by the name of what are usually called koans, which are enigmatic to such an extent that they carry no meaning. A meaningless statement with no significance behind it is made, and the student is asked to contemplate on its meaning.

One of the intentions of the teacher in giving these instructions is to deeply exercise the concentrating power of the mind of the student. The student goes on thinking again and again on this mystic, enigmatic, meaningless statement. He cannot find a solution even after thinking over it deeply. He thinks over it again because it comes from a great Master and therefore cannot be rejected as a valueless sentence; but even then he cannot find a meaning, so he goes on concentrating on it, and then also no meaning comes. The concentration becomes so rapid, so deep and profound, and it is carried on with such zest because of the impossibility of finding the meaning, that the mind gets absorbed in the very meaningless object on which the mind was set.

Another intention of the teacher is to compel the mind of the student to concentrate continuously, because once the solution is found, the mind will not concentrate on it any more. “I have got the meaning. I go.” But we cannot get the meaning; therefore, we have to go on concentrating practically endlessly for years together, and the concentration bursts the bubble of the mind. Meditation has its aim only here: the breaking of the knots, the *granthis* as they are known in the Indian system. We may call it the *granthi* or the knot of *avidya*, *kama*, *karma*, or of *sattva*, *rajas*, *tamas*, or the knot of the three bodies—the physical, the vital or subtle, and the causal. Whatever the knot be, it is broken. The mind is nothing but the point at which the knot of bondage is tied hard. It has to be severed, like cutting the Gordian knot, which is brought into high relief by the meditation on a sentence whose meaning cannot be easily discovered.

The other intention of the teacher is more philosophical: Be natural; ask not for any instruction. This is the other intention of the teacher: “Why do you ask me to teach you anything, as if you have to learn something quite different from what you are now and what you are doing now? The very way in which you are living now is a meditation, and there is no need for further instruction or teaching.”

We are reminded of the great teaching by Bhagavan Sri Krishna when he says that every action is yoga. We cannot understand how every action can be yoga. We do all sorts of silly things and immerse ourselves in meaningless, stupid activities; how can we regard these activities as yoga? But they are yoga under certain conditions. Under given circumstances, every activity becomes yoga. Even a holocaust like the Mahabharata war can become a part of yoga—but only if certain conditions are fulfilled.

What is important is the condition, and not the transformation of the existent reality. It is, rather, an interpretation of the existent characteristics of life that is important, and not the changing of the characteristics themselves—which is not necessary, and also not possible. Nobody can change the world by any amount of meditation, because there is no necessity to change it; it is perfectly normal. The disorder that we perceive in life is the reason behind our seeking a transcendence of earthly values. We see the world as chaotic, ugly, meaningless, and absolutely undivine—unreal to the core. Therefore, when our spirits surge to the heart of Reality, we automatically feel a need to dissociate ourselves from everything that is empirical, unreal, and meaningless.

But it is not so, says the great teacher, whether he is of Zen or Taoism, or even of the Bhagavadgita. There is a naturalness in meditation. Meditation is not a great sweating and a fatigue that one undergoes. It is not an instruction that we have to receive from a holy Master, but a carrying on of our usual routines of life. “Take a cup of tea; it is itself meditation. Why do you ask me to teach you Zen? Take a bath, have your lunch, go to the marketplace, purchase your daily needs.” We think these kinds of instructions have nothing to do with meditation. But they have everything to do with everything, if their significance is grasped.

The doctrine of this type of meditation conceived of a bipolar manifestation of the universe—the positive and the negative poles of reality—also known in India prior to its moving into the regions of China and Japan. Sometimes we call them *purusha* and *prakriti*, or we may better define them as the positive and the negative poles of a single power. These polar emphases are also called yang and yin, the positive and the negative that are required to complete anything in this world.

There is a medical technique called acupuncture, which is nothing but the process of breaking any obstructing principle in the nervous system which prevents the coming together of the yang and the yin in the human personality. When the positive and the negative forces blend together in perfect harmony, we are in health. Sometimes they do not move in harmony on account of certain obstructing elements—we may call them toxic matter—in the nervous system, in the *nadis*, in the nerves. These poles, positive and negative, are present everywhere in nature outside in the universe, and also inside in our own personality.

The teaching suggests that our desire to dissociate ourselves from certain features of life and associate ourselves with other features arises on account of our inability to bring together the two bipolar principles, the positive and the negative. There is nothing wrong with the structure of nature or the movement of life; therefore, true meditation, according to these systems, means a healthy cooperation with those conditions necessary to bring the two poles together. To regain health we need not struggle hard to do anything objectively which was not already present, but we have only to cooperate with the existing forces, coordinate their movements, and help in their harmonious working. We need not do anything absolutely new or novel. In the same way, the teachers of these schools held that meditation is not extraordinary magic or a juggler’s trick. It is not a circus feat, and one need not be afraid of it. It is a cooperation with what really exists.

While these two terms, yang and yin, may be compared to the principles of *purusha* and *prakriti* known in Indian systems, they also suggest the bipolar existence of the whole creation as such. The outer world and the perceiving individual are the two poles of existence. The seer of the world—you or I, or whoever it is—is one pole of nature, and the whole of objective reality is the other pole. The dissociation of one pole from

another pole is an illness. It may be called a metaphysical illness when we conceive it as original segregation of the individual from the cosmos. It gradually concretises itself, descending into more and more morbid conditions of dissociation until we get into involvement in the body itself. Then not only are we involved in the body, which is bad enough, but our body becomes sick, which is worse.

Therefore, the teachers of the system of Taoism and Zen, in their very wise vision of the minutiae of creation, taught the students to be natural, cooperative and coordinating with each other. We may be farmers ploughing our fields and allowing the water to flow through the canals, we may be businessmen working in a shop, we may be cooks in a kitchen, we may be shoemakers. To meditate, we need not give up our vocations. But generally, one feels that they have to be given up.

As I mentioned in a few words of introduction, the teachings of the religions somehow or other have bordered upon an injunction of giving up the world, and all associations concerning the world, in our pursuit of meditation. Maybe this disassociation from empirical values is necessary in the earlier stages; we cannot gainsay this much. But there is a necessity to come back to the very thing which we have absolved ourselves from, which truth again is made out in a very interesting teaching of the Zen Master who, in a very intriguing and enlightening passage says that before the practice of Zen, the mountain is a mountain, the river is a river, the trees are trees; in the process of the practice of Zen, the mountains are not mountains, the rivers are not rivers, the trees are not trees; but having entered into Zen, the mountains are again mountains, the rivers are again rivers, the trees are again trees. These teachings are very interesting—not easy to understand, but full of deep mystical spiritual significance.

When we are not in Zen, not in a spiritual state, not inclined to religious consciousness, and we are materialistic individuals sunk in the attachments, so-called, of ordinary life on Earth, the mountain looks like a mountain, the shop looks like a shop, the kitchen looks like a kitchen, and there is nothing divine in them. What is divine in a kitchen, a bathroom or a shop? There is not the least modicum of spirituality there. Therefore, when we attempt to live a life of Zen, or spirituality, they cease to be what they are. We completely withdraw ourselves from them. The mountain ceases to be a mountain. It is a great obstacle, and therefore we withdraw ourselves from even the awareness of such presences. In the early stages of the practice of meditation, there is a necessity to withdraw, but this withdrawal is a very subtle technique. It is not a physical turning away of our eyes from the existing mountain. It is not a running away from the kitchen or a closing of the physical shop. It is an inward technique of psychic dissociation which was originally associated with those things as objects of necessity or attachment or attraction.

The object which was the source of love, attachment, attraction, etc., is a bondage because in the unspiritual interpretation of things, objects are regarded as totally independent, outside in space and time. This is an untrue and unspiritual perception. Things are not so much outside us as to attract us or repel us. Attraction and repulsion are possible only when things are totally outside. Anything that is vitally connected with us cannot attract us or repel us.

Now, the phenomenon of attraction and repulsion is a great malady. It is an illness, because it arises on account of a wrong perception of things, a belief in the total independence of objects outside. Therefore, a psychic detachment, not merely a physical cutting off, is essential in the earlier stages, but once we enter into the deep

profundities of spiritual awareness, we will find the root of our personality is also the root of that from which we have cut ourselves off. As the Vedanta philosophy sometimes tells us, the *vishayi* is different from the *vishaya*. Sankara, at the very outset of his great commentary on the Brahma Sutras, makes this point that the *vishayi* and the *vishaya* are totally different from each other. They are like light and darkness. The subject cannot be the object. When this is the case—that the subject cannot be the object, and the subject alone is consciousness and the object is not—there is a necessity to withdraw oneself into the conscious condition of the subject, dissociating oneself from the objectivity of the thing.

But the Vedanta goes deeper in its higher reaches when it says that the *vishayi chaitanya* is commensurate with the *vishaya chaitanya*, and therefore there is a *pramana chaitanya* between the *vishayi* and the *vishaya*, due to the operation of which there is knowledge of the existence of the object. We know there is a thing outside us because there is a subtle connection between the *vishayi* and the *vishaya*, the seer and the seen. This connection is called *pramana*, or the process of knowledge, which would be impossible if the objects were totally independent. If A and B are totally cut off from each other and no connection is there between the two, A cannot know that B is existing. But I know that you are there, and you know that I am sitting here. This shows that we are not wholly objects of a subject, dissociated from each other. So once again that object which was a mountain becomes a mountain. No doubt it is the object only, but it ceases to be characterised by the objectness of the object. The person is still there. You are there, and I am there; we are not going to vanish after someone's God-realisation. We will be here, but we will be seen in a new light.

It is difficult to believe that when Arjuna had the Vishvarupa Darshana the world immediately changed. Everything was there as it was. The Kauravas were there, the horses were galloping, and the warriors were preparing for a holocaust. Everything was there, but it was seen in a new context, in a new light and a new perspective. The new perspective in which Arjuna saw things brought about a transformation not only in the arrangement of the objects of the world, but also in their essential characteristics or qualities. They began to blaze with light. They were not material things like brick or wood. The whole thing started blazing with incandescence. When this new perception arises in which things are seen in their true position and association—in the correct context in which they are placed—not only do they lose their individualised quantitative location, they also assume a new qualitative significance, so mountains are once again mountains.

As Swami Sivanandaji Maharaj used to say, for the Nyaka we are only a bundle of atoms, for the tiger we are food, and for the mother we are children. Well, the tiger sees us only as food, and it cannot see a genius, a poet, a painter or an artist. The tiger cannot see us as anything but a diet. Thus, the vision changes and the object assumes a new significance in the eye of the perceiving subject.

I began by giving you a little introduction to a novel type of meditation practised by Zen Masters where naturalness is the only teaching, and there is no further teaching. They never give instructions, and have no textbooks. There is no need to read anything, or to learn anything, or to be told anything. That is why when the student asks the Master for Zen teachings, he is told to go and take a cup of tea. This meaningless shooing-off of the student by the Guru is itself a great teaching. Take a cup of tea and be natural, normal. Understand the meaning, the context, the significance and the association of this "Take a cup of tea" in the light of the cosmic structure.

Meditations are galore in this world, and the more we try to understand the meaning and the significance of the practice of meditation in the light of what we are pursuing as the destination or the goal of our life, we will find it is a normal, happy, natural, positive, healthy process. It is not a struggle of closing the eyes and sweating and struggling for one hour with the urge to get up as soon as the bell rings. This difficulty will not be felt in the utter naturalness of a submission of personality to the context of things as they really are.