

Wisdom

A short series of short pieces (with questions)

6. Meditation

“One should sit, keeping the body erect and mindfulness alert”, the meditation master may say. “You breathe in and out all day and all night but you never concentrate your mind on it. Now you are going to do just this. Breathe in and out as usual without any strain. Now, focus your mind on your breathing in and breathing out. Let your mind watch and observe. When you breathe, you sometimes take deep breaths and sometimes not. This does not matter at all. Breathe normally and naturally. The only thing is that when you take deep breaths you should be aware that they are deep breaths and so on. Forget all other things, your surroundings, your environment; do not raise your eyes and look at anything. Try and do this for five or ten minutes”.

Many find this surprisingly difficult at the beginning. Their minds run away. They begin to think of various things. They hear sounds outside the room, for example. Their minds are disturbed and distracted. Many are dismayed and disappointed by this and cease practising.

Those who persevere and carry out this activity daily, even for five or ten minutes, are able in time to develop right concentration. This alone is not meditation, but it is a necessary component. So-called “insight meditation” is described; an analytical method based on mindfulness, awareness, vigilance. This may lead to understanding, to wisdom. There is “loving-kindness meditation”, in which the practitioner is concerned with the well-being of others. This may lead to the development of compassion. There is “mantra meditation”. There is “walking meditation”. There are many kinds. Meditation is a mystery useful in divining mystery. But in essence it is very simple.

I once attended a discourse on meditation. The teacher was a Buddhist monk; a Tibetan in exile from his invaded homeland. He spoke excellent English and was knowledgeable concerning the ways of the Western world.

About 40 people were sitting on chairs or cushions in the meditation hall. All rose and bowed when the lama entered. We settled ourselves again expectantly for him to speak. The teacher sat, smiled, looked around the room, gave a little cough, seemed about to begin; and said nothing. We moved around in our

places, some of those squatting or kneeling moved stiffening limbs. Minutes passed. We settled again, but soon one or two among us seemed to grow tense and impatient. The monk laughed. We all laughed, and the tension eased again.

The talk was scheduled for an hour. Some had travelled very far to be there. There had been a delay at the outset. Now, after a further twenty minutes of silence, unworthy thoughts began to arise. The speaker wasn't speaking!

The Tibetan unwrapped the cloak he wore over his robe, wrapped it around himself again, fingered his wooden rosary beads, coughed a few more times, chuckled, prepared to speak (or so it seemed at last), and stayed silent.

This went on for some time more. Gradually we took less interest in what the teacher did. Our expectations faded. We grew collectively calm, paying attention now not to him alone but also to what was going on outside the room, inside the room, in our bodies and in our minds, all at once and without effort. We were involved with what was going on but not attached to any particular thing happening. It was at this, the right moment that the lama spoke. “Meditation”, he said, “Is just this. It is simply being with yourself”.

After giving the group a few minutes to think about and digest what he had said, the monk continued. He said that the true nature of self is wisdom and compassion, these two: all else is conditioning. Meditation, he said, is useful in overcoming the illusions imposed by worldly conditioning. It is useful in overcoming attachments, aversions and ignorance. When these are dealt with successfully, we see ourselves in others and our actions follow; hence compassion. When the false, self-cherishing mentality of worldly conditioning is overcome, we see things as they are and accept them thus. Seeing things as they are is the way of wisdom. Accepting things as they are is the way of liberation.

How can we discover whether what the teacher said is true?

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