

Meditation and Consciousness

A Dialogue Between a Meditation Teacher and a Psychologist

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Shinzen Young: When I meditate I apply a few axioms, which embody for me the basic principles of meditation. The first axiom is the axiom "mindfulness": clarity of awareness is preferable to murkiness of awareness. To illustrate: A person might say "I feel angry". That represents a certain amount of clarity. They know they're angry versus not angry. But they could be more clear by saying, for example, "I have a sequence of negative thoughts about this situation, and at the same time I have certain sensations that are rising within my body." That represents a greater clarity. Instead of one bit of information "I'm angry", there's a richer information flow, a higher "baud rate". One has become specific about the types of thoughts and feelings that constitute the anger.

One could become even clearer still, and recount the exact sequence of thoughts, their interrelationships and the locations of the body sensations. This is what is meant by mindfulness.

Charles T. Tart: So one way to look at what you call clarity here is the richness of a perception, or the articulatedness of it. From a conventional scientific perspective, though, or even a "common sense" perspective, someone might ask, "How do you know that increased articulation is true detail of what is there? What is truly clearer perception and what is vivid fantasy about perception?" One might have a muscle tension due to anger in the body and generate many fantasies starting from that tension, versus being more clearly perceptive of how those muscles actually feel. How is the distinction made?

SY: Actually, I would say from my experience that, in meditation, we just want to be more clear about what seems to be real. So, in a sense, the distinction between fantasy and actuality is not so important.

CT: You just made thousands of philosophers roll over in their graves!

SY: From my point of view, the process of meditation is not the same as the endeavors of philosophy or of science.

The endeavor of meditation is a utilitarian endeavor. It is to know the truth of one's own internal processes. Even if those processes are "illusory", you strive to have more knowledge about the specifics of the "illusion". Meditation has a goal: that goal is to allow a person to experience the mind-body process without feeling limited by and trapped within that process. It's not to find some kind of cosmic truth outside of whatever truth you need to know in order to be a free person.

In meditation you are simply observing the mind and body as it is experienced in the moment. If they happen to be lost in illusions of different sorts, then your job is merely to trace, in real time, the course of the illusion, to experience its comings and goings, rather than try to get rid of it. At least that's one approach to meditation.

So "mindfulness" is a first axiom. A second axiom is the axiom of "equanimity": that it is desirable not to grasp or block the flow of the mind-body process. Our ordinary tendency is to grasp or block, to fixate or

freeze the on-going process of consciousness, and that is what brings us a sense of limitation and suffering.

So we sit down and we begin to observe, to develop heightened clarity. and we make a conscious effort to be, moment by moment, as accepting of this process as possible.

A third axiom is the axiom of "realization". It states that when we meditate in accordance with the first two axioms, important transformations will take place within us. These will culminate with some very dramatic experiences which represent permanent transformations, such that we no longer feel trapped in the mind-body process. Therefore we will realize an abiding, constant sense of freedom and fulfillment, which is independent of conditions and circumstances.

Posture for Calming Mind and Body

SY: The posture aspect in meditation is related, I would say, to developing calmness of the mind and body. Calmness of the mind and body is virtually identical with one's ability to focus and concentrate, and concentration plays the role of what we might metaphorically call a microscope. You turn that microscope towards aspects of the mind-body process and observe them. So if you sit in a posture that is "perfect", it is true that it is easier to get a settling of the mind-body, and at the same time it involves an alertness. The settling, plus the alertness, is the microscope.

However, a person can begin this process of exploration without having a particularly deep state of microscopic awareness, and it is also true that it is possible to develop an attachment to certain positions and postures. I have heard of teachers that discourage the use of special postures, and make you do your meditation as a day-to-day activity, while you work, play, eat, go to the bathroom, etc. This might seem a hard way to go, but that is the method of what is sometimes called *sukkhavipassana*, or "dry mindfulness meditation". It's just completely dry awareness; it's not watered by any of the bliss of special concentration states. And you can do that in any posture at all.

CT: Most of my experience is in what you call dry mindfulness. It's been work I've done in the Gurdjieff tradition, which says develop this self-remembering, this quality of presence in the here and now, a simultaneous awareness of body and psychological self coupled with simultaneous enhanced awareness of that is going on around you. Certainly there is no special posture involved; you do it in the midst of life. For me to practice traditional meditation, where I'm sitting still in a quiet place, is very different.

SY: Remember, though, some "traditional" teachings are that way, too, like what you call the nontraditional.

CT: My finding to date has been that these two methods both seem necessary to complement each other. I've learned to produce a certain kind of mindfulness through self-remembering in the midst of intense activity. It's valuable in a variety of ways. But it's like learning to balance on an actively moving surface, like surfing must be. There's a very high activity level while I'm doing it. The kind of self-remembering I do does not generally get me in touch with very subtle mind-body processes, although they may be going on in the background and ultimately affecting my foreground experience.

When I sit down and practice the traditional sort of *vipassana* meditation, the subtle processes are much more visible because they're not being swamped by the activity/noise of everyday life. At the same time, this awareness at a more subtle level feels like a problem in some ways. A level of thought, for instance, that would

not interfere in the hurly-burly of life with a certain high degree of mindfulness now seems like a rampaging storm!

SY: You've raised a lot of interesting issues. We can branch out in a number of ways here. Before we go any further, though, I'd like to clear up a couple of things.

What constitutes a special meditation posture is a posture that allows for stability with alertness. Any posture that allows for that is valid. There is nothing magic about twisting yourself into a pretzel. Any posture is useful only insofar as it allows for stability and alertness. The fact that the spine is kept upright affects the posture sensors that are connected to the reticular activating system. An upright posture keeps the activational level of the brain up. If you start to allow the posture to degenerate in different ways you get a direct physiological impact on alertness.

On the other hand, you want a meditation posture that gives you not just wakefulness, but a real sense of "settled-in-ness". In Japan they have been doing physiological research on Zen meditation since before World War II. They did electromyographic studies of the muscles showing readouts as though they were asleep! They are that relaxed. So you know that a profound physiological change is taking place in the musculature to allow a person to sit in such a rigorous posture with muscles relaxed as if lying down, asleep.

So, it's not so much that the legs have to be crossed, or anything like that, but the position has to give relaxation and alertness at the same time. That could be achieved in a chair, depending on how you use the chair—if you don't slouch.

Skillful Experiencing of Pain

SY: I described these traditional meditation postures as being stable, settled, comfortable. In point of fact, though, to learn them you probably are going to have to go through years of discomfort. That may seem the opposite of the goal.

As you're sitting there holding one of these postures, you have a baseline of discomfort. You begin to notice that your sense of suffering around that baseline of discomfort goes through ebbs and flows. Every once in a while you'll have a significant experience. The discomfort will not have changed, but something in your relationship to it changes—spontaneously.

That's because there are moment-by-moment fluctuations in your level of "grasping" or "resistance". Psychological grasping is your main source of suffering, not the physical sensations in your legs—that is to say, how much you are tightening psychologically around those sensations is the main source of suffering.

You may be spending most of your time in habitual tightening or resisting of the sensations, but if you sit there long enough, every once in a while, just because of the impermanent nature of things, your resistance will lessen for a moment, just spontaneously. At that time you begin to make a correlation. Diminished "resistance" brings about diminished suffering. You literally train yourself out of the habit of suffering.

What you learn in this way with respect to pain of physical origin is immediately generalizable to pain of psychological origin. Suffering is a function of two variables: one's discomfort and one's habit of resisting that discomfort. Put mathematically: $s = f(d,r)$.

CT: But I wonder about "unnecessary" pain. For instance, Shinzen, you don't have us wear hair shirts when we meditate. Hair shirts, as were used in medieval Christian mysticism, would definitely add to the pain. You don't have us lean sideways ten degrees, which would considerably increase the muscle strain and consequent physical pain.

SY: Pain does two things. If it is experienced in a "skillful" way, the energy in pain will break up the knotty, hard parts of one's being. This is true whether the pain is of physical or psychological origin. On the other hand, if pain is experienced in an unskillful way, it does just the opposite, creates more knots, making a person brittle and rigid.

Therefore, there is nothing whatsoever to be said in favor of pain per se for meditators. It can just as much create new blockages as it can break up old ones. Everything depends on one's degree of skill in experiencing it. Very little depends on the intensity of the discomfort itself. A small discomfort greeted with a large amount of skill will break up old knots. A small discomfort greeted with a large lack of skill will create new knots. The same is true with respect to big discomforts. The trick is not so much to endure massive doses of pain, but to develop that skill which will allow you to get the maximum growth out of whatever happens to come up.

For example, sometimes I'll do a practice where I'll lie in bed and be completely motionless for several hours. Somewhere along the line I feel that I'd like to move part of my body in some little way. I get subtle pressures here or there. I find that if I can detect and open up to those subtle pressures completely, I really get somewhere. These minor irritations are likely to come up at any time, so if you can greet each with great skill, they are opportunities for growth.

"Skill" with sensation means to be relatively more clearly aware of the sensation and relatively more accepting of the sensation than you would be otherwise. When a person greets a minor pain with great awareness and great acceptance, then it has a much more powerful growth effect than to greet a major pain with grudging endurance. This was nicely summarized by Thomas Merton. Merton was a Christian monk with a great appreciation of the Eastern meditative traditions—not an uncommon combination nowadays. I'm paraphrasing, but somewhere I remember him saying something like "I did not become a monk to suffer more than other people, I became a monk to suffer more effectively."

Learning to Relax

CT: In my reports on my meditation experiences, I noted that when I settled down to meditate, and I consciously put attention to my body, one of the first experiences is that of tension patterns. Sometimes just being aware of them results in their automatically relaxing, sometimes it doesn't. It's variable. If you feel an obviously useless tension, such as noticing that you're sitting there clenching your hand for no good reason, should you deliberately relax the tension, or should you just study it as it is? I think you already said something to the effect that you would be mindful of whatever it is you do with it.

SY: You've just asked a really interesting question. I believe that there are two ways of learning relaxation, because there are two distinct levels at which a person can relax. I speak of top-to-bottom relaxation versus bottom-to-top relaxation. "Top" refers to the surface conscious mind, "bottom" the deep unconscious.

Top-to-bottom relaxation is what most people think of when they think of relaxation. It's voluntary relaxation, like a progressive relaxation where you make an effort to relax. When a person sits to meditate I think it is good to do whatever possible to relax the overall body. I usually try to get an overall sense of the body relaxing. I call it a "settled-in" sense. For example, I notice that during sitting sometimes my shoulders will come up, so I'll relax them as an act of conscious intention.

This form of relaxation, although it's valid and useful, is also limited, because there are certain things that you can't relax intentionally, like the kind of intense sensations that come up when you stub your toe. You can't go through a progressive relaxation, and just relax the sensations going on in your stubbed toe. And what about the sensations that go with a stubbed ego? For that type of phenomenon, it is desirable to learn about a second kind of relaxation which I call bottom-to-top.

Bottom-to-top relaxation deals with the source of tension which is deep within the unconscious mind and way out of the range of conscious control. How can you relax tensions that are not within conscious control? By observing them with skill. "Skill" means heightened awareness, a sense of accepting the tension as is. Bottom-to-top relaxation is an attitude. You watch the tension very, very carefully. You get very specific in terms of location, shape, flavor, rates of change, etc. You just keep pouring awareness and equanimity, awareness and equanimity on the tension pattern.

That tension pattern is a conduit into the unconscious mind. By flooding the tension area with the "super-adult" qualities of "witness awareness" you are helping the unconscious infant/animal levels of the mind to untie their own "knots". The tension pattern will start to break up on its own. Paradoxically, the quickest way to have it break up is to stop wanting it to break up. The attitude of wanting it to break up adds subtle new knots. For the really deep relaxation, a person has to be willing to watch tension in a skillful way, without desiring relaxation.

Consistency: The Fourth Axiom

SY: Remember I said that I like to reduce the teaching of meditation to certain basic axioms. I mentioned three of them already:

The first axiom, "the principle of mindfulness", is to be as alert and precise as possible with respect to events in the mind-body process.

The second, "the principle of equanimity", is to maintain an even-minded, matter-of-fact attitude while observing.

The third, "the principle of realization", is that the habitual practice of mindfulness and equanimity will bring about dramatic, positive transformations in a person's life.

There is a fourth axiom I call the "axiom of consistency"; it is possible that reactions will arise as the result of observing the mind-body process — reactions such as fear, bliss, boredom, irritation. These reactions are part of the mind-body process and should themselves be consistently observed with even-minded awareness.

For example, you have told me that when you try to just observe tension you get bored and annoyed. The boredom and annoyance is a reaction to your attempt to observe. Observe the boredom and annoyance! How to observe it? Well, your boredom and annoyedness can only present themselves to you through two "doors". One is the door of thinking—ideas, concepts, images, inner dialogue. The

second is the door of sensation—feelings which pop up in the body. Note the contour and cadence of the thinking. Note the flavors and locations of the associated feelings in the body. First you had been observing tension, then you felt bored and irritated in reaction. That boredom is now the dominant phenomenon. So observe it. You just consistently keep on applying the first two axioms.

Thought: Not the Enemy

CT: I say that I'm "succeeding" in meditation if I'm having at least partial contact with body sensations, and I'm "failing" at meditation as soon as I get lost in thought or imagery. Some of this certainly comes from having too harsh a superego. But I haven't learned another way to handle this at the moment.

SY: It's a very practical thing to ground oneself in body sensation. Some vipassana teachers emphasize body sensation as the only domain of investigation. Other teachers say that you should watch any aspect of the mind-body process, including thoughts, sounds, images, and things like that. So one could almost say that two major trends exist in the world of vipassana. One is a trend to just stay with the body sensations as your primary object, and the other is a trend that says watch any of the six senses. By the way, sense number six is the thinking sense. And you get arguments—not violent arguments, of course, but mellow arguments—between vipassana teachers as to which way is the way to go.

Thought is definitely not the enemy. Your enemy is the lack of moment-to-moment clarity about rising and passing of thought. Thought is every bit as much part of the flow of nature as body sensations are. Indeed, your entire being is part of nature!

A time comes in meditation when you come to realize that the nature of thought is in fact just effortless vibration. At that point, there's no need whatsoever to stop the thought process in order to meditate. At that point, you might say that you have cleaned away all the ignorance surrounding the thinking process.

The thinking process is driven by subliminal feelings, subtle pleasures and pains that we are not ordinarily aware of. When we clear away the ignorance surrounding the thinking process we are able to detect the subtle "flavors" of pleasure that seduce us into thinking as well as the subtle flavors of discomfort that goad us into thinking. The unconsciousness and grasping around these feelings turn the feelings into "driver sensations" which mercilessly agitate the mind. When these sensations can be detected and experienced with equanimity the addiction to the thinking process comes to an end. The mind still thinks but not in a driven way. It begins to function in a spiritually intuitive mode. In other words, it dines on reality as opposed to trying to gobble it up.

The reason some teachers so strongly emphasize working with body sensations is that the body can be sensitized, can become a "high resolution screen" within which these subtle drive sensations can be detected and "felt through".

Am I Doing It Right?

CT: If I'm sleepy or my mind is drifting very easily, if I put more force in trying to focus or look at something, I seem to get more results. Not always, but sometimes. So at times I have a conflict here. I say to myself, "Well, being gentle with my attention is actually a rationalization for being lazy and not trying very hard to meditate; no wonder I don't get very far. I should really concentrate." I remember reading stuff about how if you're really

doing Zazen, for instance, you'll be sweating like a pig even if it is the middle of winter! Is it right to be gentle or should I be really concentrating?

SY: I think the important thing is to avoid the conflict about it by realizing that there are no absolutes in meditation. One just feels one's way.

I know that questions like that are a big thing that people get tripped out on. "Am I doing it right? Most people have to learn to meditate the way a baby learns to walk. The baby falls to the right, falls to the left, and gradually gets its equilibrium. So you just have to get a "feel" for what's right. Something could be said for either the gentle or forceful approach.

A question somewhat similar to this was once put to the Buddha. His response was that the meditation should be done the way that a person tunes a stringed instrument. You don't want to put too much tension on the strings, neither do you want the strings to be too slack. There is a middle degree that gives you the right tone. So one possible answer to the question is that you want to find that combination of bearing down versus gently focusing that works for you.

There is another strategy that I know exists in one of the Tibetan traditions which you might find interesting to try sometimes: Consciously alternate the two. You do a period of really intense bearing down, ten minutes, half an hour, whatever, and then you do a comparable period of laying back and gently watching, and then bear down, then gently watch, etc.

Another way to look at it (which you already hinted at in the way you made your comment) is that if you're feeling sleepy, you should bear down. We call feelings like sleepiness sinking. Sinking is broader than just sleepiness. It is any sort of dimming of awareness. If you find that you're sinking, the bear down. If you find that you're getting real tense, then you can do gentle focusing. Which you do depends on the situation. It is what we might call an allopathic approach; you oppose the problem.

Finding God

SY: Here's an addendum to an unfinished thread we were talking about before, when you asked me about aches and pains and what to do about these aches and pains. I said that there were two questions you were really asking. One is what to do about aches and pains, and the other is, what does sitting there and feeling your butt aching have to do with realizing God?

There are many valid descriptions of the meditative process, and there are many valid techniques for coming to realization. Further, there are many valid descriptions of what realization is. Nowadays, even Buddhist teachers sometimes speak of realizing God! I just happened to us that word God here, but we could just as well use words like "the ground of being", or the "natural state".

So what does feeling your butt ache have to do with realizing "God" or the "true nature of things"?

By learning to feel sensations within the body with an attitude of equanimity, one is unlearning the habit of locking around feeling. This is the earliest locking we acquire. When the baby matures and begins to think, the habit of locking carries over into the thinking process. Eventually all six "sense doors" (hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking) acquire the habit of moment-by-moment microscopic freezing. That prevents us from experiencing these sense doors as part of the flow of nature.

Start with any sensation whatsoever, pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, and begin to observe it in what I refer to as a skillful way--you are beginning to unlearn the habit of blocking the flow of consciousness, unlearning it at the most primitive level, where that habit first started. Pretty soon you find that you are able to think without freezing the thinking process, the eye begins to function without freezing the visual field, and the entire flow of consciousness begins to take on the qualities of ripples spreading on a lake. The operations of the senses have an effortless, spontaneous, "just happening" quality. This unblocked flow is also the nature of the creative spirit that gives rise to the appearance of the world. So there is a direct link between just sitting there, watching your trapezius twitch, and realizing God.

But also watch your desire for God with equanimity. Watch it come and go.

There are a couple of things which, if you can watch them in a meditative way, are very productive. One of them is your desire for enlightenment, your desire for God. One quick way to get to direct experience of God is to watch your desire for that experience come and go, until you realize the insubstantiality, the impermanence of that desire. Then the blockages to realization go away and the state that you want starts to shine through of its own.

In other words you can't reach out and get enlightenment. You can, however, eliminate the blockages to enlightenment, and then it will shine through of its own. Paradoxically, a major blockage to enlightenment is the desire for enlightenment. So if you can watch the desire for enlightenment (or your desire for something special in meditation) come and go with equanimity, then enlightenment is not far away.

Another way to put that is that all you have to do to be completely happy is to break through each moment of unhappiness. As you're sitting there, if there's the feeling that "I want something more in this moment", then if you can work through that feeling, then you've worked through one tangible block to happiness. And then another feeling of wanting something, something different, something other, will come up, you transcend it, and so on.

Stopping the World

CT: In formal meditation you're safely sitting inside, so you can shift in the direction of far more attention on the internal process and explore some aspects of the fundamental nature of mind. I suppose there must be some advanced level of vipassana meditation where you can walk across the street, aware of the transitory nature of existence, but still get out of the way of a truck. Can you comment on that?

SY: When we first come into this life we form a self in order to cope with the world. The baby has rather scant self and commensurately little ability to deal with the world. We develop a self to deal with the world, but we also develop the habit of solidifying that self, and that solidifying habit congests the flow of nature, leading to suffering.

The process of going from infancy to adulthood could therefore be called the process of forming a solidified sense of self. Some adults decide to start growing again, that is, to go from being an adult to being a super-adult. In order to do that, one has to learn the process of unsolidifying the sense of self.

The unsolidified self (which could be called the big self or the no-self) begins to arise within the super-adult. That no-self has to gradually learn how to deal with more and more complex aspects of life, just as the solidified self did.

As the beginning the no-self may not be able to do anything except sit there--or maybe chant. Gradually the no-self learns how to do more complex things, like maybe sweep the yard. Eventually it learns how to talk, how to drive a car, how to carry on contract negotiations, and anything else that needs to be done. But, just as for the self, it takes a while for that no-self to learn how to do things. Eventually most of ego's activities get taken over by the no-self activity. The no-self knows full well how to get out of the way of trucks.

There are two ways that people can fool themselves. One is "I have to sit in a certain posture, and have the body absolutely aligned perfectly in order to meditate". the second is "I don't ever need to sit in a posture like that; I meditate in daily life".

The way that you know if you're meditating in action is to see if you can stop on a dime any time you want. You should be able to go, at any time, into an absolutely stable, motionless state without struggle if you're really "meditating in daily life".