

Our Best and Most Lasting Gift: The Universal Features of Meditation



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by
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Summary

The universal features that most meditations share are based upon the middle path which lies inside of life. All life forms, from a single celled amoeba, to a human, contain internal regulatory processes that dynamically oscillate and continuously restore the middle ground. Temperature and blood pressure are examples of this. Even thoughts and emotions have some natural balance. Meditation utilizes, cultivates, and augments the biology of the middle path and applies it systematically to the body, mind, and emotions. Generally, meditation means reducing extremes and relocating alert rest. Practicing middle path regulation leads to a feeling of relative wellbeing and peace.

Vipassana shares this cultivation of the middle path with all meditation, but also has less commonly shared features, such as the focus on sensations, the emphasis on starting with *Sila*, recurrent references to the Buddha's teaching stored in the Pali Canon, ten day silent courses taught by Mr. S.N. Goenka's tapes and conducted by teachers in his tradition, and the Path of equanimity pointed towards the distant star of *Nibbana*.

As an expression of the peace that meditation often brings, interpersonal relationships may improve, increasing pro-social and altruistic feelings. Harmonious moods like gratitude may fill spaces vacated by the reduction of lesser concerns. Meditation is optimized when it is carried forward to create a positive feedback community in which individual meditation expands into interpersonal harmony which in turn nurtures individual meditation. For this to happen, there needs to be stabilizing traditions, agreed upon training, and teachers who exemplify wise life choices.

Meditation usually uses focusing practices that distance the mind from belief in its own biased contents, and that reduce clinging to one's sense of self, and these experiences may diminish the prominent and troubling cognitive error of overconfidence, also called "blind belief." Meditation based upon self-regulation, peace, social harmony, and reduced dogma, may someday have an expanded planetary role by helping people realize their impermanence within and reverence for the ancient vast matrix of life, law, time, and change.

Common Ground

I picked my title in response to the generous offers by so many diverse groups to sponsor another talk about meditation here at Yale. I wanted to find a way to speak about our common ground, where we could all celebrate our meditations, while we also examine them thoughtfully for their differences, strengths and limits.

There are good reasons to emphasize the differences among meditation practices. That emphasis allows for the preservation of the uniqueness of each practice. Each has special applications or impacts that differentiate it from others. I am not promoting a bean soup, in which the different colored beans all float in one broth. Last year in this hall, I discussed Vipassana meditation at length and emphasized its particular properties. Today, I will not be saying that all meditations are the same, just that they overlap on large swaths of shared terrain, while they also have their coexisting properties.

I want to examine the overlap, what we hold in common, in order to set a wind behind the sails of meditation, so that it can achieve greater momentum towards healing our world. This emphasis arises from my hope and my grief about our historical agenda to reduce suffering in people, animals, and all beings, while we tilt along towards unsustainable climate change, species extinction, ongoing warfare, ideological chauvinism, and mass displacement of entire populations. We can only view our planet today from the standpoint of concern and compassion. We cannot feel satisfied with our own contribution to the world. Many meditation traditions remain enclosed in cloistered self satisfaction. I like to imagine that meditation could be more helpful to the greater human enterprise.

Meditation can elevate and guide our shared fate here on Earth. But meditation is not a uniform entity, and the word contains a variety of meanings. There is no meditation in isolation from the network of people who embrace it, and the meanings they assign to it. All meditations have potential benefits that are significant, and they are all also vulnerable to decay,

and to misuse. In order for meditation to escape the confines of parochial belief systems and address larger issues, we need to understand its fundamental message.

Most people who meditate do so with high hopes and aspirations to heal both themselves and the world around them, and this optimism is like an ocean current, a gulf stream, circulating and surrounding the various practices and traditions. You could say idealism is our shared context for all meditations. In these shaky, bellicose, and divisive days of ours, many of us have nothing better to give to the world than the fruits of our meditation, which often feels to us to be our best and most lasting gift.

Recent Rediscovery in the West

Today, every literate person is familiar with the term, meditation. It is a regular focus of scrutiny in *The New York Times*, and there are many university departments that study it, and a few that are dedicated to that study. A brisk economic wind is pushing meditation along because some people's psychology, nursing, or medical careers depend upon the validation of the meditations that they are already employing to earn their living; and countless classes, resorts, magazines, websites, and books base their sales revenue upon it. So there is also competition for stature and market share for the commodity that meditation has become. Whether it is for money, for research articles, or for the status that accompanies being called a spiritual teacher, meditation's natural and healthy contribution to individual people, and to our global community, has fallen under forces that redirect it.

Because I have no professional interest in meditation and receive no remuneration from talking about it or for conducting meditation courses, I hope that I can be heard nudging us back towards meditation's pre-commercial universality.

Augmentation of a Naturally Occurring Function

There is a saying, that to give a good talk, you have to tell people what you are going to tell them, then tell them, then tell what you just told them.

Here is the take home message: all meditations share a natural function of mind and body which is just waiting there to be cultivated, honed and employed. This is similar to exercise. You are born with muscles; you can just let them hang there, or you can cultivate your muscles and make your body strong. This is similar to the mind. You can educate it, or you can run for political office. Similarly, meditation is a specific cultivation and augmentation of the mind and body. The reason that meditations share a common ground is that they are all based upon this essential functional capacity.

The main insight I want to emphasize is that meditation is the systematic cultivation of homeostatic regulation of the mind, body, and emotions.

Homeostatic regulation could be called the single most important and defining feature of life. We harbor processes within ourselves that are resistant to environmental variations and forces, and which perpetuate for a while our own self-regeneration. Life maintains certain relative constancies through active holding and herding all of its activities. It is by dint of this ability to restore ourselves that we continue, still alive, through time.

Let's look at the natural homeostatic function from which meditation springs. We all know what muscles are, we all know why we exercise; we all know what our minds are and why education is a good thing. But meditation, up until recently, was not widely known at all. In fact, when I first started giving talks on meditation, not to mention when I first started practicing meditation, it was essentially unknown. It was considered exotic or foreign, and so our culture had created a situation where this natural function was never identified or developed. It was as if we were somewhere in the world where there was no literacy, or as if we went to some places in our own country where people don't exercise. Times have changed, and we

now have the opportunity to be well educated or exercised with this natural function.

Most natural functions are subject to utilization-based repair or decay. Meditation is a swimming pool, or a college, or a type of wisdom we are born with, that we either groom and amplify, or neglect.

Meditation fits into the larger system of homeostatic regulators that are constantly active within us. All life, whether you are talking about an amoeba, or whale, have cascades of feedback messages bringing our bodies and minds towards a middle path. Life can be described as boundaries (like cell walls or skin), and curtailment of extremes.

Some parts of our body specialize in homeostatic regulation. A small region of the oldest part of the brain, the hypothalamus, plays an important role in monitoring temperature, appetite and other primary functions. Another part of the brain, the medulla, is important in regulating our breath. But it is more important for us to understand that every living cell requires monitoring, and every large animal like us is homeostatically regulated in a multitude of ways.

We all have a temperature that runs about 98.6. Actually everybody is slightly different than 98.6, but pretty close to it, within a degree or two. If your temperature goes very high, 102 degrees, that's called having a fever. A temperature of 104 degrees Fahrenheit, that's a very high fever. Above that, you are likely to die. We can only exist within a very limited temperature range. The same thing applies if you go out and run on a rainy winter day, you know well enough to be worried about hypothermia. You dress properly to stay warm and dry. We can survive a subtle dip in our body temperature, but only to a limited degree. So a set of homeostatic regulators are always buffering our temperature towards a middle path. And the middle path is not a single exact point but a general area which exists around 98.6. (Biologists have now altered the concept and the term "homeostasis." The current nomenclature is "allostasis." I have incorporated

the revised conceptualization while preserving the classic and better known word, “homeostasis.”)

Along with temperature, we need a blood pressure that is not too high or too low. If your blood pressure goes very high, you are in danger of having a stroke. High blood pressure can be fatal. If your blood pressure goes too low, you are in danger of going into shock. Low blood pressure can be fatal. So a healthy body regulates blood pressure around a middle ground. The regulation is dynamic, not static. We don't contain thermostats and we don't have an exact set point. We veer and steer towards our oscillating constancy, changing and then returning.

Homeostasis dips deep into the life of every cell in our body, helping us maintain our hormones at a level that is not too high or too low, and helping us maintain neural excitation in every brain region in a manner that is not agitated or sluggish. The most famous example of the biological middle path inside of our cells involves the division by which we make new cells to sustain our bodies in the face of continuous aging, loss, and death. If we do not manufacture enough new skin cells or red blood cells, we die. But if we overproduce any cell type, we may also be killed from within because the overproduction of cells is called cancer. Our body has many ways to selectively kill its own cells, a process called apoptosis, which can decrease our tendency towards cancerous overproduction.

It is interesting that the Buddha called his way of life, “The Middle Path.” It is as if his meditative liberation revealed to him the most important feature of living things.

Mental Homeostasis

Let's look at the homeostatic regulation of our mind. Suppose an event happens in your life and it makes you quite angry. You might stew in anger for a period of time. Or, you might feel intense anger. But as that anger sits inside of you, it becomes dysphoric, meaning you don't feel good about it. Our discomfort with our own anger is a form of biofeedback, and we have a tendency to try to figure out what to do to reduce our anger. If you are a more externalizing person you might say, "I better confront that person who made me angry." If you are a more internalizing person, you might say, "Well, its my fault that I feel so angry." You might rationalize to yourself that it is only a passing incident. You do something to try to deflate the pressure you feel from that anger, whether you are a meditator or not. When we hear news reports about people who killed others in a rage, one thing that stands out is that the murderer lacked the ability to bring his fury back towards the middle path.

The same psychological biofeedback actually happens if you feel good. We often need to down-regulate some of our good feeling. You are planning a vacation, and that makes you quite excited. You spend hours on the Web reserving a hotel, buying plane tickets. But at the same time you need to go to work the next morning. So you reduce the excitement about your vacation. You say to yourself, "Well, I will go back online at 5:00 pm when I get out of work, and then I will look for more beaches and restaurants."

We have an ability to some extent to regulate our thoughts and emotions, but not in a systematic way. Almost all well educated people have not had any education about psychological balance. The skill of emotional modulation is considered by mental health professionals to be the signature of maturity, and a precondition for the development of wisdom. Typically we leave our education about this to our family, and to our random thrashing about in the world.

Meditation is the systematic cultivation of homeostatic regulation of thoughts and emotions, and it fits a pattern that all body functions have, which is to re-regulate themselves towards an approximate middle.

Meditation provides some recurring attentional metronome, some “calling us back,” some stay against our mental dissolution into disorganization and daydream. Meditation is a low-stimulus, reduced-input, self-containment, that provides an opportunity for the mind to self-regulate. When the mind begins to follow its straying peregrinations, the meditator (sometimes) returns to focal attention, some ground zero, some screensaver. The unregulated mind will tend to regenerate its old, conditioned, patterned sequences and excursions of anger, anticipation, striving, frustration, anxiety, despair, or seductive ensnarement, but meditation means not acquiescing to the patterns of the past. Meditation is the renewed return, recalling the mind back to what is immediate.

This practice of recalling the mind to a refresh setting is a subtype of the homeostatic regulation that is the El Dorado of life. Meditation exercises the mind in the way that the body preserves itself, optimizing its own healthy continuity. Meditation means some degree of protection from the outside world (such as our skin provides to our body), permissive mental variation (analogous to the oscillation between diastolic and systolic blood pressure), and restoration of a central mental position (which corresponds to the way our body returns to a relatively constant body temperature).

Our nervous system has homeostatic regulators that are called into play when we regulate our thoughts, because the mind has some integration with the body. As we try to focus on our meditation, we activate the prefrontal cortex of the brain, which is the center for planning and concentration. Prefrontal activation automatically reduces activity in the limbic system, which is the epicenter for our emotions. This is a homeostatic example of how elevating one function suppresses another. As we become more concentrated, we become less emotional, and that formula is built into our nervous system. As we draw closer to peaceful states of mind, the

parasympathetic nervous system automatically sends messages of rest and relaxation to our blood vessels, heart, intestines and endocrine system. The opposite regulator, the sympathetic nervous system, which was sending messages of anticipation and aggression, is automatically suppressed. The hypothalamus is no longer overridden by signals from the sympathetic nervous system, and can assert its natural homeostatic balancing capacity over sleep, appetite, and restful alertness, which is why these basic functions of our body and mind feel restored during meditation.

There can't be a return unless there had been a departure, so meditations always contain a dialectic between spinning out and reeling in, a varying but regulated alternation. Meditation holds the mind in the same way that our blood vessels hold blood pressure, elastic yet constrained.

I believe that most meditations share the process of return to a homeostatic resting place, and I also believe that for most meditations the resting place is the moment, the immediate, the mind free from its entanglement by the patterns of the past.

Meditation fits easily into our natural self-regulatory wisdom.

An Evolutionary Step Forward

Another word for homeostasis might be equipoise. At the subjective level, we experience meditation's stabilizing, active rebalancing as equanimity. In the ancient texts, the portrayal of the Buddha could be understood as the personification, the human face, for our aspiration to continuously restore the middle path that life has built into us. Because we are living beings, homeostatic balance is a direction that guides us from within every one of our trillions of body cells, each one of which has its own predilection to return. We are constrained from within towards stability.

But at the same time we are called in the opposite direction. The outside world induces us to be changelings, to chase and flex, so that we are able to survive in a demanding world. We are hunters, gatherers, scientists, writers, soldiers, mothers, human beings, because we are not only peace seekers but also strategists and schemers.

Life is a bridge that holds together two agendas: relative constancy of ourselves, and dynamic responsiveness to the changing world around us.

When we reach out to survive and adapt, sometimes we can never get back to our calm core. Still, every cell, blood vessel, and brain region will be waving us back towards restoration of our temperature, blood pressure, and subjective poise and peace.

We can hone and educate these restorative processes, but they are far from perfect and can break from survival stress. Meditation means practicing the inner peace that is the subjective indicator of the homeostatic core of life. We meditate to be alive better, to be calm and alert, observing without reacting, our varying mind-body states with their attendant thoughts and feelings held in balance by the cortical, transformative activities of awareness coupled to equanimity. Our mental and bodily life rises up in front of us and is held aloft by our non-reactive observation.

No wonder that meditation has been discovered by human consciousness, because it so closely mirrors what our cells, blood vessels,

brain and heart are so busy trying to do all the time. We are built to change, vary, and then rebalance.

But this is work. Meditation requires energy. It is an activity. It works at restoration, and as we will see, it works at a restoration that transcends one dimensional homeostasis, because biological stability is always time limited and ends in death, and the work of meditation can also hold steady as its own biological basis decays. Meditation is the augmentation of a natural function and not the mere use or application of it. Meditation augments subjective, homeostatic inner peace in the same way that reading augments speech and thought. It is an evolutionary step forward. This is not mere flattery. In the same way that books (and now the internet, which also rests upon the written word) have revolutionized humanity yet not altered our underlying biology, meditation may yet elevate and help to liberate us by using our basic embodied selves.

Mental Homeostasis and Its Ramifications for the Brain, Body, and Relationships

Because meditations return us to unpatterned immediacy, they may help us reduce mental errors, fixated thoughts, mis-judgements, or inaccurate beliefs that draw our minds away from equanimity. Thoughts, daydreams and feelings certainly occur during meditation, and they all become subject to recall. Meditation may facilitate our discernment about how to live in a skillful and optimal way, because it puts our ideas through a strainer, it sifts our thoughts and feelings through the screen of immediacy, which is less biased than are the pathways of the conditioned past.

Another way to say all of this is that meditation is the practice of mental and emotional balancing. In silence, your thoughts and feelings rise up, demanding, threatening, or arousing you, but you then re-direct them towards calm and self-possession, practicing the restorative of equanimity. You exercise and expand your executive function, your ability to modulate your psyche. You practice self-observation, self-control and self-mastery.

In your mind, various unmet cravings, upsets, losses and grief have caused you suffering, and meditation gives you a way to stop cycling around and around them helplessly. It provides some tools for self-collection.

You learn to re-locate internal springs of well-being, to which you can return through the shifting circumstances of life. Your over-reactions and your judgement errors can be at least temporarily retracted, if not abandoned, when you re-enter meditation's glades of dynamically restored neutrality. I am not talking about "centering," because there is no single geometric center in the mind. There are collections of middle grounds that are all elastic and are participating in departing and returning.

The mental homeostasis, or auto-regulation, or equanimity of meditation may also bring in its train a middle path for other physiological variables like heart rate, hormonal output, or neuronal excitement.

From these descriptions however, it should become clear that meditation has certain limits and certain conditions where it may not be advisable. One of the big trends of our day, which is quite prominent in New Haven and Seattle, is that mind and body are integrated. That is a new trend because as Western science developed in the Renaissance, it was based on the belief that mind and body were separate. The mind was thought to be a part of the soul, and the body was considered to be a temporary site to test the soul's worthiness. That theological fantasy unfortunately ruled Western science for hundreds of years. Fortunately, in the second half of the twentieth century, that idea was put to rest by the recognition that our mind is partly, if not predominantly, a feature of our body. The more we learn about the way the mind works, the more we see that it is at least heavily, if not exclusively dependent on the function of our brain and body. Just as an example, if you take medication you may change the way you think and feel. If you are dehydrated or very exhausted, it will change the way you think or feel.

An example that crossed my life as a psychiatrist many years ago was when post-traumatic stress disorder became a conscious focus of treatment. Post-traumatic stress disorder is as old as civilization. Even the Greeks knew that soldiers came home from combat and sometimes had difficulty re-entering a non-combatant life. That became a very strong focus of American psychiatry after the Viet Nam war. One thing that happens to traumatized vets is that their mind and body remain integrated, and if you have been heavily traumatized in your mind, your body becomes dis-regulated. We learned that trauma is both in the mind and the body. You can't separate them. You can't treat someone and say, "You have been shot at, but no one is shooting at you anymore back home in the United States, so relax." But of course that person's body has also gone through the trauma, so one has to help in re-regulating the body as well.

Mind and body integration has become the new doctrine that has replaced the divergence of mind and body. Unfortunately, I want to say that

that integration is somewhat limited, and mind/body integration is itself becoming a dogmatic problem. Let's look at some other examples of that.

If you are a nervous person, anxiety may drive up your blood pressure for the wrong reason. Anxiety is basically a good thing, an adaptation. For example, if we are a couple of people walking around in the jungle looking for our food, and there is a lion, and there are two of us, and one person is anxious and the other person is calm, guess who is going to survive? You want to be anxious. I noticed that to get me here tonight, the friends who were driving me kept insisting that we leave at an earlier and earlier time. They said we should be dropped off at 6:00 PM, then 5:30 PM. Everybody is anxious about the traffic, and I gather that if you are not, you would never get here. If my hosts weren't anxious, I might still be in Massachusetts. So anxiety is good, we need it and want it, but anxiety is accompanied by high blood pressure. Let's say you want to run away from a lion. You don't want to run away from a lion with relaxed low blood pressure. You want high blood pressure. But if you are chronically anxious and you feel that you are always running away from a lion, you may be carrying high blood pressure around that's doing you no good. Somebody might say to you quite correctly, "You could consider whether meditation will help lower your anxiety and your blood pressure," and that is a good idea which I, of course, support. But those of you who are doctors or biological scientists will know that blood pressure is also regulated by our kidneys and some of our glands, like the adrenals, which are situated near the kidneys. So if you have constriction of your renal artery, that's a common cause of hypertension. As you get older, if you have some narrowing of the blood vessels, and if the narrowing is in the renal artery, you may get hypertension. And no amount of relaxation will take that away. Blood pressure is also regulated by other processes, such as the elasticity of the smooth muscles in the arterial walls, which diminishes with age and is eventually unresponsive to relaxation at the mental level.

To some degree, our body may replicate the calm in our mind, but somatic processes have many other forces impinging on them. Meditation may reduce errant impulses to overeat but it does not eliminate the blood sugar dis-regulation of diabetes. Meditation may balance some bodily functions, but it does not treat or eliminate disease. The greatly inflated estimation that has recently been given to “mind/body integration,” should actually remind us of the limits to healing the body by meditation, since all bodies inevitably decay and die. If your mind and body are integrated, then both will eventually succumb to the loss of homeostasis that always ends in death. The mind has a substantial but nevertheless limited impact on the body. There are times when you have to fix the body by fixing the body. The reason I am stressing this is because we want to have a meditation that is realistic and honest rather than an inflated over belief.

Meditation can help us restore the peace inside our mind and body, and thereby can paradoxically also permit wider adaptive strategizing, allowing us to wander further away from calm, because we will remain elastically tethered by our improved skill at restoration of peace. But meditation is not a panacea to all mental or health problems. It is not the same thing as learning to write and think, nor even to having social skills and sensitivities. Meditation’s restorative functions reach out widely into our lives, but they do not substitute for education or skill. We grow in our abilities that we have trained for. Meditation alone is not a total way of life.

Just as meditation can rebalance some body functions, to some degree, it can also bring sunshine across the gap between two people. Your own pool of inner poise may make you an epicenter of well-being for people around you who may be ricocheting in turmoil. Certain cultures and communities (as we will soon see in more detail) may facilitate or curtail your expression of meditation’s social balancing.

Meditation is not only practical, not just a mental regulator, but it may sometimes also be a mental augments. It may guide you to newly released dimensions within your heart and mind. It may open previously inactivated

potentials. Because less of your energy is spent in wild or futile oscillation, you may dip into clearer sources of wisdom. The new dimensions of meditation may be encountered in both the processes of trained thought, or in the pools of your wordless mind. These new dimensions are why meditation is usually considered a spiritual practice, an encounter beyond the mundane. Meditation reduces constricting self-preoccupation and opens the doors and windows of the mind. Meditation for many people goes far beyond its partially curative aspects, and becomes not just palliative, but transformative, as old reaction patterns are extinguished and new patterns of secure rebalancing are added.

If It Is Easy, Then Why Is It Hard?

Meditation is always easy and always hard.

It is easy because it is superimposed upon the natural restorative mental and physical functions that make life possible, the maintenance of relative stability.

But it is hard because even the body has to work to find the middle path. All of our coats and heated homes in winter, and all of our AC cars and swimming pools of summer, are creations to help our homeostatic temperature regulators. As we live and age, our self regulation, which is subject to continuous challenge, always fails. We die. So meditation is the effort of consciousness to remain calm, balanced, homeostatic, as all the other homeostatic regulators fail. Meditation is also always a challenge because our minds are not only based on a natural function but also upon a doomed person. We can say that all information systems decay; the signals become lost to noise. We can define death as the loss of vital homeostatic regulation. When we meditate we bask in the warmth of nature's core homeostatic basin, and we exert the will of concentration and consciousness to persevere in nature's peace even as it departs from our bodies like the Lone Ranger. Meditation can become an extension, stretching into new zones and dimensions, transcending the merely natural.

Meditation is always a challenge because our minds are not only drawn to homeostasis, but they are simultaneously working in the service of adaptive manipulation and acquisition of the outside world. One part of us does not want to relinquish its vigilance and stealth. Inner peace is not our only agenda when we are running from lions or facing exams.

Where I Am Coming From

Before we move on, I would like to tell you about my own background, in the spirit of “full disclosure.” We all know that a person’s background colors his ideas and beliefs, and my long sojourn in meditation has certainly shaped the way I think about it.

I have practiced meditation formally under a teacher’s guidance since 1974, when my wife, Susan, and I took a ten day Vipassana meditation course which was taught by Mr. S.N. Goenka, in Mehrali, near New Delhi, India. We have subsequently adhered to Mr. Goenka’s admonition to stick to one practice, focus on it, staying true to it, and following it to the end, rather than shifting among practices, or creating an eclecticism at the top of many practices but at the root of none. This attitude is like marriage: a life-long bond. Mr. Goenka exemplified his own message when he got news that his own teacher had died, and he decided to devote his life to maintaining and transmitting the Vipassana tradition. In response to his dedication, he inspired thousands of students to prioritize meditation as they made their life choices. So I have lived with meditation across the decades as an unshakeable, twice a day commitment, along with an annual retreat; and I have been inspired by many dedicated friends around me.

Here are a number of features that have powered my longevity in meditation practice, that are based upon the framework that Mr. Goenka built.

Meditation can be a spiritual practice, that moves from person to person with the quality of a present given with ribbons, and therefore is taught for free. Vipassana teachers at one hundred and fifty or so centers around the world that follow Mr. Goenka’s teaching are all volunteers. Money has no place in the practice and can’t bend its purposes. The Centers are donation funded.

I am here for free, all the courses I have ever conducted were for free, and Mr. Goenka, who is now deceased, but who was very alive and well in 1974, made a cornerstone of his tradition that no money was in-

volved. That was even before Bernie Sanders was mayor of Burlington. Why is this emphasis so important? Actually the tradition of non-commercial transmission comes from ancient India, in which meditation was always a spiritual practice. I am going to give my own definition of “spiritual” because the word covers a wide range of meanings. Here is an example:

We all know that running a restaurant is a noble and rewarding profession. It is also very hard. Probably there is no one in this room who hasn't eaten many times, maybe even hundreds of times in restaurants. Now suppose on this coming Saturday night you go to your friends' house and they serve you a meal, and you hang out with them watching the Red Sox or the Mariners lose yet one more game, and then at the end of the evening your friends say, “You owe us forty bucks and if you don't give us your credit card, we will call the police.” Why is it that we don't condemn the restaurateur for charging us money, but we feel that our friend would be awfully weird to make us pay for the dinner? The answer is that we understand there is a difference between friendship and business. We don't condemn business. There's only a limited number of ways that goods and services can flow from person to person and one of those ways is commercial. And that's not bad. I was a doctor for well over thirty years and I charged for my services. That was my business.

But meditation is different. It is not a form of medicine. It's not like running a restaurant. It is more like friendship. Keeping that feeling of friendship actually changes the biological basis of your heart and brain when you learn meditation. I will go into that in more detail in a minute. That's an interesting emphasis, that if you learn meditation for free, it changes your body as you are learning it.

Vipassana meditation is taught in ten day residential courses so that it starts with reasonable commitment. It is intended to shape lives through deep and meaningful psychological experiences. If you want to gape in awe at the expanse of the Grand Canyon, you will have to fly to Arizona.

Ten days no longer feels like too long a time to give to learn meditation once you stand on its rim and feel its expanse.

That Vipassana is taught in ten day courses is often the hardest hurdle for many people who might otherwise be interested in meditation. Why ten days? Well ten days is somewhat arbitrary. It is a statement of the value of what you are learning. Meditation is something worth pursuing, an important step in life. We can see some things that we want to learn in a one hour lesson, and other things we go to the university for four years to study because it takes many years to learn. There is a closure we can keep on our knowledge about ourself for a period of time, but after a longer pursuit, our ability to keep that closure loosens, and our self awareness, our self acceptance, our non-judgmental relationship to ourself, and our self integration is vastly, exponentially expanded over that longer period of time. Vipassana is taught for free over a period of ten days and each of these positions is significant.

Courses convene with the traditional five moral vows, not to kill, steal, lie, commit sexual misconduct, or use intoxicants, and by doing so Vipassana appeals to standards of conduct and character.

Vipassana sends a tap root down into ancient Indian culture and Buddhist texts, keeping alive the atmosphere and flavor of accumulated knowledge and tradition. A rich cultural context can augment the dimensionality of meditation, helping it resonate with more aspects of the meditator's heart and mind. Education can feel more alive when it is embellished with myth and poetry. Or, put in modern, neurological metaphor, learning is optimized by modulated limbic arousal that accompanies stimulation of our mythopoetic ancestry.

Vipassana is also a transmission from the past. Vipassana is a word that was used to describe meditation by the Buddha. Vipassana is not Buddhism. I am not a Buddhist. I am just a nonsectarian person without any affiliation with Buddhism. But Vipassana is the teaching of the Buddha. I came here in an airplane, but I am not a Wright Brotherist. I just flew in an

airplane. I actually do feel grateful all the time to the Wright brothers, for how they have planetized my life, but I don't become a devotee. One doesn't have to become a religious devotee to be aware that something has been given to you from the past. The feeling of receipt is very important. We have received Vipassana from the Buddha.

When you feel that you are inventing something or that you are learning something that was invented at Esalen in 1969, you have a different feeling for it than when you feel you are getting something from the dawn of human experience.

Students are free to depart at the end of ten days without being bound by anything they have learned, but some, many, people will bend the light of their lives around meditation, as if they had just passed through a gravitational field that can bend the light of stars. Ten day Vipassana courses change lives.

Vipassana meditation focuses on the experience of the impermanence of the body, with all of its molecules, chemicals, sensations, and mentations. The meditation's first goals are acceptance of the reality of impermanence of all our sensations with equanimity and dignity, and the inspiration to pervade the world with a modicum of peace and love. Vipassana can be interpreted as a psychology of the scientific world-view, an adjustment to the galactic cosmos of shifting and unstable things that also gives birth to us.

Vipassana is also entrained by the ideal of *Nibbana*, a life of pure peace and love that derives from an experience of transcendent clarity and perspective. Holding to this ideal, no matter how distant, gives meditation a direction that is different than simply being mindful.

Susan and my lives have been tethered to these practices and guidelines from Mr. Goenka, which we have field tested for over forty years, pragmatically, with freedom from belief, and found to be "a practical and spiritual path:" to sit twice a day for one hour each, to keep five moral vows, to take an immersion course once a year, and to at last conduct courses,

and, at the specific request of Mr. Goenka, to give outreach lectures and write about meditation. I would like you to hear the emphases that are in my heart as I speak to you, about the importance of meditation assuming an immutable presence in your life, like your husband, wife, or child, along with having agreed-upon practices with a world-wide community. Meditation practiced fitfully or as an individual is different than meditation as an embedded participant in an evolving communion of friends.

I have moved rapidly through these descriptions about my personal meditation because my more detailed lecture at Yale, from last year, about Vipassana, is dispersed for free on-line, and can be obtained from the email dr.paulrf@gmail.com, as well as from the website pariyatti.org/paul.

Now I would like to continue speaking about my long thought out views regarding the little, or much, that we as meditators can add, among the noises that jostle for attention amidst our planetary roar. I hope that you will listen to me not only as a member of a meditation tradition, but also as a still, clear expression of “authority,” a word which originally meant “someone who writes his own lines,” an author, speaking in his own voice. I will be talking to you with the bias and authenticity of a participant observer. I will tell you what I have witnessed and thought, about an activity that over the course of a lifetime can become our defining gesture. I sometimes indulge in the fantasy that in the lights of distant galaxies there are eyes looking for our message, and the fruits of meditation are what I would like their routers to receive.

We have already discussed idealism and homeostasis as two deep roots of meditation.

Inner Peace

Probably the number one motivation to meditate is to attain more inner peace. The third common feature of most meditations is the cultivation of inner peace through heightened self observation and self awareness. Maybe this is just reframing biologically based homeostatic self regulation into a subjective, or “heart” perspective.

As soon as a person sits down and closes his or her eyes to meditate, a particular psychological frame is activated. External stimuli are cut off. Demands and intrusions are unplugged. Whatever else the meditator does, he or she has stepped back from active coping, manipulating, and functioning, and has risen into a realm of psychological adjustment rather than of instrumental action. The meditator no longer rearranges the three dimensional world, but, for a time at least, becomes committed to rearranging his or her own psyche. The center of concern becomes adjusting and accepting rather than dominating, organizing , or controlling. This is the psychological, subjective stance within homeostasis. We cope with ourselves. Our t-shirts could say “Thinking and Feeling Homeostatics.”

Not all psychic and social threads have been cut. In fact, the meditator joins and participates in traditions, lessons, and skill training. Although externalizing engagements have been shut down, other types of mental life have actually been augmented. Like Tibetan hermits alone in their caves for years, who are nevertheless deeply attached to their gurus, and thereby avoid feeling abandoned in their solitude, modern meditators remain connected to values that animated their original decision to meditate, and to meditation instructions and teachers. Meditation is a mental activity that can increase both autonomy and independence, but it can also open a conduit to dependence upon the social system from which the meditation instructions derive.

Meditation can be described as “dropping out” and “dropping in,” leaving a lot behind, and engaging something invisible, internal, and ironically social. The heightened mental life of meditation includes both person-

al introspection and absorption of meditation instruction. It is solitary and friendly.

Although most meditations define some focus for the mind, that focus will be intermittent, because no one can focus perfectly, and the meditator's own thoughts and feelings, fears and wishes will rise up into consciousness during the moments when focus wavers. The meditator will become more self-aware. The pre-conscious mind will emerge front and center. Mental contents that were partly or even fully hidden will be revealed as if they were on a fifty-six inch high definition flat screen.

“Know thyself.” “The unexamined life is not worth living.”

You can't be integrated with a person you don't know. Meditation leads to an increased unity between the conscious and preconscious mind.

The feeling of peacefulness that accompanies meditation has two initial components that have an ironic and productive tension. Focusing on a neutral stimulus takes your thoughts away from your problems, like, “counting sheep.” And loss of focus during extended stillness and silence leads to many unfiltered thoughts and feelings that rise up to become integrated and accepted rather than repressed. I am discussing here from another angle the straying and returning that I have described as the central homeostatic, balancing feature of meditation, but here I am emphasizing content, what arises, what comes into view during this process.

If you are doing Vipassana meditation, the focus of your meditation is your body. Therefore you are integrating your mind and body by observing your body as the focus of your mind. The integrative process that I have described, where you come to terms with your thoughts and learn not to judge them, may also be going on with your body, with its varying sensations, pleasures and pains.

Challenges to the Establishment of Inner Peace

But there can be challenges to the establishment of inner peace.

The human mind cannot always tolerate self-awareness. We may all have self deceptions that keep intolerable impulses or memories tucked away from our consciousness. Some aspects of self-knowledge can be upsetting to us, such as memories of past traumas, or losses. So meditation may make us more self knowledgeable, but also more self-avoidant. Our self-protective denial of some aspects of ourself may reactively thicken. The increased self awareness of meditation, that follows upon observing one's own mind in silent and sustained observation, may generally lead to a more conscious person, who is more in touch with and more able to accept the spectrum of him or her self; but it may also lead to flight.

The simplest way to flee the self who is revealed to us in our own silence is to stop meditating. This is very common, probably predominant, in any group of meditation students. In his early teaching days, Mr. Goenka would claim that 90 to 95% of the people who took his ten day courses would not continue to meditate. Today, with better advanced preparation and more widespread knowledge about meditation among new students, the percentage of people who continue to meditate is significantly higher, but nevertheless, many people do not want to continue to meditate. Not everyone has knees that are built properly for safe jogging. Not everyone is born to meditate. Meditation should never be imposed on anyone who is not in a position to safely learn it. I have given scores of lectures about meditation, and I have encouraged the practice, but I have never told anyone that they should meditate. The Buddha never claimed that everyone should meditate.

Let's remember that a large percent of any group of people has psychiatric disorders. Of the many people who do not have psychological diagnoses, many still suffer significant psychological distress. Epidemiologists consider forty million American to have some degree of anxiety disorder. No one is free from suffering, and its slings and arrows vary consider-

ably in intensity and magnitude. People try to meditate for the very reason that they are suffering mentally. So it only follows that the value and impact of meditation's ability to expand self-awareness will be variously welcomed by its practitioners.

Along with the challenge to inner peace that is presented by deep psychological self observation, there is a second challenge. Some people meditate in order to fulfill religious convictions that they have previously held. They may cling to an ideologically driven reconstruction of what they experience during meditation. We can relabel and selectively remember the experience we have just passed through, and there are formatted agendas for doing so, that are promulgated by various sects and teachers. Meditators from these groups may claim to have personally contacted non-existent gods, or to have concentrated perfectly without any drifting attention. Meditation can become a vehicle for culturally sanctioned world views. This is what happens when meditation, with its heightened susceptibility to suggestion, becomes the tool of charismatic movements.

In contrast, one of the signatures of authentic, lifelong, non-sectarian meditators is their disarming honesty and modesty, which are products of self observation and self integration. They have become people who know and accept their real dimensions, salty and earthy, without self appointment or pretension.

For many meditation students, some degree of inner peace, the primary psychological benefit of meditation, opens immediately, like a mental Springtime: self-contained, self-observing, self-accepting, calm, holding mental states. The heightened sense of personal peace that is the most sought after and most achieved benefit of meditation comes from the practiced ability to know, like, and accept oneself. The key to equanimity is non-judgmental attitude towards a richly revealed self in the present moment.

Holding Still and Self Restraint

Most meditations are practiced sitting still, and in fact sitting still is a kind of accomplishment. If there were videos being made of me as I sit at this desk and talk with you, or if there were videos being made of you as you listen, we would see that there is always a modicum of motion in us, and we never sit entirely still unless it is part of a recommended practice. Our bodies prevent stasis by continuously provoking our muscles into a little bit of spontaneous motion.

Depending upon age and temperament, small children can't sit still at all, and our education system has shifted from mandatory desks to more fluid learning environments for early grades. Sitting still is a developmental attainment. If you entered a third grade classroom, you would find little boys talking out of turn, sliding off their seats, breaking pencils and biting off erasers. On the one hand, if you tell them they must sit still, they hear that as punishment, but on the other hand, they will confess to you that their motoric restlessness feels uncomfortable and like being out of control.

Meditation is partly the practice of neuromuscular inhibition. All adults learn to some degree to restrain the drift of our muscles towards generating motion. As children, our muscles are often as much our bosses as our brains, and learning neuromuscular inhibition requires maturation of certain brain centers based upon particular neurotransmitters, and gives us the feeling that we are more in control. Meditation's stillness can also be comforting, making us feel more in charge of ourselves.

The experienced meditator can sit still even when some ill advised impulse may be urging him on to, say, an outburst of angry feelings at a family member, or, say, pursuit of an addictive use of his cell-phone. We can view the neuromuscular stillness of meditation as a practice in increasing pre-frontal cortical inhibitory capacity, the very talent that is the center-piece of an educated, literate, well-spoken, and computer oriented society.

Now if you regulate your body into stillness, and stay still over some period of time, a different amount for different people, it depends how you

are sitting, eventually that will become uncomfortable. It will become uncomfortable for various reasons. Some blood vessel may be slightly crushed and your foot will fall asleep, or some muscle may be slightly tense so there will be some reactive tension. The more you meditate, the more you may learn to sit still. To some extent it is practice, and to some extent you can reduce some of the pains by learning to sit properly and to rest your muscles. But that is relative. As we discussed at the start, all things in the body are movements back to the middle. If you are sitting still for a long period of time, that is actually movement away from the middle by keeping one static pose for a long period of time. Is there any advantage to that? Well, it depends upon how long you sit and it depends what the goals of your meditation are.

But one ironic benefit of learning to sit still is that it is uncomfortable. I have I added, “one ironic benefit.” What is the benefit of becoming uncomfortable? Typically in life when you are meditating and different thoughts are arising on your mind and you are calling your mind back into focus, many of the thoughts that arise in your mind are uncomfortable. I used the example, of angry thoughts on your mind, and you use your meditation to try to focus on your body sensations, not on your anger. By doing that, you are learning to regulate your anger. You are not trying to get rid of it. You are not repressing it. You are not judging it. But you are learning to refocus to maintain realistic perspective.

The same is true with physical discomforts. Physical discomfort rises up because you are sitting still. No one is encouraging you to sit still for an unreasonable period of time, but for a reasonable period of time you feel some discomfort and our natural tendency is to try to get rid of it. Our culture does have a problem facing discomfort. Learning to be non-judgmentally observant of some degree of bodily discomfort is one of the benefits of the neuromuscular inhibition that accompanies meditation.

So it is, that meditation is often a lesson in increased tolerance of routine pain, a kind of benign stoicism.

However, simply diverting one's attention from pain and learning to ignore it is not the same thing as learning to observe it non-reactively, as a meditator ideally learns to do. Hopefully, the increased pain tolerance that often accompanies meditation is a product of insight into some pain's transient nature. This has to be balanced against the recognition that often pain is an important indicator of disease that has to be attended to.

Of course, some people may react against this inhibition. The fantasies and cravings that rise up during meditative self observation and stillness, after brief inhibition, may surge into action when the meditator gets up. In many psychological studies, deprivation has been shown to simulate reactive excess. His cravings may be clearer and stronger. Follow-up and continuity of practice are the best guardians against these pendular reactions.

People may love and pursue meditation to the degree that they can both value and sustain inhibition of action: just sitting. Let's not stereotype this skill as the domain of geeks and accountants. Surgeons and football cornerbacks also rest their abilities partly upon skillful neuromuscular inhibitory auto-regulation, the poised scalpel, the pivot and turn. And, in the other direction, motor control is not the same thing as self control. Some meditators can sit still for a month, but even so, they may remain subject to outbursts of anger or disregulated and impulsive speech.

Inner peace, and self restraint, are two aspects of meditation that may often travel in each others' company, but they are not the same thing. People seeking one may locate within themselves only the other. Students who perfect sitting still may be mentally lost in cultic beliefs, and may not always mature as self observers. Self observation does not necessarily require meditation.

Reducing Belief in One's Own Thoughts

“You are not what you think.” “Your thoughts are not truths.” These slogans point to one of the most important features of meditation: the ability to distance oneself from one's own thoughts, to become more balanced in belief and speech, to see one's thoughts as transient clouds rather than as personal possessions and indisputable truths.

Maybe this capacity for objectification of thought is not very different from the “self-observation” we have already discussed. But our focus now is on thoughts, rather than emotions, desires, or fears. We are now considering the way the self-observing, non-reactivity of meditation may diminish “cognitive overconfidence.” This is not a trivial effect.

Nobelist Daniel Kahneman has reminded us in his book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, that the single most important finding of modern psychology is how pervasive and intense the cognitive distortion of “overconfidence” is. People commonly believe they know more than they know. Doctors and investors are more confident in the accuracy of their predictions than is warranted by the measured outcomes of their speculations. People believe in their gods, politics and world-views with fervor and tenacity, even in the complete absence of evidence. The human stage is a theater of conviction and self-righteous conflict. Everyone seems to feel they know how to run the country and bring about world peace and guarantee good health. Ignorance is always ignorant of its being ignorant. The essence of ignorance is unwarranted conviction.

During our long evolution, it was helpful for us to become overconfident. Overconfidence came into play when there were two guys standing around with sharpened sticks, long before spear points were invented. One guy is saying, “I don't think I can hunt lions, and I am going to fall down on the ground and cry.” But the other guy is saying, “Yeah. I'm not afraid of lions.” I've already pointed out how anxiety can be helpful. We should recognize that its dangerous to hunt lions with wooden spears. On the other hand, we need some courage; we need some confidence; we need some

overconfidence. We need the capacity to face very difficult things and to screw up our courage and believe we can do it. Overconfidence is a psychological mechanism that got built into the Homo Sapien psyche in order to generate psychological comfort in an insecure world. Stock brokers will overestimate their ability to predict the movements of the stock market. But wait a second. What about psychiatrists? If you do the same thing, asking psychiatrists to predict the outcome of their patients' treatment, psychiatrists will tend to over estimate their ability to foresee what will happen. If you ask people to estimate their driving ability, your study will show that most people are above average drivers. So where is the average driver? I guess they evaporate at the end of the day.

The worst part of this problem of overconfidence is that most people believe that their religious and political belief systems are true. Most people believe they know the meaning of life and how planet Earth got here, and who is regulating the universe, which archaic book of myths is true, and most people believe they know how to govern vast social systems like our country. A tremendous amount of what used to be called hubris we now call overconfidence.

Now if you are meditating and you are constantly reminding yourself, "I am going to let go of my thoughts and go back to observing my sensations," following instructions that are not to disbelieve your thoughts but to lighten your grip on them, and let go of your overconfidence, then it is easier to meditate. Meditation helps you feel comfortable and safe without proclaiming to yourself that you know everything.

We all look forward to that rare moment when we get to share an evening with a treasured friend who thinks in multi-dimensional paragraphs instead of emphatic sentences, who sees issues simultaneously from multiple standpoints, who favors the grays of life experience over the black and white of insecure over-simplification, and who can feel comfortable saying, "It seems to me," "maybe," "sometimes," and "I don't know"; and who, when introduced to another thought pattern, does not escalate his tone into deri-

sion or rage. This wise friend has made all of those intellectual adjustments in order to reduce the cognitive distortion of overconfidence.

Since meditation is at least partly the practice of watching one's thoughts, letting them go, and disengaging from them, meditation seems ideally pointed towards reducing cognitive overconfidence. The Buddha called his Path "going beyond views." The idea is not that we become clueless and dumbed down, but that we are committed to just observe what we think we know. Meditation is a natural adaptive practice to hone runaway, one-directional, one-dimensional thoughts. We practice "de-semanticization," wordlessness.

Not a Guaranteed Methodology of Open Mindedness

Unfortunately, the opposite may occur. Sometimes meditation exposes practitioners to states of mind that reactively trigger blind belief. Because meditation creates a distance from one's own thoughts, and therefore reduces the number of beliefs, some people become uncomfortable and grasp for convictions that can anchor them. These people become dependent upon overconfidence in someone else's thoughts.

If your goal is to concentrate, the less you think the better, and therefore unquestioning belief can be elevated to the status of a virtue. Your thoughts will no longer distract you if you cling to a few of them and discredit the rest. This can happen when concentration based meditation extols a narrow focus of thoughts, as if, when the spinning mind slows down and begins to circle a dot, the thoughts that slowly rotate around the focal point need to be simple and even impoverished. A selected few thoughts become repetitive, and convincing. Meditators who overemphasize concentration may sometimes adopt narrow-minded beliefs to perpetuate their focus. The elastic band in the human mind can snap back from freedom towards authoritarianism.

It is important for all of us who treasure meditation to acknowledge that it alone does not free people from religious beliefs or testy vehemence. Meditation is most helpful when it is taught as part of an explicit value system that affirms the importance of moderating ideology and softening tone of voice. My email inbox has born proof that serious meditators can remain beset by gullible hopes, and by angry needs to defend sectarian dogmas. If we hope that meditation will participate in the creation of more civilized social discourse, then we have to assert our humanistic, or Buddhistic, or simply our well-brought-up values, as necessary additions to the mere mechanics of meditation practice.

So the ideal, that meditation should give us detachment from overconfidence in our thoughts, has its own variations. Meditation is not a guaranteed methodology of courtesy, or non-sectarianism, but its thrust is cer-

tainly aligned with them. Meditation is a reminder that our thoughts come and go. Our knowledge is often culture-based and subject to error. The clubs to which we belong are also as impermanent as we are. Our world evaporates with us at our death. Many of our concerns and convictions are overblown. Meditation is designed to help us to live comfortably unattached to our own narratives, and capable of recurrent psychological rebalancing. Each one of us has the opportunity to steer our beloved meditation practice away from unsubstantiated conviction and blind belief.

Letting go of thoughts also means non-attachment to the stories we have invented to make us feel secure and important. Our mental scenarios often focus upon ourselves, our achievements, safety, or health, and they may also become pseudo-historical, telling a soothing tale about the importance of our communities, or our historical moment. There is a common human tendency to portray our own moment in history as more important than any other. This illusion is difficult to substantiate in the face of a fourteen billion-year-old universe, and four billion years of life on Earth without any human beings! Meditative distance from self referential stories may help us accept the larger changes that are always surging around us, that put our own lives and dreams into perspective. The belief in a cosmic, central role to play for one's own group, or religion, is what turns traditions into sects. I hope meditation will help us all let go of spurious histories and fairy tale fundamentalism.

Non-Belief Is Not Cynicism

I want to clarify the difference between non-attachment to ideas, and cynicism, which meditation is not. This is why I have aligned myself with a meditation practice that begins with moral vows that represent commitment to a values-based way of life. Our meditation-derived caution in conviction should not be misunderstood as cultural relativism in which all ideas are equal. Disbelief in our own thoughts should not become its own dogma.

There are places in life to take a stand. Generally, we base our lives on values and feelings, not just ideas. That is why the philosopher, William James, coined the term, “overbelief,” to describe deep ethical feelings about the “more,” by which he meant the rich world texture from which our brief lives have emerged. On the one hand, our little planet existed for billions of years without humans, and on the other hand, here we are!

We carry inside us reverence for the incomprehensible fact that we exist at all. Our emergence within the cornucopia of evolving life forms implies camaraderie with all life. Without believing in our thoughts, we can revel in our mere coming to be.

Therefore, we can hold ethical feelings in the absence of moralizing beliefs. It is an error to always avoid the possibility of error. In an uncertain world, we can go forward and watch for our effect, and then modify our direction. We don't have to be equivocators because we are meditators. We can live by good values even though we are cautious about belief.

I persist in my own overbelief that widespread meditation practice may reduce the mass of assumptions and convictions around the globe, and may facilitate world wide appreciation of complexity and nuance. The practice of non-attachment to thoughts during meditation may well help to birth the civilized virtues, such as improved listening to others, and increased capacity to examine one's own thoughts either spontaneously, or as part of conversation. Meditation that explicitly stands on values is less likely to be oblivious to them.

Not-knowing has to be balanced by the recognition that there are varying degrees of evidence and certainty. We all know that if we let go of a brick it might fall on our toe, but it will not spontaneously rise up to knock us on the chin. Small practical facts occupy a different domain of knowledge than bigger questions of greater breath. There is also the matter of how much effort has been spent to collect balanced information. Working hypotheses based on evidence and ready for revision, have more credibility than fabrications. I like Robert Frost's line: "The strong are saying nothing until they see." We can wisely parse the differences between dogma, credence, evidence, interlocking webs of information, and other forms of knowing, as I have discussed in my book on the sense of wonder.

Reducing, Disrupting and Re-framing Thoughts

Meditations vary a lot in the emphasis they place on stilling the mind. Concentrative meditations that emphasize unbroken, one pointed attention are obviously very different from those that are permissive, and that emphasize simply watching whatever happens. But most share to some degree two further actions regarding thoughts, that are different from simply distancing.

First, meditation often lessens the activity of the mind and leads to seconds, or minutes, or more, when its practitioner is free from thoughts, or has reduced thoughts. This is usually experienced as a big relief. Lessening thought is different than disbelief in one's thought. It's not that thinking is bad; it's just that thinking is exhausting. We get tired of planning, coping and reacting and we just want to be there, alive within our life. This aspect of meditation piggy backs on top of self acceptance, and heightens inner peace and tranquility. Mental spaces of reduced thinking can feel like freedom from our own pressures and plans. For a moment, we can escape from strategizing and ideologies.

Second, to the extent that the meditator makes any effort to return to a focus, such as the breath, or in the case of Vipassana meditation, awareness of body sensations, that effort of returning to a focus will disrupt the conditioned spontaneous flow of thoughts. Meditation severs some patterned lines of programmed mentations and emotions. It blocks some rehearsed scenarios. It interferes with psychic habit. That is why people who meditate seriously for the first time are often thrilled by the new insights that rise up in their minds, seemingly by magic. In fact, fresh perspectives emerge from the meditative process of blocking ruts, and barricading repetitions. What you mentally did before, you no longer do now. Returning to a meditative focus is a methodology of not repeating an old script. You return to the immediate.

Through the meditative process, new organizations of thought schemes and feeling tones are given time and space to assemble themselves. People are often enthralled by new solutions that emerge to prob-

lems they were not even consciously thinking about. This experience is not entirely unique to meditations, and historians of science have long known that breakthroughs in problem solving often occur when the hard working scientist finally “attends away.” Not-thinking can provide a fertile field for freshly germinating thoughts. Making an effort to circumvent the old wiring and to wipe clean the slate gives more chances to new formulations.

Clarity and Decisiveness

Sometimes when I am asked to justify meditation, in a conversational way that the listener is hoping will be brief, I describe how Susan and I will wait before taking any significant decision, whether it consists of purchasing airplane tickets, or re-arranging our lifetime priorities as the demanding progression through life stages has often required of us, until after we have meditated for an hour, or a month.

Why does meditation bring so much clarity and decisiveness in its wake? When we are faced with a troubling conundrum we can't solve, and we meditate for an hour or a month, many scenarios will rise and pass away in the mind. Foolish thoughts, angry scenes, and hopeless thoughts will arise and pass away, and among these temptations based on ignorance, there will also be stories about some future in which the problem has been solved, and some of the short stories of the meditating mind will be valuable. Meditation places both our problems and our solutions up against the screen of transience. We envision, edit and revise scenarios, letting go of most, but recognizing a few as prescient.

Meditation helps us to observe our thoughts, bodies and cellular sensation as changing, various, many angled, inconsistent, renewable. What we say we believe is often only a sample of the menagerie of thoughts we have entertained. It is helpful to be able to watch while many thoughts parade past. Sometimes there is psalm that emerges among the jingles.

Alongside the creative proliferation of scenarios, and the perspective of endless time and change, when it comes to clarity and decisiveness, you can add into the mix that the baseline of meditation is calm, or peace, at least to some extent. Decisions are often easier to make when you are gazing on the scene with long, clear rays. During meditation, our straying thoughts often rise up from a relatively calmer, clearer mind.

By disrupting old patterns, and permitting a plethora of new ones, and then filtering those also, meditation increases fresh, and often optimal clarity. I feel more adaptive and effective as a result of my meditation.

Hyperfocus and Dissociation

The ability to hyperfocus that some people are born with can be a gift that is useful to the deeply immersed scientist, artist, or meditator. But this talent also carries the danger of immoderation, unbreakable focus, pursuing one state of mind into into dissociative avoidance. Extended and involuntarily fixated concentration can run out of control, precluding necessary skill in redirecting attention when meditation ends. Temporary relief that comes along with hyper concentration that blocks out everything else does not really add a life skill. Blinding absorption may bring self-satisfaction and pain relief, but it is not necessarily wisdom. The Buddha emphasized that concentration and insight are not the same things. Concentrative self absorption was the goal of some meditation practices in ancient India but is not the goal of most meditation today. The Buddha described it as a useful tool, but not the substance.

Hyperfocus was a state of mind and body I saw often in emergency rooms in New York City when I was a medical student, when desperate patients sometimes presented in dissociative fugues that made them temporarily impervious to pain. To assess the authenticity of their detachment, medical interns might probe these patients with needles, and there would be no reaction. I saw very clearly that states of concentrative dissociation were not necessarily on the path to wisdom.

People who have experienced cruelty in childhood often learn early in life to be “absent,” and when as adults they encounter meditation, they may dissociate because of their practiced, and once helpful, escapism. Abused and neglected children grown up often dissociate in order to locate a mental state that is free from the toxic environment that once surrounded them. Many exaggerated stories about meditation from past eras tell us more about the austere conditions of child development in those days than about states of mind that we should aim for. We should listen with caution to exhortation about the value of extended vacancies, or extreme focus, as a way to cope with artificially induced pain.

The relative mental stillness of meditation is occasionally experienced as getting in the way of necessary problem solving. People with obsession-al styles do not always like mental spaces. When a person is temporarily overwhelmed by a pressuring life circumstance, such as divorce or family illness, that may not be the right time to learn meditation. During some pressured life circumstances, some people will want to keep on trying to solve their life problems, whereas others, meditators, may recognize the benefits of an hour, or ten days of “attending away” that may permit fresh solutions to arise.

Harmony and Right Speech

Right speech is one of meditation's most meaningful boosts to our everyday existence. To the extent that meditation augments partial or occasional relinquishment of one's own thoughts, and offers clear-mindedness and inner peace, then we should see those processes emerging into our speech. Speech remains our most important and subtle interpersonal regulator, and it has a rich layering and depth. You can think of skillful speech as a social homeostatic regulator that increases communion and that decreases static between people, a potential return to psychosocial middle paths. I'm going to mention three effects that most people can count on from most meditations, and look at their contribution to right speech.

We have seen that meditation is one of our species' best ways to balance out one of our worst flaws, our overconfident beliefs. To the extent that you have gained this benefit, you may find yourself listening better to others. By listening, I don't mean acceptance or acquiescence. Having just thrown away half, or all, of your superstitions, and evidence-impooverished conclusions, why borrow someone else's? But in interpersonal relationships, listening well, understanding what someone is saying, is the royal road to improved communication. Listening prevents the cardinal errors of cutting people off before they have finished speaking, or arguing against something they didn't say. Possibly the most effective tool in every kind of psychotherapy is the feeling of being heard. Why not make this contribution to other peoples' well being before they need professional therapy? The thing that blocks our ability to listen is our own belief that we already know the answer and we are right. Meditation might help us reduce that blinder.

We also took note of meditation as diminished impulsivity and improved self restraint. This learning should ideally help us punctuate our speech with pauses. When the Buddha discussed right speech, he meant not only honesty, but also skillful timing and phrasing. Today speech has gotten faster. When I listen to a young person today, I feel that I need a digital program that records speech and slows it down one-third. I imagine

that the increased rate of speech today is a product of television, on which sportscasters and newscasters always need to generate a mood of excitement and urgency; and of shows that sell commercials on a cost-per-second basis. In contrast, it is the pause, the moment of thought, the considered phrasing that helps us change mere speech into communication, saying well what we have intended to say.

Meditation gives us a chance to consider. We know that our own thoughts need modification with phrases like, “I believe,” and “it seems to me,” and a similar perspective is involved regarding other peoples’ thoughts, which often merit being turned over and seen from many sides, as if we were children examining shells on a beach. Of course, not all shells are worth keeping. I am not recommending passive acquiescence to verbal bullies. Don’t weakly bend to other people’s overconfidence.

Another feature of right speech is honesty that goes beyond merely “not-lying.” Meditators who have observed their inconstant and self-serving minds during silence, can more easily partake in a down-home realistic back-and-forth with others. We know well just who we are and who we aren’t. We can confess and unmask in the company of friends, presuming they also have the capacity for authenticity and intimacy. A friend of mine who holds a high position in a large meditation organization told me that meditation’s greatest gift to him was to show him how ordinary he was. Sometimes this insight is given the name of “egolessness.”

Right speech may be the most valuable, direct, and useful side effect of any kind of meditation, but it is not always generated. We have already seen that in prolonged silence and concentration, some minds will travel further downhill into the cognitive errors of fear, closure, and dogma.

Some people pursue meditation, but feel a need to justify it. What they have actually done with their minds does not seem enough to them. To reduce the dissonance between who they wished to become and who they have remained, they may claim that they have become exceptional, and insist that other people validate them.

Teachers

Are the people who have apparently benefitted most from meditation, and who eventually become teachers, really beneficiaries of meditation per se, or are they feeling good because of their titles, positions, and importance in the eyes of others? Would they attribute equal benefit to meditation if they had to practice it under the condition that they could never become teachers?

Meditation as part of a defined tradition contains the benefits that are found in all comforting groups. If you immerse yourself in a meditation tradition, you join a club. This carries the danger of exclusiveness, but also the warmth of belonging to a world of historical echoes and of friends. You could say that joining a tribe of meditators adds value to meditation practice that has little to do with meditation, and that could be equally accomplished by joining a church or a grass roots movement. Or you could say that friendship on the path adds dimensionality to meditation, revealing that the practice prepares us for and facilitates certain types of friendship, those based upon meditation.

Meditation traditions also create (as any human group does) some positions of importance. Particular individuals become vested in the warmth of other participants' attentions. You could say that to meditation there are falsely attributed gains in well-being that are really attributable to role hierarchy, and the feelings of being valuable, useful, and important. Or you could say that teaching and guiding others is a natural parental and cultural function that every community requires, meditation traditions being no exception. Someone needs to uphold and carry on what has been given.

So it is, we find the dearest friends, filled with energy and richly donated time, teaching other students with a generous heart. There are meditators who ascend the pinnacle of social roles who do not lose their modesty or humor. You know who they are by the way that they know who they are.

A teacher explains the value of meditation, exemplifies it, makes it seem something you can do, and gives it away for you to keep as your own. In the wake of a great teacher, like Mr. Goenka, many other teachers appear and their hallmarks are clarity, devotion, kindness and generosity. Mr. Goenka explicitly rejected the claim that he was a teacher because he had attained some “stage.” The attainments of teachers are what they give and not what they claim. As the African American writer, Zora Neale Hurston said, “Those that don’t got it can’t show it. Those that got it can’t hide it.”

In the long run, our best teachers and friends on the path shower us with the feeling that we aren’t alone. Meditation is partly an infectious enthusiasm. Teachers are people who radiate encouragement and promotion. A teacher is a person who shows that the Path is “doable,” and walks along with you a little way in the right direction. Mostly, you have to “walk on alone.”

The Great Embrace

We have all come to wish that meditation effloresces into both personal equanimity, and also into harmony, that is, interpersonal and social good will. Today, meditation is promoted as part of wistful attitudes, like “Peace Now,” “War is Not the Answer,” or “Coexist.” Meditation has become blurred with the cultural matrix of the sixties, within which it emerged into the Western World. Anecdotes from the hazy mountains of the past circulate as if they were historical documentation about the peaceful accomplishment of mythical meditators, once upon a time, long ago. Almost everyone confuses Gandhi and the Buddha and imagines that meditation made the Buddha into a pacifist, which he wasn’t. Even the Buddha did not claim to have solutions to the widespread violence and war that were present in his own time and that press onward into ours.

We all want to believe that the good feelings we can locate in ourselves during meditation will suffuse around us with social blessings. You can count me in as one among the hopeful. But I am a meditator who questions the objectivity of my own beliefs, so I want to ask whether meditation really has a significant benign social impact.

Certainly, in our minds as we meditate, or as we get up from meditation, we feel the great embrace. We feel not only greater self integration, and self acceptance, but greater appreciation and empathy for others. The relatively enhanced homeostatic regulation of our thoughts, feelings, nervous system, blood flow and other psychosomatic processes has optimized our sense of peace and wellbeing. We feel more understanding and forgiving. And we feel surges of gratitude for our opportunities, primarily, meditation itself. We feel pervasive love. Many of us will at that moment practice “*Metta*,” as we believe that the Buddha taught it, radiating all beings and all directions of the cosmos with our grandparental hearts, (whatever our age), with our feelings of love, joy, peace and compassion. This is meditation’s glow, our harvest moon, our own light in the dark.

But is that feeling durable and socially significant?

It seems to me that in answering the question about whether our personal ebullience at the close of our meditation has any real social significance, we have a number of different things to consider.

First, there is the question of whether every solitary meditator will have his or her own social significance, or whether meditation creates its social utility only when a large enough number of people cohere into an effective unit. We say that in a democracy, each voter counts. On the other hand, we also say that many beautiful desert flowers are born to bloom unseen.

We have to think about critical mass. We know that a certain number of radioactive atoms are necessary for a chain reaction to occur. The idea of critical mass is also important in biology. For example, if an animal becomes rare, it may precipitously die off because there were not enough mature animals to find each other, to mate, and maintain their population. This is the story of the passenger pigeon. This sudden disappearance happens to human groups too, as ethnicities and indigenous peoples are lost to our human gene pool. Not every last member of the group has to die, but if the critical mass of members becomes too small, the society will cease to self regenerate, and will fade away. The same laws of nature may be true with fads and trends. Meditation may have little substantial impact upon a community, nation, or planet when its participants are few, or localized in population islands in rarified communities, or in enclosed sects. The impact of meditation may grow as the number of its participants surge, and, in particular, for those of us who are optimists on this point, we may also have to think about different thresholds, in which, say, the number one thousand and one is entirely different than one thousand. By "threshold," I mean a tipping point, such as the temperature where water turns to ice, or where a social hope finally gets written into a new civil rights law. There may be staircases of threshold effect, in which more becomes different and the changes accumulate and pile up, like our culture before or after pc's, the internet, and smartphones. I have been partly animated by the idea that the

significance of meditation as a social force cannot yet be measured and could some day cross a threshold to become a salient governor of our well being in large populations.

But another issue that effects significance is decay with distance. In physics and chemistry, we are always measuring the decay of an effect across space, and very often, decay varies as the square of the distance, meaning, that very closely placed things can influence each other, but as soon as they move slightly apart, their mutual influence rapidly wanes. This is one reason why experimental studies on the immediate social impact of meditation can be overly self-congratulatory. Influencing your family and friends may be an entirely different thing than influencing society, because, as we have just seen, the spread of influence is usually increasingly difficult with distance, and widespread influence is different and more difficult to obtain. Still, if forces like literacy, gay rights, internet access, or Jihad can sweep the globe, why not meditation, with its reduced grasping at delusion and its social warmth?

Pascal said that wisdom is the ability to recognize and appreciate the uniqueness of every person. Won't our hard-won meditation practices help to make a large number of us appreciative and wise?

One thing I think about is the hormone oxytocin (and its relatives like vasopressin) that surges in our blood and brain when we feel bonding love with a baby, a romantic partner, or our dog, and which increases in the brain of a petted dog, too! Is it possible that meditation may sometimes throw us into a pan-oxytocin state, in which that bond of mother and child, or dog and man, may suffuse out in a less targeted and more perfumed manner, encompassing grass, trees, birds, rush hour drivers, and rude siblings? Is this the biological basis of "the great embrace"? Is it possible that meditation changes our hormonal makeup in such an infectious way that we shift the physiology of all people and mammals with whom we come in contact? (This is what I had in mind when I said earlier that the commercial-

ism or friendship during which you are taught meditation may alter your brain state as you are learning to practice it.)

We want to remind ourselves that the Buddha, specifically, warned against basing one's meditation practice upon mass-movement salvation fantasies, because for him, everything was impermanent and changing. He said that he taught meditation to lead individuals out of suffering, not to guarantee everything to every one. (He was not running for public office). We need to remember that our desire to reshape the world may be a modern, post-Renaissance attitude. I don't believe that we should substitute complex, multi-system problem solving, as global peace and sustainability will require, with a single, all-accomplishing fantasy based upon meditation. Meditation may or may not participate in global improvements that may or may not occur, and if they do, will require input and participation from a wide diversity of economic, political, technical, and spiritual contributors. Meditation should not be harnessed to fearful thinking that denies all dangers by wishing them away simply by waving the magic wand of the word, "meditation."

I want to believe that meditation justifies my life as socially useful, but I know that most changes flow like waves, and that waves collide and interact, obliterating each other or reinforcing each other, to generate unpredictable wave forms, and that one lifetime is a short-term experiment. I plan to meditate now, and to send out the waves of loving-kindness as well as I can, and surrender my attachment to long term outcome. My confidence that meditation is hugely beneficent for me is my springboard to wider hope, even though I also recognize this may be an overbelief.

The great embrace that wells up in us from our meditation practice has to do with the reduction of beliefs, positions, and judgements; the lessening of angers and self-righteousness; and the compassionate connection to everyone else's problems and distress. It is a blessing to feel that we hold the world in the cupped hands of our understanding and empathy.

I have noticed that my fellow meditators seem to be motivated by an unceasing purpose in their personal lives. They seem to feel that their life has meaning that is deeper than simply constructed meaning. They seem to hold steady to goals that are more direction-setting and insistent than any explanation they can give. Although most meditators remain ordinary in their skills and accomplishment, many people who pursue meditation across the tides of life develop notable persistence, and devotion.

The great embrace that meditation brings out in us is not dependent upon our proving that “together we will change the world.” I believe the great embrace arises from each meditator’s psychological recognition that a small corner of the world inside of our hearts has already been changed.

Receptive to an Unthinkable World

An unthinkable world rolls around us, vast in billions of galaxies spangled with stars and planets. And a densely creative, detailed world lies within us, because evolution has designed trillions of body cells which are performing uncountable chemical processes, all gleaning the benefits of billions of years of life's successful utilization of scientific laws. Our bodies and minds are inventors within the cosmos. Through our amazing species, life has become aware of its own existence. The world that science has revealed to us is too big and too small for us to fully grasp. Humanity has had the tendency to mis-portray the scale of the universe and the complexity of our minds and bodies, by creating stories about mythical ancestors and their gods, that diminish the extraordinary complexity of our quadrillions of neuronal synapses, and the multi-galactic universe that stretches out fourteen billion light years or more.

I like to imagine that meditation, with its equanimity and reduced craving, may play a role in diminishing the fables that get in the way of our right understanding. Meditations that decrease our reactivity, and diminish our urgent or fanciful conclusions, may help us adjust to realities that are emerging today through sciences. Meditation is practical, but it may be more than a self-help tool, because it offers open-mindedness and emotional stabilization that can facilitate new collective vision. When we can hold our minds open, momentarily relieved of emotional reactions and intellectual beliefs, we may be poised to receive new synthesizing apperceptions. To realize new things, we will have to put aside the outmoded ones.

Through the Buddha's meditation, enduring revolutions occurred in human consciousness. The discovery that all people and things are impermanent compounds was a product of the Buddha's meditation. He realized that every "thing" was a combination of smaller particles in unstable and temporary contact, and therefore everything in the universe was subject to inevitable decay. By his insight, he anticipated the basis of modern physics, chemistry, biology, and cosmology. It was through his meditation, also, that

a person had the first clear vision of an entire universe run by cause-and-effect, free of divine interventions or motives.

Maybe our meditation today can help us stay stable and receptive, turning the bubbles of our thoughts over and over, as we wheel in our newly reconfigured world. Maybe along with our hoped-for social impact, we may germinate new dimensions within people, who may become freed to experience the real context of our lives.

Coda

From an evolutionary standpoint, meditation appears to be a particular form of wisdom that has arisen through adaptations. This wisdom permits the mind-and-body in which it dwells to discern more skillful and optimal living. It provides some guidance about how to reduce errors of thought, judgement and belief, and also how to reduce emotional overdrives and excesses. It tends to balance human executive function within more modulated physiological states. It is far from perfect, and like all homeostatic regulatory systems, it can falter and become the seat of its own kind of exaggerations and imbalances. All homeostatic regulation eventually fails, all bodies decay, all cultures and all species die off. Meditation seems to reduce the suffering that derives from the craving and ignorance that leads to clinging to impermanent things, and to provide a haven of well being within the shifting circumstances that everyone has to cope with.

When it is cultivated deeply and widely, meditation may provide wisdom beyond adaptation and wellbeing, raising a curtain to reveal new dimensions of the human heart and mind by which we may recognize subtler and more consilient guidance.

At its best, meditation can lead us towards greater accuracy of thinking, reduced emotional turmoil, refreshed ideas, clearer listening, and more luminous appreciation of the value of all lives, preeminently, our own. I wouldn't live a day without it.

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