

Meditation and Education: India, Tibet, and Modern America

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This article explores Asian traditions of meditation, with particular attention to Buddhism as it was developed in ancient India. It delineates a core curriculum, initially developed in monastic institutions of higher education, that has been most fully preserved in Tibet. It then explores how this curriculum might be adapted so that it can help support a genuinely humanistic education within American higher education. This exploration focuses not only on the inherent values of Buddhist meditation but also on practical strategies that can be used to introduce these values in the academic curriculum and in the broader campus life.

I. WHAT IS “MEDITATION”? WHAT IS “CONTEMPLATIVE MIND”? WHEN WE FEEL WE’VE LOST IT, NEED MORE OF IT, CAN IMPROVE OUR HEALTH WITH IT, CAN GENERATE WELL-BEING WITH IT, WHAT IS THIS “IT”? HOW DID IT GET LOST IN THE WEST AND THE MODERN WORLD? WHO HAS BEEN FOR IT, WHO AGAINST IT?

It is fair to say that classical Indian civilization incorporated the contemplative far more than any other, then or now. The contemplative marked that civilization in every way. It caused it to develop unparalleled “inner sciences,” as they are often called, which were shared among the various religions. The Buddhist inner sciences were the most broadly developed because their monastic institutions of higher learning were the most numerous. So we can conveniently use a Buddhist analysis of meditation and contemplative mind as typical for our general discussion.

Meditation translates from the Sanskrit *dhyana*, *bhavana*, and even *samadhi*, which all designate organizations of the mind-body complex considered different from sensory and intellectual receptive states (as in learning) and intellectual reflective or discursive states, though they include these states sometimes. There are usually said to be two main categories of meditation: *shamatha* (calming) and *vipashyana* (seeing-through, insight, or transforming), with both again dividing into critical and creative types.

Calming meditations are deep concentration states, culminating in one-pointed trance, usually devoid of all sensory awareness or mental flow, though also able to entertain with great stability a fixed picture or even a full environment. They produce marked physical effects and equip the mind with fitness and fluency in executing whatever tasks it addresses. When our health researchers note and study effects of meditation, they are almost always referring to calming, one-pointed, thought-free meditation, with or without images. Calming benefits health and empowers the mind but by itself it is not thought to produce in a person either positive or negative evolutionary transformation.

Seeing-through or transforming meditations are also numerous. They range from basic scanning mindfulness meditations, through critically penetrating insight meditations, up to imaginatively creative visualizing meditations. They are considered most important in psychological, intellectual, and spiritual development. They have been studied relatively little but are generally viewed as closely related to reflective states.

Both these types of contemplative mind exist in all cultures, even the simplest: Naturally, hunters and mothers cultivated the most one-pointed mind-states, and the maker, the shaman/shamaness and the poet/poetess the most transformative. I think it can be quite misleading to speak of our culture as lacking contemplative mind. When we make that claim, we are rather lamenting the deplorable contemplative states within which the common mind is absorbed. Our minds are absorbed in continuous reverie almost all the time, and when we sleep, we experience a withdrawal from sensory stimuli. Education in any particular culture builds up a worldview, constantly reinforced by symbols and images that are contemplated throughout life. Television, modern culture's peculiar contemplative shrine, supplies a contemplative trance to millions of people, for hours on end, day after day, year in and year out. It is unfortunately a trance in which sensory dissatisfaction is constantly reinforced, anger and violence is imprinted, and confusion and the delusion of materialism is constructed and maintained.

Thus, when we talk about seeking to increase and intensify contemplative mind in our culture, we are actually talking about methods of transferring contemplative energies from one focus to another. We would like for people to develop contemplative states that increase contentment, detachment, tolerance, patience, nonviolence, and compassion, which simultaneously decrease feelings of anger, irritation, and paranoia. We would like them to develop more wisdom, more freedom, and more capacity for responsibility and creativity by seeing through the constructed realities in which our materialist culture has enmeshed us. It is important that we recognize the value choices implicit in our esteem for contemplation. Only by doing so can we understand the opposition that we are encountering, deriving from other value choices.

Commercial interests, with their advertising industry, do not want us to develop contentment and less greed. Military interests in economic, political, ethnic, or nationalist guises do not want us to develop more tolerance, nonviolence, and compassion. And ruling groups in general, in whatever sort of hierarchy, do not want the ruled to become too insightful, too independent, too creative on their own; the danger is that they will become insubordinate, rebellious, and unproductive in their allotted tasks. Therefore, in Asia, contemplative institutions at times received their licenses from the governments by creating a second society—ritually outside the ordinary society—wherein contemplation in the directions we consider positive was encouraged, and by tacitly promising not to interfere too much with the dominant culture's ongoing contemplation of its own necessity. In the community outside the mundane society (*sanghai*), calming and insight could be valued, even by the ruling elite, as a sort of safety valve activity for unsocializable individuals.

The fact is that developing contemplative capacity—either calming or seeing-through—greatly empowers an individual, the combination even more so. Civilizations that suppressed these capacities had reason for wishing to disempower individuals: They tended to be collectivistic and persistent in regimenting their people because of their insecurity with respect to the environment and their neighbors; hence, these civilizations maintained substantial armies.

Though we Euro-Americans like to think of ourselves as primarily individualistic (even when we simultaneously consider too much of that a bad thing), Western societies have tended to suppress individualism over the millennia. Socrates finally was given the hemlock cocktail for corrupting the potential soldiers with critical thought, and Sparta was the dominant model, not Athens. Therefore, the kind of humanistic and humanizing contemplative orientation we would like to develop has been systematically suppressed all along.

So we must not be surprised if commercial and military influences and conservative ruling groups still active in our society set themselves against any contemplative movement even today. On a more positive note, if the liberal education so essential to a modern democratic society really wants to empower the individuals who must constantly re-create democracy, it needs to incorporate contemplative dimensions in its curriculum. For liberal education to fulfill its responsibility, the teaching of contemplative skills is a necessity, not a luxury.

Our society has entered a quite complicated and ill-understood time, the so-called postindustrial and postmodern age. Democracies are meritocratic in ideal and so are compelled in principle to try to provide each individual with the opportunity and ability to rule the whole. Individuals have the responsibility to make crucial decisions and the technological power to

cause immense destruction if they make deluded, greedy, and angry choices. It is the kind of situation in which we oscillate between terminal, doomsday pessimism about our chances of surviving as a species at all and a utopian, optimistic vision about how our society might evolve through an increased use of contemplative practices. I prefer the latter kind of view (while not blinding myself to the dangers of negative outcomes) and remain fully aware that those who think the future hopeless will not support—indeed, will actively oppose—any attempt to create a more contemplative awareness. I personally consider broad-scale individual development of contemplative insight to be necessary for survival.

There are many ways to make our society more contemplative. James Joyce wrote *Finnegan's Wake* to make unthinking embeddedness in words more difficult to maintain. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi from transcendental meditation has tried to organize contemplative SWAT teams to travel to trouble spots to send out mass meditation waves to calm groups caught in the flames of fury and violence. Contemplation is taught in thriving Eastern-based centers and various Western monasteries such as Cistercian, Trappist, and Benedictine. In recent times, it has begun to be taught more widely in our educational institutions.

I have chosen the liberal arts and sciences university as the individually liberating institution left over from our Western extrasocial contemplative communities. It has, however, been too much coopted to empower and train individuals who are destined to serve as the ruling elite of materialist, modern societies. I view the technological media as branching out, however clumsily, from this university complex to enfold the larger society within it. Therefore, if our concern is to heal, enlighten, and empower individuals to live better and create a more humane society by learning how to manage their own contemplative energies, the academic community should become a vital arena within which a more positive future can be determined.

II. WHAT IS THE BUDDHIST APPROACH TO CONTEMPLATION AND MEDITATION? HOW WAS IT USED IN BUDDHIST CIVILIZATIONS? HOW CAN IT BE RELEVANT TO OUR MODERN SOCIETIES?

The essence of the Buddha's awakened vision of life is that its purpose is evolutionary: Beings naturally seek happiness and can effectively evolve into a condition of perfect happiness through awakening to the reality of the world. The cause of suffering is ignorance, an active misknowing of unreality as if it were reality. The antidote to misknowing is awakening, which leads to superknowing, insight, or wisdom. The human life form is already immensely evolved toward awakening, and the ideal occupation of a human lifetime, therefore, is disciplines and practices that enhance and accelerate evolution toward awakening. Because wisdom is the ultimate

cause of awakening, of liberation from ignorance, then these disciplines and practices are educational in the classical sense. One person cannot awaken another. No God can awaken someone. No belief can awaken someone. No meditation can awaken someone. The individual's transformative understanding is the cause of awakening. Realistic beliefs, helpful and skillful others, meditations and practices—all these can help by supporting the process of education. But the realistic understanding that liberates is the individual's own process and attainment.

Therefore, the Buddhist civilizations developed institutions and curricula that empowered individuals. India became the most individualistic of all civilizations after the time of Buddha. Buddhist India was the first to develop cenobitic monasticism, and that monasticism developed into a network of universities with a liberating curriculum. The Buddhist curriculum always cultivated contemplative mind, both for empowerment and for liberating transformation.

The Buddhist tradition should thus be viewed essentially as an educational tradition. In its essence and beginnings, it is not too *religious* in the usual sense of that word—that is, focused on the transcendent, the sacred, concerned with ultimate realities, warrants of meaning. Its goals are rather liberative and evolutionary. The Buddha broke with the dominant religious system of his world, the powerful religious atmosphere of the Vedic Brahmins. He found it misleading, not liberating, and not necessarily evolutionary in a positive direction. It wrongly submerged the individual in the collectivity, reinforcing the sense of social duty at various levels with ultimate sacred sanctions. It relied on deities; Buddha did not question their existence but thought their powers to be not as believed by the Brahmins. He thought that these deities had mundane powers but not the power to liberate individuals from suffering, or even themselves from their own devastating agonies. And the Vedas enjoined rituals of sacrifice that cause suffering and death to many animals, which turned evolution in a negative rather than a positive direction. The Buddha rejected all this, and set forth the following: (1) individuals have to take charge of their own evolutionary destiny, not relying on deities or any others; (2) individuals have to face the fact that all life bound by delusion is inevitably frustrating and ultimately miserable, and hence seek to overcome delusion by cultivating wisdom; and (3) because positive evolution has no limits, individuals can participate in creating a world of happiness for all instead of the unenlightened world of universal suffering.

I would like to emphasize that in Buddhist and, consequently, Indian thought in general, delusion is the root cause of suffering, and wisdom is the antidote for delusion and thus the root cause of liberation. Wisdom (*prajna*) is not accumulated instrumental knowledge, but is rather a special kind of superknowing, a knowing by becoming the known, by transcending

the subject-object dichotomy. Thus, liberation is achieved not by believing, not by participating in any ceremony or belonging to any group, but by understanding in the deepest possible way. The cultivation of such understanding naturally became the task of the Buddha's teaching and the mission of the Buddhist tradition. Contemplation was an indispensable discipline for deepening and empowering this understanding.

The path to freedom was viewed as having eight branches, eight channels of realism that can gradually overcome the massive unreality generated by instinctual delusion. These eight are called realistic worldview, realistic attitude, realistic speech, realistic action, realistic livelihood, realistic effort, realistic mindfulness, and realistic meditative concentration. These eight are grouped into the Three Spiritual or Higher Educations (*adhishiksha*): the Higher Educations of Justice or Morality, Meditation, and Wisdom. The Buddha found that he was unable to liberate people by the sheer force of his own wisdom or compassion. He could only help them to open their minds to a new understanding of self and world; he was thus forced to channel all his wisdom and compassion into education. So it is that the Buddhist tradition has always focused on spiritual education. The Buddhist monastery was not primarily a place of solitude, but was rather a place of cultivation. Wisdom, the engine of liberation, was cultivated at three levels, by learning, critical reflection, and contemplative penetration. First, one learned the Dharma, and one moved away from one's inherited deluded mind and into the Buddha mind by engaging with the enlightened speech recorded in the Sutras and their elucidations. Having understood the teachings at the surface level, one then had to pit one's instinctively deluded mind against the new, inferential, and relatively delicate understanding of the verbal Dharma, and struggle back and forth, cultivating doubt intensely through critical reflection that seeks to delve below the surface to find the deeper meaning. When this process is pursued with great energy and determination, critical reflection becomes penetrative concentration upon the cultivated, doubt-deepened understanding. This concentration draws energy away from instinctual misknowledge and pours it into the liberating insight of transcending wisdom until realistic understanding becomes intuitive and instinctual. Wisdom becoming intuitive, the self realizing its selflessness, and the person enjoying liberation all occur at the same time.

This kind of core curriculum was maintained for more than 10 centuries in hundreds of Buddhist monastic universities all over India. Many more developed in most other Asian countries, from Sri Lanka all the way to Japan. India's abundant economic situation, the special gentleness of its gracious ancient culture, and its tolerance of individual liberation were not easily duplicated in other countries where conditions were harsher. After the Indian classical civilization was utterly smashed by the Muslim invasions at the end of the first millennium CE, this curriculum was most faithfully

preserved and implemented in the high mountain refuge of Tibet, where so many of the great Indian masters fled. So it is that fragments of the full educational program of the global Buddhist movement has only begin to emerge fully since the opening of Tibet.

III. WHAT ARE WE DOING IN LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES TO PROVIDE HUMANISTIC EDUCATION? CAN IT BE FURTHERED BY DEVELOPING A MORE CONTEMPLATIVE ORIENTATION ON THE PART OF FACULTY AND STUDENTS?

Within our institutions of higher education, we attempt to liberate critical intellect, emotional stability, aesthetic sensitivity, and moral decency. Supposedly, natural sciences develop intelligence and knowledge of reality, social sciences develop awareness of the social dimension, and humanities provide emotional stability and aesthetic sensitivity and mold a sense of moral decency. Religion was originally driven away from the humanities—its content divided between literature, history, philology, and philosophy—because the scientific study of religion could not proceed effectively as long as it was dominated by a particular religion. This tradition was born of the Renaissance through Enlightenment's impulse toward awakening the full powers of the human. The new notion was that the purpose of human life is to move beyond the worship of a transcendent reality (conceived as a mysterious, all-powerful God) to the understanding of reality, assuming responsibility for the self and the environment, the whole existential situation. Therefore, it is only natural that religion should be regarded with suspicion by the academy. However, without the assistance of religion's deepest disciplines, contemplative and intellectual, the liberal arts and sciences are effectively prevented from becoming *liberating* arts and sciences. People are informed and certified but not properly prepared to exercise the responsibilities that humanism imposes on the individual. It is not that religion can make this contribution because of the efficacy of one belief or another, or one practice or another (including the practice of meditation). Religions concern themselves with humans' ultimate orientation, with their ultimate aims, and so possess a broad repertoire of arts and disciplines, enabling individuals to integrate their entire being—their physical, ethical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual elements. Although no particular religion could, or should, dominate the academy again, the moral, psychological, contemplative, and philosophical disciplines embedded within various religions must be made available to faculty and students if education is to go beyond being merely informative and become transformative.

Fortunately, the *study of religion* in religious studies departments has returned to the humanistic universities, although it labors under the suspicious regard cast upon it by scientists (natural and social) and other

humanistic scholars strongly mindful of the prevailing canonization of secularity. Nevertheless, religion departments are able to restore to the curriculum the resources of the world's great spiritual traditions for self-exploration, self-cultivation, self-liberation, and self-integration. However, this must be carried out in an impeccable manner, not only because of the surrounding suspicion but also to ensure pluralism. No one religion can again become normative, its resources dominant, its approach controlling others, so a modern religion department must incorporate courses in all the major traditions.

In this context, we can approach with greater clarity the issue of contemplation within the university. We have seen that contemplation fits in the traditional inner science curriculum at the highest level through the cultivation of wisdom. Therefore, it is virtually indispensable if wisdom is to become fully transformative. The question, then, for academic institutions is not a question of adding a desirable frill to their vast smorgasbord of offerings. Rather, it is a matter of their effectively fulfilling their duty to provide a liberal—that is, a liberating and empowering—education. The ideal pedagogical process is first to learn something really well, using memorization and broad study; then to reflect upon it internally, assisted by energetic debate and discussion with teachers and other students; and finally to meditate upon the first tentative understandings in a sustained and focused way in order to develop insight to a transformative depth.

IV. WHAT ARE SOME PROGRAMS THAT WOULD HELP MAKE CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES A NORMAL PART OF A LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION?

We should recognize that we already do provide contemplative opportunities to our students off campus in that we provide opportunities to study abroad in countries such as India, Thailand, Tibet, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. We are also aware, though institutionally it is an uneasy awareness, that our students join meditation centers and go on retreats offered by all religions (though primarily Eastern-based ones, which have become especially popular in this country). There are also student groups on campus, often fundamentalist ones, that offer opportunities for participation in their rituals, chanting sessions, prayer meetings, and confessional activities of various kinds.

Finally, on the therapeutic or athletic model, there are stress reduction clinics and yoga and tai chi classes in our physical education department. The point of reciting these ongoing activities is to remember, before we consider other methods, that we should reinforce those activities that are already performing valuable service.

Other strategies that might be developed include the following: (1) Encouraging the establishment of contemplative centers on campuses such as that proposed at Middlebury College by Steven Rockefeller. Harvard University's Center for the Study of World Religions was set up by its donors with such a purpose in mind, though significantly, its meditation room was eventually turned into a library. Colgate University's Chapel House was set up by the same donors and has provided some contemplative relief in its undergraduate center over the years. I know from personal experience that Amherst College, Williams College, Wesleyan University, Hampshire College, Mount Holyoke College, and Smith College have chapel spaces that can be expanded, pluralized, and contemplativized, depending on the availability of motivated faculty who are willing to provide leadership. Certainly at Columbia University, both St. Paul's Chapel and Earl Hall are used by a number of different groups for various kinds of contemplative practices. I'm fairly certain that every liberal arts college and university has available resources that can be used to support such practices. (2) Encouraging departments to introduce contemplative experience and expertise in whatever tradition as a recognized and rewarded accomplishment in the professor and the student. Just as knowledge of a particular text, ritual, doctrine, historical era, institution, and individual expressed in a thesis or other demonstration is evaluated and rewarded, so should knowledge of a particular meditation practice, gained by study of texts, exploration of institutions, and personal experience of the practice, expressed in a thesis or other demonstration, be evaluated and rewarded. (3) Encouraging individual scholars in the natural and social sciences to expand their research into physiological effects of various meditative disciplines. Professor Davidson at the University of Wisconsin has used magnetic resonant imagery to demonstrate certain well-developed mental capacities demonstrated by monks who are experienced in meditation. (4) Encouraging scholars in religious studies to research, translate, and publish more of the contemplative literature, technical as well as evocative, born of the contemplative disciplines. As I often point out, in the domain of contemplative development, we should not make the mistake of investing heavily in hardware possibilities and thus neglect the extraordinary software developed over millennia by contemplative cultures and traditions. (5) Encouraging media productions that inform about and instruct in the practice of contemplation, thereby reaching a wide audience, demystifying contemplation, and creating greater public acceptance of contemplation in the educational arena.

The opportunities are manifold for creative work in integrating contemplative practices into higher education, and we are grateful to the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society for the support it has given to faculty members at colleges and universities across the country to engage in this challenging work. We anticipate that their work will be multiplied in the

years ahead as our society becomes more aware of the critical need for such practices.

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