

Jerome Liss

Talking and Listening can be Meditation

The cooperative help talker and listener (or co-counselling partners) can set up their tasks as 'meditations.' Meditation means a continuous focus of attention. Although to meditate often means to sit alone, perhaps in a cross-legged position, and observe the thoughts passing through one's mind with the aim of reaching a point of stillness, from which to observe the flux, this is not the only setting in which one may achieve a continuous focus of attention. In fact, even the sit-still-and-concentrate approach to meditation has as its goal the transformation of *all* one's experiences in daily life; so, it makes sense to modify meditation exercises in order that they can be integrated with other daily life activities. Just washing up, changing one's clothes, taking a walk, even doing the bills, can be mentally structured to become meditations in the sense that one continuously attends (pays attention) to the essential ingredients of the experience, noticing distractions, and yet gently returning one's awareness to the primary flux of what is happening.

The object of continuous attentiveness or meditation is to heal the usual interruptions of experience that distract us from what is essential and that also waste our precious energies. In some way, intensity of experience may be compared to the build up of energy in an electrical capacitor. Constancy augments the charge. Change, even slight shifts of eye gaze, and more so the normal jumping from subject to subject in day-to-day thinking, depletes it. Meditation does not cut out associative thinking and shifting experience, but merely slows it down, and this helps compensate for the disparate and unintegrated forces that bombard us in daily life to make every moment more wholesome in its own right.

Co-counselling can therefore be taken as meditation in communication, one partner meditating or keeping a constant focus as talker, the other partner meditating as listener. And, of course, after an hour (or two) they switch. I believe the closest analogy of this 'way of development' which is also a 'way of being' is Tantric Yoga, in which two lovers use 'non-action' as their guide while meditating and making love.

An implication of co-counselling as meditation is that one can set up in the privacy of one's mind a series of subtasks to complete the meditation. In other words, were I to meditate alone, I might decide to (gently) bring my awareness to the sounds I hear and maintain that focus. Or, I might decide to bring my awareness to the homogeneously coloured wall if I am in my room, or to the silhouette of trees in a landscape setting, or to the passing cars that seem like metal insects if I am walking down the street. Or I can combine these dimensions of experience so as to be aware of *both*, what I see and what I hear, or what I hear and what I feel, *at once* that is, to the extent that I am capable of this simultaneous double consciousness, and this depends on my skill and capacity developed by previous practice. ('Why do you meditate?' 'To meditate better.')

Thus, so too with communication. As talker, I can focus on any one or two or several 'sub-tasks' while relating to my listener - particular examples will be offered in a moment - and my listener can meditate within his subtasks.

In a sense, the usual self-instructions in co-counselling are already meditations. 'Stay with what you feel, especially if it is painful, and see what thoughts come up.

For the listener: 'Pay attention to everything expressed by the talker, and remain aware of your silent reactions.' Already we see this is a *very complicated* 'double consciousness' meditation: continuous double awareness of my expressive companion and of my silent reactions. For example, just attending to my companion includes awareness of his words and meanings, his vocal intonations that go along with (or contradict) what is said, his breathing, the shifts of breathing with changes of apparent feeling, the relation of breathing toward outflow (smooth and continuous or sporadic and halting), changes of facial expression, eye gaze, head position, mouth expression, total body posture, general 'mood', specific gestures that convey that 'mood,' alterations in mood and posture as related to what is said: and then *all* of these elements, presumably grasped at once, related to my own mood, specific thoughts ('internal reactions'), body feelings, breathing rate (When is mine mirroring his? When is it exactly complementary? When is it totally divergent?), my own eye gaze, head position, body posture and shifts, general inclination of liking and disliking, and so on.

Thus, it is because experience *is* so complicated that we involve the meditation principle of intentional focus. To spend many hours in cooperative help sessions offers an opportunity for meditation, and a 'high form' of meditation at that; for it is meditation during communication with another rather than more simply when alone.

Given the complicated fabric of experience in a cooperative help session, and assuming some people give themselves generous time allotments to explore its dimensions, the notion of meditation allows one to formulate 'past experiences' which can be microscopically homed in on and then withdrawn from as one refocusses on the whole. To shift between 'part' and whole

experience - which, I might repeat, we anyway do in our normal patterns of shifting attention - allows for greater awareness of detail as one focusses in upon one or several ingredients of experience. The heightened awareness of detail is then partially retained as are references on the whole of an experience, so that the whole too partakes of this increased vividness. So, for example self-instructed meditation may be to 'go with' all shifts of experience, and *not* to maintain any constant focus; or to intentionally enhance shifts in experience; or to 'go with' the shifts when they arise and maintain the constancy when that arises. In other words, 'do what you're already doing.' Nevertheless, the instructions clarify one's awareness of and position toward one's own experience - even when the instructions are broken - and thus one becomes better centered, one might say one becomes more whole, or fully present, within the flux.

Another use of structuring one's cooperative help session as a meditation is that meditation emphasizes the experiential rather than the expressive nature of the task. For example, when I take the talking role, I have noticed a tendency to become less aware of my partner and my surroundings as I begin the focus on my thoughts and feelings, and even more so when I begin to talk. In a sense, this is natural, for as one domain (myself) comes more into focus, another domain (my surrounding world) will recede. Also, the activity of talking augments still further my self-focussing and diminishes a bit more my acute awareness of what is around me.

Yet I would not take such 'natural' tendencies as absolute. Thus, I have found the following meditation interesting. (I cannot vouchsafe its 'usefulness' but I guarantee it is difficult.) 'I will be aware of everything I say and whatever I see at the same time.' (There is a tendency to lose visual focus whenever

one talks spontaneously. The eyes appear to phase out.)

Another talking meditation, which is not so easy to maintain as might appear, is: 'I will be aware of everything I say, and my tone of voice and breathing in saying it, at the same time.' (To focus on visual mental imagery alone is identical to 'guided fantasy').

The most fundamental listening meditation I've used is: 'I will be aware of how everything I see and especially *hear* is linked to changing feelings in my body.' This is not a difficult meditation, as compared to others, and I've sat for many hours through psychotherapy sessions employing this as the base line to understand what is happening.

Any two domains of experience can be linked in these exercises of 'double consciousness': Breath, talk, body position, mood, here-and-now perceptions, mental imagery, and so on.

There will usually be a difficulty in experiencing two domains because we are habituated to focussing on one item of experience at a time; but at some point moments of instantaneous double focus can be achieved. And of course one can go on from there to triple focus and then further 'multiple foci' of awareness, if it seems possible.

It is not clear to me what the full implications are for these mental challenges. I suppose anyone trying them should have his own say. I think for myself I have recognized several outcomes: a) I am more aware of the nature of my experience at any one moment. (I can better locate my focus or 'energy'.) b) I find I enjoy doing two or more things at once, whether within or outside of a state of meditation; (although this latter distinction is not always so clear any more.) c) Because in moments of 'double consciousness' there is a less rigid focus than during normal

single consciousness, I think I have learned to de-rigidify even my normal focus of attention, so that it is now more flexible and, I believe, at times, faster moving.

Frequent Impediments to Progressive Conversation

From the Listener's side:

Interruptions (Impatiently 'coming in' too soon).
Switching the topic (Missing the point).
Giving advice (Instead of recognizing feelings and attitudes).
Opposing the 'rhythm' (The talker is 'the baby.' To repeatedly grab the spotlight of attention is like grabbing for the bottle.
To repeatedly 'reply at length' is like holding on to it).
Avoiding commitment when a reply is desired (Avoiding 'I-Statements').
Asking questions to please one's self-esteem ('Were you a good boy at the park today with Mummy?').
Over-reacting within the talker's territory. (Losing an awareness that the talker is speaking about himself, not oneself.
Taking the energy).
(Invariably) showing no interest in what is said. (Never asking for 'more').

From the Talker's side

Vagueness and generality (Giving a general point without details).
Rambling without conclusion (Giving details, often switching from topic to topic, without stating any particular point).
Going on and on (Losing the listener's interest, but taking no notice of this).
Avoiding personal commitment (Presenting 'I-Messages' or opinions as 'You' or 'One').
Describing thoughts in the negative without a balance of positives - (Too many 'don'ts', 'isn'ts', 'can'ts' and 'shouldn'ts').

But all this is more conjecture than hard and fast facts. My purpose in offering these surmises is to stimulate new possibilities of awareness, for myself as well as for others, because once expressed, I know I shall take these ideas further. To ex-press in the sense of 'press out', for anyone, means the cup of experience is once again emptied and ready to be filled.

guarantee the growth of one's natural potentials. Growth comes from sustained, self-regulated activity. It may come as slow as grass or fast like Topsy, but it comes.

(Repeatedly) Demanding agreement from the listener. ('Don't you think?' 'Isn't that so?' 'I'm sure you agree.' 'You must admit').

As a final note, to make up one's own meditation exercises is the best way to

ANTI-SCIENCE

From its position as the ultimate in human rationality, science is now in some quarters seen as not only a destructive activity, but as a totally misplaced one. Professor Stephen Cotgrove in a recent article (*New Scientist*, July 12th 1973), identifies this feeling among alienated students and also among groups seeking an alternative society. He cites Jaensch, who in 1938 identified a personality type characterised by liberal views, a happy eccentricity and independence. In a study of alienated students, Kenneth Keniston described a cluster of attitudes that included concentration on the here-and-now, emotionality, awareness, responsiveness and openness. These students, Keniston found, were 'distinguished by their passionate concentration on a few topics of intense personal concern'. They were also found to have a very rich fantasy life.

What is at issue here, claims Professor Cotgrove, is not the uses to which science is put. This is not a movement calling for responsible science, or even for a socially aware science. It is a feeling that scientists' entire way of thinking is alien to human development,

The rigidity and authoritarianism of traditional science is seen as mechanistic and alienating. This movement could represent the corollary of the tremendous growth of interest in mystical and oriental cults and philosophies.

Although this is primarily a plea for the value of the individual, for imagination and spontaneity, Professor Cotgrove sees it as going much deeper than this. 'Society is seen as itself irrational in the sense that there is no reasonable relationship between society and the nature of man.'