MEDITATION: THE PATH AND ITS FRUIT

by

Guy Claxton

One day a man of the people said to Zen Master Ikkyu: 'Master, will you please write for me some maxims of the highest wisdom?' Ikkyu immediately took his brush and wrote the word 'Attention'. 'Is that all?' asked the man. 'Will you not add something more?' Ikkyu then wrote twice running: 'Attention. Attention.' 'Well' remarked the man rather irritably, 'I really don't see much depth or sublety in what you have just written'. Then Ikkyu wrote the same word three times running. 'Attention. Attention. Attention.' Half-angered the man demanded: 'What does that word 'attention' mean anyway?' And Ikkyu answered gently: 'Attention. means attention.'

Meditation is the way out of the apparent impasse created be the fact that many of the buried beliefs and conditionings which cause us to be uneasy and insecure are dissolved in our experience.

Perception comes already contaminated by the false assumptions that Buddhism invites us to root out if we are to find peace of mind and generosity of spirit. Yet the only way we can recognise them as pernicious is by putting them to the test of experience.

The task seems impossible, like trying to clean your hands in filthy water. How can it be possible to find fresher water, a more pure or true experience, with which to wash?

Fortunately it *is* possible. What we have to do is to train ourselves to be very attentive to the way in which our thoughts and impulses and perceptions arise. Instead of leaping to conclusions, and only waking up at the moment when the conclusion presents itself, we can learn to listen in on the leaping. We can hide in a corner and eavesdrop on our thoughts as they chase each other round and round.

In this way we are little by little able to notice the ingredients as they are stirred in, and by doing so we can appraise whether they are necessary, helpful and valid. The discipline is to catch experience as it is being formed, when it is still raw, and thereby to watch more acutely the hand which surreptitiously slips in the salt or the bile, the guilt or the frustration.

Thus the way out of the apparent impasse is to see that only noticing experience after it has been tampered with is not a biological restriction but a lazy habit, one that with

some effort and determination can be broken, just as any habit can.

In a way we might describe meditation as a kind of science, and meditators as scientists. But they are scientists of a particular sort. They are not investigating somethong new, but rather submitting to renewed scrutiny a theory that is widely accepted and taken for granted.

Now this is the most difficult kind of investigation of all, because such a theory, when it becomes the orthodoxy, tends to determine the very way that research can be carried out.

Assumptions will have become buried in people's minds about what observations are 'important' or 'relevant', or what are 'sensible' questions to ask, what are 'legitimate' ways of going about testing them, and so on.

Our scientists therefore cannot trust their reactions, but have to be hyper-critical of their own ways of thinking and researching. They must exercise super-vigilance lest a crucial presupposition slips through on the nod.

They have to keep coming back to the data, to their observations, again and again with fresh eyes, looking for the patterns and oddities that are there, but which do not fit with Common Science. They must try to be as much of an objective but attentive witness as possible, with no axe to grind, and a wide-open mind.

Just so, meditators must strive to return to the bare bones of their habits of thought, speech and action. Those that are found to be unnecessary or unjustified can be weeded out.

Thus expressed, stripped of the trappings and connotations that the different schools of Buddhism, (as well as the other spiritual traditions within which meditation has a focal place), have given it, meditation may seem unglamorous or even mundane - as it certainly did to Ikkyu's visitor. Meditation can seem exotic when you first meet it. It rapidly becomes, in practice, anything but.

As you begin to be able to sit and watch your mind scampering about, and your experience unfolding, what do you begin to notice?

Of course people vary enormously, depending on their personalities and on the particular meditative tradition they are studying. But some initial insights are quite common. Frequently the first thing that happens is that people think their minds have gone crazy: suddenly there is an explosion of thinking, and your mind seems to be busier than ever before.

In fact what is happening is that you are hearing the incessant internal chatter for the first time. You begin to see how chaotic it is, and to see that this mercurial and scattered trail of associations is not what the mind produces occasionally, but all the time. It bounds about like a puppy chasing leaves, following first one track and then another, ricocheting backwards and forwards between quite different ideas, with little apparent rhyme or reason.

And the absence of reason is another shock. In our normal inadvertent way we have assumed that this inner voice is our most valuable, finely honed tool, the pinnacle of human development.

Put it under the microscope, however, and this treasured possession suddenly looks a lot less precious and a lot less precise. Its stock-in-trade is not logic but sophistry. It wheedles its way to a conclusion it likes, and ruthlessly demolishes any argument it doesn't. Its objective, it appears, is not to find the truth so much as to rationalise its own pre-existing prejudices.

Far from being an impartial resource with which to plan and think, reason begins to look like a cork bobbing on a sea of quite irrational, and very egocentric, preferences and aversions.

If your reaction is to feel embarrasssed that the High Court Judge has turned out to be a hyperactive monkey, and to try to pin it down, the next disappointment is that you can't.

Try as you will, the effort to shape up turns out to be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to start with. 'One word from me and he does as he likes' my father used to say, in mock (and sometimes real) despair at his inability to stop me doing something naughty. He could just as well have been talking about the new meditators' attempt to control their thinking.

When you begin to watch the contents of the mind, you will probably discover just how much of its time is taken up with making judgements.

As you become aware of sounds, for example, so they instantaneously get sorted into Nice and Nasty. How pleasant the birdsong. How irritating the little cough of the person to my right. How soothing the wind. How exasperating the traffic. And on and on.

What you discover is how little time you actually spend 'in contact' with the sounds. You take a little sample, usually just enough to be able to assign the sound to a familiar pigeon-hole, and then you pull out of the pigeon-hole all sorts of additional information about what kind of thing it is that is responsible for the sound, whether you like it or not, when was the last time you had a similar experience, and so on.

Then meditators are likely to become aware of the strong impulse to do something about things they have decided they don't like. I must move away from that idiot who is coughing all the time. Next time I'll get a fatter cushion. Oh blast, I must remember to take the phone off the hook.

We can begin to see, in meditation, how much of our mental life is taken up with the attempt to *manage* experience in this way. And we can then come to see more clearly the costs in everyday life of being so pernickety.

In meditation people are not trying to remove every last preference, not to become indifferent to their surroundings. Enlightened people can still prefer tea to coffee, and a quiet place to sleep. They still have people they like to spend time with and people they choose to see less often.

The point is only to restore some intuitive intelligence, some basic sanity, to the business if choosing, so that it stops being obsessional and counterproductive.

Furthermore the attachment and aversion that we project onto our sensations are not experienced as home-made judgements but as properties of the sensations

themselves. Those mosquitoes *are* a nuisance. This leg *is* painful. These cherries *are* delicious. My boss *is* a bastard. That person *is* attractive.

As people meditate more so they begin to distinguish the judgement from the sensation. When the ability to sustain a form of attention that is more objective and microscopic develops, they become able to spot the hand that is covertly dropping the Like or Dislike into the perception, like a capsule into a cocktail. They get acute enough to see the magician flick the ball up his sleeve. One begins to be able to see accurately what belongs to the mosquito and what belongs to oneself.

As people get better at making this distinction, so, sometimes to their amazement, the experience itself changes. When we can detect the point at which the salt is thrown in, we are also able to sample life *before* that point, and it is astonishing how fresh and interesting the taste can be.

Instead if a Bloody Mosquito Bite what you experience is a small burning sensation that lasts for a few seconds, and a little later, a small-scale itch that emerges in the same spot and, if left unscratched, recedes again; perhaps reemerging and refading from time to time. You may in addition feel the tensing of muscles that gave been part and parcel of the 'intention to swat'; but this physical counterpart of the mental aversion may also die away, leaving a feeling that is much less agitated or restless.

It is as if the *resistance* to the sensation, which is born out of the judjment 'I don't like it', actually increases the unpleasantness. When we can do something effective to make things better, both for ourselves and others, then let us do it. But when we don't know when to stop, the frustrated umpulse to change what is unavoidable turns round on us and bites us all the more.

Fairly early on, as people tune to The Voice, they notice how much of its time is spent in self-criticism. Patting oneself on the back and beating oneself over the head seem to be favourite pastimes that are revealed very starkly in meditation.

Not only do we react to and judge our experiences; we react to and judge our reactions and judgements. We feel pleased with ourselves for having a brilliant thought, or for putting ourselves out to be helpful. We feel stupid for forgetting our friend's name or for falling over the chair. Then we feel guilty about feeling proud, or cross with ourselves for feeling stupid.

It is this tangle of thoughts and evaluations that is brought into sharp relief as we sit still on a cushion and watch the performance of Much Ado About Nothing.

Whereas previously self-awareness had always brought with it the risk or the reality of self-consciousness - of feeling awkward or ashamed of what we saw - now we start to be able to have the former without the latter.

After a while meditators develop a resillience which enables them to look at these habits with some detachment, rather than condemnation. The twisting and turning of the mind begins to be interesting, something to be learned from, and not something that we have to justify or ignore.

At some point the cycle of reacting and judging is broken, and we can find a vantage point of clear-sighted,

unsentimental but affectionate self-awareness.

We start to have glimpses of ourselves as a good but perceptive friend might see us, or as a loving parent might feel towards a child who is all upset over a toy. We can see the home-made nature of the drama, and still feel warmly towards ourselves.

I seem to remember that in the Winnie The Pooh books, Christopher Robin would sometimes look at Pooh, when he had done or said something particularly foolish, and say, with enormous love: 'Silly Old Bear'. The clear self-knowledge that meditation develips brings with it some of the same attitude towards ourselves.

But this attitude is not fatalistic or complacent. It represents a space within wich we can grow, not a terminus at which to stagnate.

Although in Buddhist meditation there is no deliberate intention to reduce the amount of thinking, nevertheless this begins to happen naturally. One comes to notice the spaces between experiences, as well as the experiences themselves. And periods of thinking tend to become shorter.

Instead of leaping onto each passing sensation and elaborating it into a lengthy saga of remembering and fantasising, surmising and regretting, one comes to wake up sooner and to be able to return to stillness or to bare sensations.

Thus the opportunities for the troublemaking beliefs to sneak in, and to do their dirty work of sowing seeds of greed, anxiety and confusion are short-circuited, and the creation of agitation is reduced. The mind becomes still more often, and for longer periods.

As meditation practice progresses, other fruits may begin to ripen, though individual patterns of development are quite varied.

We have already seen that there is a growing equanimity: one becomes able to tolerate more and more of oneself before getting scared and running away. In Zen Buddhism this is known as 'learning to keep your seat while the horse is bolting'.

This slow ripening of self-acceptance is vital, for the second long term change that happens is that the enquiry gets deeper, and begins to reach into more murky and problematic areas of the mind. Fantasies may become darker and stray into strongly taboo subjects such as sexual or other forms of violence. Experiences may occur in the body which seem weird, such as trembling or twitching for no apparent reason. Likewise feelings of sadness or joy or laughter can well up from nowhere.

Becoming more and more seasoned, meditators are able to remain calm and pay out the rope little by little, knowing through gathering experience that they can reestablish 'control' if needs be, and that they are not going crazy.

The next element which needs to accompany this is the widening gap between thought and action. If people were to become more open to their 'shadows', as Jungian psychologists call it, but were at the same time to remain impulsive, then meditation might be a dangerous activity. But developing a fine awareness of thoughts and impulses as they arise means

that we can disconnect what goes on in the mind from actual physical behaviour. Within meditation we can bring light and fresh air into some of the dark cormers, and this will if anything decrease, and not increase, the likelihood of our doing something dreadful.

On a less dramatic level, the ability to pause in between a thought and its expression stands us in good stead in everyday life, for it gives us the opportunity to take stock, and to see whether what we are about to do is actually for the best. We become less at the mercy of sudden impulses that we might earlier have acted on and regretted; more able to say 'Hold on a minute. Is this really what I want to be doing, or have I been hijacked?' Good sense is able to intervene when it is needed to prevent us from ding something stupid like driving home drunk from the party, or risking a good relationship for a quick affair.

A feeling of distance from your own dramas becomes stronger, so that although the same old patterns of guilt or anger or anxiety continue to play themselves out, they seem to be somewhat less central to one's life.

The same old nonsense goes on, but one is increasingly able to find a quiet place in the middle of it all from which one can see, but is not so much affected as one was.

It is as if one's sense of self were becoming detached from the previously all-important questions of happiness and sadness, success and failure, recognition and rejection, and all the emotional fall-out that went along with them, and is becoming less involved, more unruffled.

This is very different from a sort of 'Who cares?' defensiveness, and equally different from the ephemeral pleasure of getting what you want (before you start to need another one, or to worry about losing the one you've got).

It is cooler, less exciting. But as you get used to the taste of it, so it becomes clear that is is what you have been after: a deep-down inner peacefulness that is becoming more and more settled and inviolable. There is still playfulness and activity, even upset and conflict, but is is as if it is not happening *to* you. In fact the sense of some*one* to whom things are happening begins to disappear, at first just in moments, but then for longer patches.

Now the sense of self is breaking up. Not only is there no entity which is on the receiving end of events: there is a dawning realisation that there is no local organiser either.

As one gets deeper into the meditative enquiry, so the question of who is in control, who is doing your actions, thinking your thoughts, perceiving your experience, making your decisions, becomes more central, but also more unanswerable.

As you watch with great precision the arising and passong away of sensations, thoughts and actions, that is precisely what you see. No actor, no decider, no thinker, no author, no manager.

You notice with amazement that a hand reaches out for a glass; that the thought 'Its getting late; nearly time to stop' pops into your mind; that the sound of a motorbike fills your awareness for a few seconds and

is gone. You find yourself in the audience at a perpetual firework display where you have no idea about, and no control over, what is going to happen - an itch, a thought, a memory, a movement, a pause, a smell ..... whatever next?

Guy Claxton is Senior Lecturer in the Psychology of Education at King's College London. He edited *Beyond Therapy: The Impact of Eastern Religions on Psychological Theory and Practice*(1986) Wisdom Publications and *Living the Faith: Buddhist Lives*(1989) Oliver & Boyd.

Obituary

Dr. Brian Dobson

16.3.50 - 20.10.88

Brian Dobson was born and raised in South Africa. He was a dedicated physician and surgeon at Baragwanath, a major hospital for black people in Johannesburg, and worked as a psychiatrist at Tara Psychiatric Hospital, but eventually chose to leave because of the political situation. Some of the places in London where Brian worked as a psychiatrist included St. Bartholomew's Hospital, the Tavistock Clinic, Westminster Children's Hospital, Charing Cross and Westminster Medical School, and Earls Court Child Guidance Unit. He was the Medical Director of the **metanoia** Psychotherapy Training Institute and directed the Counselling Diploma Course.

Brian specialised in psychotherapy with children, adolescents and their families. He had a remarkable aptitude with children (of whatever age) and achieved outstanding results in some cases where conventional medicine and psychiatry had failed. He gained his M. Phil. with a thesis which makes a substantial contribution to bringing experiential and direct learning experiences into medical training.

He was compassionate, prickly, funny, intelligent and loving, and combined an unwavering commitment to a vision for a better world with conscientiousness and honesty of rare quality. He died gracefully, surrounded by friends, curious about what he described as 'another kind of journey altogether'. He left us with the gift of how mysterious and how beautiful death can be, but it is his life and his work which remain his greatest legacy.
