On the Cultivation of Presence in Meditation

> Huike said to Bodhidharma, "My mind is anxious. Please pacify it."
> Bodhidharma replied, "Bring me your mind, and I will pacify it."
> Huike said, "Although I've sought it, I cannot find it."
> "There," Bodhidharma replied, "I have pacified your mind."

Essentially, the Buddhist path is an investigation of consciousness. Knowing the nature of consciousness and how it functions, according to this tradition, can free one from illusion and bondage. On the Buddhist path two general forms of meditation are practiced. Shamatha, through the development of concentration, aims to bring stability to the mind so that it may be used in a more skillful way. It is not directly concerned with the investigation of mind. In Vipassana, the path of clear seeing, meditative presence is cultivated so that one may discover the nature of mind.

Practices that develop concentration are not difficult to understand as they are similar to the ways the mind is used in daily life. Stability of mind after all is needed so that our activities may be accomplished. The required technique is a simple one: the meditator chooses an object of interest, and keeps it in mind. One may focus on the breath, or on some positive emotion, like compassion. One may recite a mantra, or concentrate on a colored disk. Again and again, whenever the mind wanders, one reels it back. Over time, after long practice, the meditator can remain fixed for hours to the object, without wavering.

There is fundamental difference between concentration and meditative presence, or simply, presence. (There is no difference between meditative presence and presence.) The mind holds, through concentration, to an object; it holds to contents, to something that it knows. In meditative presence, the mind is concerned by itself. It rests upon itself. This does not mean something vague. The difference between concentration and meditative presence is not a matter of exchanging one kind of object for another—that would be a serious misunderstanding. Rather, it implies a difference in attitude.

Concentration requires aim; it requires effort. Concentration requires that attention be directed toward a specific object. In meditative presence, however, the mind is its own end, and does not require any specific orientation, any effort toward the accomplishment of anything.

—Imagine a tennis player. Perfectly aware of how she holds her racket, aware of the other player and of their intricate play together, the movement of the tennis ball—perfectly aware of everything during the course of the game—she may completely forget herself. This is an example of concentration, not presence. During the game she had no clear consciousness of herself.

It is a characteristic of concentration to become absorbed in the chosen object. When meditators develop this capacity of mind to an uncommon degree, this characteristic may be more evident. One meditator, for example, practiced concentration for several months on a yellow disk. This implies fixing the mind from 16 to 18 hours a day upon a yellow disk, avoiding any fluctuation, any move to another object, such as sounds or pain in the body, thoughts. His mind became so focused on the yellow, he reported, that when he later saw the yellow of an egg he felt as though he was being inhaled, or swallowed; he felt bound to disappear.—At this point, there is no sense of presence. As concentration implies grasping to an object, there is therefore a lack of presence, which can be partial or near-total.

To study Buddhism is to study oneself.

—Dogen

As the aim of meditation is not ultimately to know the world around one *or any specific object* but rather to know oneself, another orientation is required. One needs to look within. Looking within does not mean looking within the body, but within the mind. *Within* means that the looker, the mind, is looking at itself. In such way, one shifts beyond the practice of concentration to meditative presence, to awareness. But this represents only a step, a way to withdraw the mind from its fascination with external objects. It is a means of opening to discovery. When the mind is

not pushed by fascination in any direction, neither to external objects, nor to internal objects, like thoughts and emotions (treated as external objects), there will be no object, no aim. Notions like "within" and "without" will lose their meaning.

The mind is so used to being directed toward some object that it is hard to understand how to proceed in the exploration of mind. Even thoughts are treated as if they are external objects.

Jean Piaget, the Swiss naturalist and philosopher well-known for his work with children, and for his work in cognitive development and genetic epistemology, asked children which was heavier: the name *feather* or the name *stone*. The children said, *Stone.* Names were confused with the objects they were referring to. As adults, we are not entirely free from this type of confusion. Freud noted:

> By their interposition internal thought-processes are made into perceptions. It is like a demonstration of the theorem that all knowledge has its origin in external perception. When hypercathexis of the process of thinking takes place, thoughts are actually perceived—as if they came from without—and are consequently held to be true. [1]

Mostly, we relate to thoughts and to mental images as if they are concrete objects, or real people. Based on such mistaken assumptions, we react with desire or aversion, anger or sadness.

In some meditation manuals, meditators are invited to uncover the source of their thoughts: Do thoughts come from outside the meditator? Does a thought come from fire, earth, water or air? Can a thought be traced to a mountain, a river, or a tree? Only once it has been ascertained that thoughts are not to be confused with tangible objects, is the meditator invited to check within.

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Before we look for consciousness, let us see how the Buddhist tradition defines it. Dharmakirti, the seventh-century Indian philosopher whose work became normative in Tibet, has much to say on this point. Georges Dreyfus, in his book *Recognizing Reality: Dharmakirti's Philosophy and its*

Tibetan Interpretations, offers rich examination of Dharmakirti's work, and this will help nourish our discussion. In *The Transcendence of the Ego* and *Being and Nothingness,* Sartre also brings incisive commentary to this matter. In some respects, Sartre seems to express a vision similar to that of the Buddhist tradition, although in a more contemporary language.

In Tibet, debates were held for centuries about the way to define consciousness. There was much at stake. How meditation would be practiced was dependent on the outcome. Some scholars described consciousness as "that which knows an object." In other words, that there is always an object of consciousness. We may find something similar in modern philosophy. In phenomenology, as Husserl tells us, "all consciousness is consciousness of something." This points to intentionality. Consciousness, in this view, always aims at something which is not itself. It aims at something transcendent.

But this definition does not account for an awareness of consciousness itself. For those Tibetan scholars and practitioners who held to this definition, it was not possible to cognize the mind directly. Only through concept, according to this position, only through cognizing a previous moment of consciousness, can consciousness be known. The Dalai Lama, describing the gelupga view of meditation on the nature of mind, explains: "In the meditation of Mahamudra, we may use either a moment of consciousness to focus on the remembered experience of a preceding moment of mind, or we may use one part of consciousness to focus on another." 2 But a previous moment can only be known as a concept. It is not a direct awareness of consciousness; it is only the trace of consciousness. Tibetan masters who believed it possible to know the mind directly, without concept, did not find this an acceptable definition. "Sapan (Sakya Pandita, of the 13th century, one of the most respected philosophers of Tibet) rejects the definition of mind as that which cognizes an object since it does not include self-cognition." 3

Another definition of consciousness—*that which is clear and knowing*—is less restrictive. It is also more widely accepted by Tibetan scholars of the Buddhist tradition. Even if we were not concerned with the knowing of consciousness itself, it seems that to describe a consciousness that

could cognize an object without knowing that it is cognizing this object would amount to a useless cognition. There would be no difference between cognizing and not cognizing an object. If we were to state that a second instant of consciousness that knows the first instant is needed for consciousness to function, then we would need a third instant to know the second, and so on. Sartre was well aware of this problem. "Consciousness of self is not dual," he said. "If we wish to avoid an infinite regress, there must be an immediate, non-cognitive relation of the self to itself." 4

> Consciousness is aware of itself in so far as it is consciousness of a transcendent object. All is therefore clear and lucid in consciousness: the object with its characteristic opacity is before consciousness, but consciousness is purely and simply consciousness of being consciousness of that object. That is the law of existence. 5

From the Buddhist point of view as expressed by Dharmakirti:

> Consciousness does not apprehend external objects directly but only through the mediation of aspects. An aspect is the reflection or mark of the object in consciousness. To be aware of an object means to have a mental state that has the form of this object and is cognizant of this form. 6

Dreyfus goes on to explain this aspect as:

> …the aspect of the object in the consciousness as well as the aspected consciousness itself**.** Awareness takes on the form of an object and reveals that form by assuming it. In the process of revealing external things, cognition reveals itself. 7

But the mere arising of this aspect in consciousness is not enough to provide cognitive context. The aspect needs conceptualization to endow it with a meaning.

> For Dharmakirti perception does not identify its object but merely holds in its perceptual ken. Hence perception does not provide any cognitive content by itself but merely induces conceptual activities through which

content is constructed. 8

Conceptual activities may be similar to what phenomenology calls intentionality.

A concept induced by perception can be stored by memory. Of course such concept is no longer dependent on the presence of physical elements, like light, and so on. This may be why there is confusion between what is thought of and what is perceived. The concepts are the same, but the conditions for their arising are different.

Intentionality, as noted earlier, signifies that consciousness always aims at something which is not itself, something transcendent. Such conceptual activity is needed for cognitive content, and this creates duality. Duality, between consciousness and its object. But consciousness can furthermore be placed at the level of an object through the construction of the concept *I*. Now we have the duality of an object and I.

We commonly speak of *my* thoughts, *my* sadness, *my* pleasure, *my* vision. We take the I to be consciousness. Sartre also pointed to this misconception.

> Everything happens, therefore, as if consciousness constitutes the ego
> as a false representation of itself, as if consciousness hypnotized itself
> before this ego which it has constituted, absorbing itself in the ego as if
> to make the ego its guardian and its law. 9

> The ego is not the owner of consciousness; it is the object of consciousness. 10

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Buddhist meditation is an exploration of the nature and function of consciousness. As consciousness is not an object, the exploration of consciousness needs an uncommon approach.
In opening to such exploration, one main difficulty is the tendency to fall back on the attitude commonly associated with the exploration of objects.

Consciousness cannot be the aim, the object of a quest. As soon as there is an objective in mind, one is dealing with an object. Therefore, any wish, any desire or hope to discover what

consciousness is—veils it. Meister Eckhart, the 14th century Christian philosopher and mystic, expressed this in a paradoxical way: "We should pray to God," he said, "to free us from God."

It is not through the cultivation of a specific objective that the mind can be known. But the mind *is realized* when one drops all aim and objective. It is a *via negativa* well-known to mystics. But this is not to suggest any negative objective, that is, the wish to get rid of any contents of the mind regarded as an obstacle. There is nothing to get; there is nothing to get rid of; there is no hope; no fear. Tibetan meditation texts repeat this endlessly.

Sartre was aware of the need to have no intention, no motivation:

> A reflective apprehension of spontaneous consciousness as non-personal spontaneity would have to be accomplished *without any antecedent motivation*. This is always possible in principle, but remains very improbable or, at least, extremely rare in our human condition. 11

But Dharmakirti, who was certainly used to the practice of meditation, points to this possibility:

> Due to the speed of the mental process, the untrained person usually cannot differentiate conceptual from non-conceptual cognition. Only on special occasions, such as in some form of meditation, can a clear differentiation be made. 12

In vipassana, the main aspect of Buddhist meditation, it is possible for the meditator—through the very sharp cultivation of mindfulness—to be aware of the first instant of perception before the arising of a concept: to be mindful means, precisely, to be present at each instant. This allows the meditator the possibility to not buy into objectification of the perception. But this requires a state of mind that is totally balanced: a mind that is not engaged in the object, either positively, through desire or attachment, or negatively, through aversion. It requires a mind that is not dulled through indifference. It requires a mind, in fact, that is free of intention.

The Burmese meditation master Mahasi Sayadaw describes one facet of the process through which the meditator is aware of the arising of any experience in the mind:

> As the practice get more refined, at times the number of different objects to note may shrink to one or two or all may even disappear. However, at this time, the knowing quality is still present. In this very clear open space of the sky (-like consciousness) there remains only one blissful consciousness, which is very clear without comparison. 13

A Thai master, Achan Mahabowa, spoke of meditation on the breath. —Mindful of all the physical sensations that accompany the inflow and outflow of breath, the meditator simply rests. After a while, as the meditator's mind becomes more deeply attentive, and refined: perceptions become finer, more subtle still, until they disappear all together, and only the knowing quality of the mind remains. This is a pure knowing. Paul Valéry, a modern French poet, writes with extraordinary intuition: "to feel the knowing itself and no object."14 In allowing for intimacy with the experience, objective content disappeared for this poet, and the mind suspended any involvement with the object. In another approach to meditation, meditators work on the attitude of the mind. Using modern terminology, we could say that it is the intentionality of consciousness which is suspended. That is, one does not take the duality of consciousness-object for granted. Meditators need to recognize how the mind constantly buys into intentionality, into conceptualisation.

Let us examine a few of the concepts that we impose upon our experiences: As suggested earlier, *within* does not clearly express what is at stake in meditation. "The mind is neither within nor without, nor is it to be apprehended between the two." 15 To look within, even when understood to signify within the mind, gives objective to the meditation: it gives intention. Looking for the mind, whether within or without, is to conceive of an object. Consciousness is not located in space as that is a characteristic of objects. There is nowhere to direct the mind. "Don't try to place your mind inwardly. Don't try to observe an object outwardly. Rest in the observer, the thinker, mind itself, without fabricating anything." 16

Presence. —To be present means that we are conscious of being conscious of something. And this is entirely different from being absorbed in the object that is being perceived or thought of.

Although the word presence, or present, may be used, one must be careful to not make it an instance of temporality. An instance between past and future. The word present is used merely to avoid being trapped in past and future; nor does it mean, instead, being trapped in another aspect of temporality, the so-called now. Temporality is a concept, a frame that is used to organize the recording of experiences: it is useful, and efficient, but it is nonetheless only a frame, framework, and nothing else.

Sometimes, the mind aims at past or future, and this keeps a concept in mind. Use of the word presence is an attempt to clear, dust off this misunderstanding. Lost in thoughts of the past or future is certainly a way to not be present. But temporality is perpetuated in less obvious ways, too. —Any attempt, for example, to transform or change an experience that is arising implies temporality. When we transform an experience, it means that we anticipate another experience that is not present, an experience that we project onto another time.

Saint Augustine, the 4th century philosopher and theologian, was puzzled by the notion of time. He said that if no one asked him, he knew what time was, but as soon as he was asked—he did not know. The past does not exist, he said, and neither does the future, nor is there a gap in-between for a present to exist.

Consciousness is not located in time; time is a content of the mind.

In meditation, the most common confusion is to believe that presence has a specific aspect, like vastness, peacefulness, or clarity. But this is to make an object of presence. Such notions arise when one does not recognize that no matter the experience, presence is the awareness of being conscious of this or that. But consciousness is not the content—it is the experiencer, the knower of the experience. This awareness implies that consciousness is not lost in its object.
The object is irrelevant for the knowing of consciousness.

It is possible to be present in any kind of experience—agitation, sleepiness, joy and sorrow—providing one's concern is not with the content of the experience but rather rests, simply, in the knowing of it. But the investigation of consciousness can only unfold in the first person.

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In order to explore consciousness, one not only needs to disregard the object, but also pass beyond the tendency to personalize consciousness. When one identifies with this knowing capacity which is consciousness, thinking *I* know, *I* see, and so on, one projects a concept onto the experience, splitting it in two: Object and subject, with the individual in question as subject. It means that one is attached to the content of experience: the concept I. Lost in this content, awareness of the knowing capacity of consciousness is veiled. Consciousness appears in whatever aspect of the I. If the mind clings to this appearance, there is no awareness of the consciousness that appears as I.

Exploration of this knowing capacity of consciousness does not require a new technique, but rather the suspension of the habitual function of the mind by means of temporality, personality, and the duality of a subject facing an object. The notion of a technique is subjected utterly to purpose. It is subjected to an aim.

Can consciousness be sought out by seeing? Can it be known by hearing, touching, or thinking? If that were so, consciousness would be a shape and color, a sound, a tactile sensation, a thought. None of which is true. Treating consciousness as an ordinary object of knowledge splits consciousness in two. But consciousness is not breakable. —One does not have to get rid of any experience, only not be lost in it. Consciousness reveals itself at the moment of seeing, hearing, touching, thinking. In a sutra, the Buddha expresses this clearly. 17

First, the Buddha said that there is nothing in the universe that he does not perceive. This is to point out that he is free from any deficiency. "If I were to say, 'I don't know whatever in the cosmos...is seen, heard, sensed, cognized…pondered by the intellect,' that would be a falsehood in me…'"

He goes on. "Thus, monks, the Buddha, when seeing what is to be seen, doesn't construe a seen. He doesn't construe an unseen. He doesn't construe a seer."

The Buddha continues, speaking of all perceptions, and thoughts. Clearly, the Buddha is describing an attitude that is free of duality. And yet his mind is not empty. He does not construct,

when seeing, the duality of a seer and that which is seen. According to the Buddha, this is the attitude of freedom.

Sartre points in this way to the artificial nature, the split, the duality between world and I:

> It is enough that the *me* be contemporaneous with the World, and that the subject-object duality, which is purely logical, definitively disappear from philosophical preoccupation. The World has not created the *me*; the *me* has not created the World. These are two objects for absolute, impersonal consciousness and it is by virtue of this consciousness that they are connected. 18

—How is that possible when thinking?

The first step: understanding that a thought is not the object it is pointing at. For example, the thought of water isn't wet. But one needs to go further.

A thought is only an appearance taken by the mind. There is no duality between a thinker and a thought. The thought is the consciousness of a certain meaning, or rather, consciousness taking on the appearance of a certain meaning. There is no meaning that needs to be known. Meaning cannot be distinguished from consciousness of the meaning.

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Let us explore consciousness of emotions. —Imagine an experience of sadness. If I wish to get rid of it, that would mean I believe it to have a concrete reality, an objective reality, something I really could get rid of. It would mean that sadness has an existence separate from that of the mind. But sadness is just a coloration that the mind has at this particular instant. At this instant, sadness is to the mind what temperature is to water. Consciousness is the *material* out of which sadness is made.

Imagine a houseplant not far from the living room window. Only a small part of it receives direct sunlight, and this part appears as bright green. But the rest of the plant seems rather dark, a darker green. It would not make sense to take a cloth to somehow rub away the brighter area. In order to get rid of this shade of bright green one would have to clip it away. Moving the plant slightly, turning it just so, would be easier. Instead of changing the plant, which remains exactly the

same plant, we change the context.

We cannot act on sadness directly as with an object, but we can change the condition that causes sadness.

Our concern here, though, is not to imagine how we can get rid of sadness, but to know what consciousness is. If one thinks one needs to get rid of sadness in order to be aware of consciousness, this implies that one is dealing only with contents. When we do not make an object out of an emotion, we can experience it as the way consciousness appears at this instant. But this does not change what consciousness is. "Pleasure cannot be distinguished—even logically—from the consciousness of pleasure. Consciousness (of) pleasure is constitutive of the pleasure as the very mode (of) its own existence, as the material of which it is made." 19

Another common mistake in meditation is to believe that in order to know consciousness, one must get rid of all contents—to have an empty mind. And so one tries to push away any experience that appears to the mind. Paul Valéry seems to fall into this trap:

> The soul enjoys its light without any object. Its silence concerns the totality of its speech… It feels equally at a distance from all names and forms. No image affects it or constrains it. The smallest judgement will spoil its perfection. 20

We may wonder what Meister Eckhart means when he says to the mystic that she must give up temporality, multiplicity and personality. Does he mean to get rid of them, or to negate them somehow, or to simply let them be?

One must take nothing for granted to understand the nature and function of consciousness. It is not possible to meet with understanding when one frames one's search, narrows it, through the notions of temporality, multiplicity (duality) and personality. It is not that one needs to do something special. Rather, one simply needs to suspend any doing.

In their attempt to discover what consciousness is—whatever name they may have called it—scientists, mystics, philosophers and artists have all been confronted with similar difficulties.

The solution that many have opened to is not drawn from a vast array of techniques, but comes rather from a shared willingness to go on with the quest in the most complete destitution—to let tools, skill and technique all fall away. As the modern French writer Maurice Blanchot tells us: "Presence upon which we are without power."

A recent description of the universe suggests that it is not expanding into something. It is unique, and comprehends everything. There is nothing outside it; it has no center, no periphery. As there is nothing other than itself, it is not located anywhere. This also seems an illuminating allegory for the mind.

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Notes

1 Freud, Sigmud, /the Ego and the Id/ (W.W Norton & Compagny : New York) p.16

2 Dalai Lama (1997), /The Gelug/ Kagyü Tradition of Mahamudra/ (Snow Lion : Ithaca) p.133

3 Dreyfus, Georges B.J /Recognizing Reality/ (State University of New York Press :Albany) p.403

4 Sartre, Jean-Paul (1956) /Being and Nothingness/ (Washington Square Press : New York) p.12

5 Sartre, Jean-Paul (1960) /The Transcendence of the Ego/ (Hill and Wang : New York) p. 40

6 Dreyfus, Georges B.J /Recognizing Reality/ (State University of New York Press :Albany) p. 336

7 Dreyfus, Georges B.J /Recognizing Reality/ (State University of New York Press :Albany) p.336

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9 Sartre, Jean-Paul (1960) /The Transcendence of the Ego/ (Hill and Wang : New York) p.101

10 Sartre, Jean-Paul (1960) /The Transcendence of the Ego/ (Hill and Wang : New York) p. 97

11 Sartre, Jean-Paul (1960) /The Transcendence of the Ego/ (Hill and Wang : New York) p. 97

12 Dreyfus, Georges B.J /Recognizing Reality/ (State University of New York Press :Albany) p.351

13 Mahasi Sayadaw, unpublished material.

14 In Lafranchi G. (1993) /Paul Valéry et l'expérience du moi pur/ (La bibliothèque des arts : Paris) p. 23

15 Thurman, Robert A.F. /The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti/ (The Pennsylvania State University Press : Pennsylvania) p. 30

16 Patrul, Rimpoche /Self-liberated Mind/ (Rangjung Yeshe Publication :Kathmandu) p. 148

17 Anguttara Nikaya IV.24 Kalaka Sutta

18 Sartre, Jean-Paul (1960) /The Transcendence of the Ego/ (Hill and Wang : New York) p. 105

19 Sartre, Jean-Paul (1956) /Being and Nothingness/ (Washington Square Press : New York) p. 14

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