

Chapter I

An introduction to the what and why of meditation.

At this point in time in this country – The United States – Meditation from the Asian traditions has become ubiquitous. Some of it is attached to practice in one of the Asian religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism but often it is a secular practice. People practice meditation with their secular yoga practice. Athletes practice meditation before engaging in competition. Former soldiers practice meditation to help with post traumatic stress. Many people practice meditation both because it disciplines their mind and because it helps with overall happiness. “Mindfulness” meditation is currently a popular movement in therapeutic psychology with well documented evidence to its effectiveness.

Meditation is a series of disciplines that hones our concentration and awareness. It can help us focus the mind and keep us present in our activities. It can help us be more effective in whatever we are doing. It can help us clear our mind of repetitive thoughts and opens our mind to new ways of seeing and understanding things. It can help us remain calm and centered through the travails of life. It promotes overall happiness. It decreases our ego centered thoughts and changes our relationship with the world around us. It can open us up to feel more freely the emotions of love and compassion. At its deepest levels it can completely quiet the mind and cause a major perceptual shift. It can thus open us up to deep religious experience which will completely transform our relationship with the world. It can open us up to a non-dual perception and understanding of the world in which there is no individual self or things, where birth or death do not exist except as artificial ideas. It thus frees us from our fear of death and opens us to a unique freedom.

There is no magic in this practice, nor do we need the intervention of a god to help us along. The benefits of meditation result from personal discipline, effort, and practice. We all have the potential of the deepest meditative experiences. It is said that when the Buddha had that deepest of meditative experiences we call enlightenment he said, “How wonderful, how wonderful, all people have this same clear bright mind that I have just awoken to.” This “clear bright mind” which we work so hard to experience in meditation is already a attribute of the human mind and we have all experienced it, though it is suppressed in our normal consciousness. The Buddha aware that his experience and understanding was not unique, placed himself in a lineage of previous spiritual instructors in ancient India.

The poet and Zen adept Gary Schneider recognized the meditative mind in another discipline, hunting, and wondered if hunting was where meditation began. Even though we may choose not to hunt or eat meat there is no denying that Man began on this earth as a hunter. The hunter's state of mind must be natural to us. What is the hunter's state of mind? It is quiet, concentrated, and aware. It is a state of mind in which the hunter and pray become one. It is a state of mind in which the hunter becomes one with the whole environment in which he hunts. One experience I have had seems to confirm this idea. I have done many Zen retreats on a beautiful piece of property with a few wilderness trails. During the breaks I would often walk the trails doing a slow walking meditation stepping carefully so that I moved quietly. I found that I walked quite closely to many animals. Of course the animals were startled when they noticed me and quickly fled. I could sense their fear and stopped walking so quietly.

The meditative state of mind is natural, Even though many humans no longer hunt we find the deep meditative mind in all sorts of human endeavors such as the arts and sports. For example the musician may become so absorbed in his or her playing that they lose all sense of time and experience a deep joy. The athlete at times experiences what they call “being in the Zone” in which self consciousness is dropped and there is no separation between thought and action. Danger also has a way of bringing out the meditative state of mind. Skiing down a mountain at 30 miles/hr has a way of

focusing my concentration. I wager that we all have experienced this deep state of mind though maybe not since we were children running around with friends.

We call this deep meditative state of mind samadhi. There are three characteristics that are typical of be samadhi. One characteristic is that concentration is so deep that we seem to be unconscious or barely conscious. In other words we are lost in the activity. Verbal thought shuts down and the conscious I is not making decisions. There maybe even the feeling that something or someone else is making the decisions and the I is watching as an outside observer. Also because we are lost in the activity time goes very quickly.

The second characteristic is energy, When we enter samadhi we seem to be possessed of a unusual energy. In the zone the athlete feels little fatigue and the artist feels unusually energized. If we are sitting in meditation we will feel this unusual energy in our body, our back will naturally straighten and concentration will seem to be razor sharp. In sitting meditation this energy can be much more pronounced and may manifest in unusual body feelings. This is an important aspect of meditation and I will go into it detail later.

The third characteristic of samadhi is the pure joy of the experience. Artists and athletes as well as the child at play knows this joy. There are many activities that naturally promote this joy. . There are many activities which promote this type of concentration and it is different for each person but when we find an activity that promotes this type of concentration and gives us this joy we naturally make a psychological attachment to this activity. We say we really “like” or “love” to ski or play music or build boats or whatever and we think the specific activity is what has given us such joy. But this is actually a mistake, this joy is the result of our natural absorption into the activity, a period of pure concentration and un-self-conscious awareness.

Samadhi, of any extended length in time, is not usual even for the athlete or artist, in fact it is rare. Our critical self conscious awareness and way of thinking is so deeply ingrained that it usually cuts off more then a moment of samadhi. While most of us have experienced some extended periods of samadhi in the joy of childhood at a young age we develop a strong self conscious awareness and that constant internal dialogue starts up. And though the athlete, artist or hunter may experience some extended periods of samadhi in their activity even these are rare and are gone when the particular activity ends. In fact artists and athletes are often very critical of their own work and often perform the activity of their art or sport without joy. In my youth and early adult hood I was a soccer (foot ball) player. I remember one game I played after a seven day meditation retreat. After finishing the retreat I found myself in almost continuous samadhi for a few days. Even though I was out of shape from all the sitting around I played quite well. But I noticed lots of frustration on the faces of my fellow players. Yes for moments they would let go and kick the ball or do some other action but then the critical eye would set in. When the results were not as intended I could see the frustration. Even in sport where everybody is trying to have fun I saw the undercurrent of suffering. When we actually examine what suffering is we will see that it is none other than the frustration of things not being the way we want them to be.

Sidhartha Gautama the man we call the Buddha or Shakyamuni focused his teachings on suffering and how we can overcome suffering. His Third Noble Truth is that there is a state of mind beyond suffering. Samadhi is that state of mind. It is filled with joy, love and also wisdom. Meditation is a practice in which we cultivate samadhi. At first it is learning and training the mind so that it may enter samadhi while just sitting. What could be more difficult? It takes years of dedicated practice to deeply experience samadhi while sitting. But, if we can experience samadhi while sitting then we will start to experience the joy of samadhi in all aspects of life. This may seem like such a lofty and difficult goal that it may seem off putting but the benefits of meditation even for the beginner will soon become apparent for those who start a daily practice. Learning to discipline the mind by learning mindfulness and letting go of thoughts as well as concentration has benefits that are quickly apparent

even for the beginner.

Does this give you reason to start meditating? Each individual begins meditating for their own individual reasons. Many people begin meditating because they feel deep personal suffering. This is the reason why the Buddha started meditating and he sold meditation as a way to end suffering. Others may begin meditating as part of a spiritual quest, a search for God. Some begin meditating simply for the mental discipline. I began meditating more as a philosophic quest than a spiritual quest. This practice has not disappointed me. I have had many deep experiences that have answered many philosophic questions. It has given me a deeper understanding of self and ego, of human experience and our relationship to the physical world. For me meditation has become a fountain of insight. As a spiritual quest one might say that I have even realized God but not the God as understood in most religions as an independent being. I have experienced moments of pure bliss and I find a deep joy in just doing the practice every day even if nothing special happens. With dedication the practice of meditation will not dissappoint.