
MEDITATION FOR PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

by

DAVID BRANDON

People with severe mental handicaps are amongst the most neglected, deprived and devalued group in our society. Take these two extreme, but not uncommon, forms of disablism - the protesting petitions against long stay patients moving out of mental handicap hospitals and the mawkish headpatting, white hanky, TV Telethons. From the "We think they should move out of hospital but not into our neighbourhood" to the whimsy of "Aren't they darling little cheerful mongols. Let's write a big cheque for Mencap so they can all buy sweeties."

Disablism is linked to both sexism and racism. The underlying social and political processes are similar. A group of vulnerable people are devalued by others in a more powerful political situation. They are stereotyped and scapegoated, viewed as being ugly and having undesirable qualities and bad habits. People with a mental handicap are usually herded together in poor quality segregated facilities on the dubious grounds that somehow 'it will be good for them'.

This segregation and congregation in so-called 'special' schools, hostels, Adult Training Centres (ATCs), mental handicap hospitals and health units

separates them off from the rest of society. Few have contact with ordinary valued facilities and are further isolated as the years go on. Commonly they don't use the same schools, colleges and even swimming pools as the rest of us. We have little experience of mixing with handicapped people generally.

Eventually that wholw devaluing process is internalised. They come to think and feel about themselves in negative ways - 'about being a burden'; 'being neither use noe ornament'; 'not being as good as others'. Those who 'look after' them - parents and paid carers - are seen as modern heroines and saints.

Work by myself and others shows that most people with a mental handicap feel this separation deeply and dislike being herded together on the grounds of like disability. However they have little say in the development of colonialist social services. Some conditions in Adult Training Centres come close to what elsewhere would be called slavery. Take this example from a 'trainee' in Scotland. "I've spent 18 years here. Nothing much happens. I'm bored most of the time. Nothing to do. We play

pool and dominoes. I would like to earn some money and get out of this dump. The contract work for Johnny Walker; assembling cardboard boxes, is OK. We make a thousand boxes and get an extra £2. That makes £4 a week. I like metal work, making boxes and running."

Another man comments: "I'm bored. I've my own flat. Managing my money has been the most difficult thing. Bills and bills. Get bored, the same thing - day after day. If you didn't get out of the flat and come here - you'd go daft. I've never had a job in my life. We all act different in here. We're normal outside the centre. When you come in here, you're in a different world. You end up talking more like the other handicapped trainees. You get feared to go out."

They are congregated on the grounds of handicap not because they are Zen Buddhists, Millwall football supporters or members of the Green Party. They are trained to behave in a disabled manner and to live a handicapped life. Most relationships are with relatives, paid staff and other handicapped persons. They have few relationships with ordinary valued non-paid persons.*

Sadly they have been largely neglected and sometimes rejected by the counselling and psychotherapy mafia. Psychotherapists and psychotherapy is just as disablist as anything else. Much early psychoanalytic literature took the position that people with mental handicaps were too unintelligent and insensitive to benefit from sessions. There were minimum levels of intelligence and verbal dexterity and most people with a mental handicap fall below the magical line. With such a philosophy, Sainsburys Supermarkets would go bust within a month!

The literature on counselling and psychotherapy tend to ignore people with a mental handicap. There are no British books and few other sources, like video tapes and articles, describing counselling work in this area. A recent computer search trawled only five relevant academic references.

Things are beginning to change. Several relevant books are due for publication in the next eighteen months. There are particular problems which need working out. Every person is a unique individual but few groups of people have experienced such isolation from ordinary folk; such profound devaluing processes; have such a tenuous notion of self. I recall a young ATC instructor at a case review meeting commenting that "Downs Syndrome people don't feel things like the rest of us." We had been discussing a middle aged man who had lost both parents in the previous year. I had suggested that he was very depressed by the loss.

I have concentrated on teaching meditation to some people using an Adult Training Centre.⁸ After all the great thirteenth century Japanese Zen teacher, Dogen, wrote "There is no question here at all of being intelligent or stupid, nor is there any difference between the quickwitted and the dull. If you exert yourself singlemindedly, this is practising meditation." Simple but far from easy.

Much rubbish is written about meditation systems using sounds - mantra meditation. A mantra is a repeated sound heard inside the mind or chanted over and over. It is essentially a very simple process to learn. I taught a group of six people with a mental handicap. The group began with humming,

getting louder and louder until the noise gradually harmonised, of its own accord. They were delighted to hear the harmonies. They were asked to feel the vibrations of the humming inside their own bodies and exaggerate the movements. They became human tuning forks, moving all over the room like spinning tops.

After an hour of experimenting with various sounds, contrasts between EEEEs and OOOOOOs and more kinds of humming, people seemed very relaxed. They were asked to internalise the humming - to hear it inside the head without actually doing it. After a few minutes of help everyone succeeded if only for a few seconds. For one person in particular, that was a considerable realisation. "I've never hummed before without humming. Just humming quietly inside my head. It's really great." Another commented - "At first it was a big struggle to get it and then it just came and felt very good. When I get upset now, I can do my silent humming."

The session ended with simple relaxation exercises to music. Music seems to give people permission to behave in ways which would ordinarily be considered weird in the ATC. (In an initial session with so called ordinary people, it was death by ten thousand questions as people struggled to categorise the information they were being given, to relate it to what they already knew.) There was none of that process evident in this group. It made it easier to teach meditation. There were fewer intellectual resistances to work through.

Everyone seemed to enjoy the experience. The sessions had to be broken up into several segments to help sustain

concentration. It seemed to give people a feeling of value and involved lots of personal attention. It had also been unusual and even a little strange. There was an atmosphere of energy and excitement in the room. One staff member said "People look more attractive and younger."

Sessions continued in the ATC for several months. They had a set form, lasting just over an hour, which helped develop peoples confidence. They knew what was going to happen and had mastered some of the exercises. Staff said that people looked forward excitedly to the sessions. Wednesday became Meditation Day.

People were encouraged to find a daily time for individual meditation practice. That raised tricky problems. Most people lived at home with parents and were discouraged. "You don't want to do strange things like that." One group member was told firmly by his Mum that "Meditation is too much for people like you." Meditation was linked in many peoples minds with high intelligence and 'The Guardian' reading. It was seen as 'difficult'.

In the subsequent sessions, they mostly practised the silent humming. Later they went on to use a formal mantra. They used the sound PALI, PALI said rhythmically over and over. Firstly it was said out aloud and then internalised with considerable ease. Their period of meditation practice was usually ten to fifteen minutes, gradually lengthened as time went on. They found this a simple practice to learn after the experience with humming.

Meditation based on visualisation was a rich area for exploration. A few people found this easier to learn than the auditory systems. Some people are more gifted with pictures than with sounds. We introduced it by using a number of brightly coloured balls. The group concentrate on seeing the ball in the middle of the table. They close their eyes after looking intensely at it and then try to continue seeing the ball. They tried this several times. After a few minutes the ball is spun very rapidly so the colours and patterns merge together. They close their eyes again and try to see the ball spinning and spinning...

At one session we used soap bubbles which was very messy and did not please the ATC cleaners at all. It was enormous fun. They blew bubbles with a steady blow and watched them until they burst. The slower and steadier the blow, the bigger the bubbles. They stared at the various colours on the bubbles and tried to see them with their eyes closed at the very moment of bursting.

We sometimes used a candle rather than a ball or bubbles. The group concentrate on the flickering flame for a few minutes and then try to see it with their eyes closed. They open their eyes several times to check the accuracy of their inner seeing. Eventually they can all sit for several minutes 'seeing' the candle in their mind's eye. Such exercises aid the concentration immensely. "When I first started I couldn't really see the candle with my eyes closed but now I can see it clearly. I just imagine it."

Meditation on feelings can help unlock such great potential. We sat a group on cushions and asked them to close their eyes. We played some relaxing music and asked them to picture someone they loved. Most chose Mum and sometimes Dad. We asked them to feel the love for that person come surging up through their bodies. I could see the transformation taking place in the room. People just glowed with the warmth. "I felt a warm feeling in my stomach going through my chest into my head. It was lovely." Another person said "I just wanted to cuddle everybody."

Later sessions used meditational movements. These were a series of movements, some taken from the martial arts, others from sources like Hatha Yoga. They involved a number of themes - balancing, grace, synchronising with explosive breathing and strength. They involved learning to be much more aware of the links between body and mind - in fact their essential unity.

We borrowed Kin Hin from Zen Buddhism. People enjoyed the slow walking round a large room in Indian file. They pretended to be walking on a floor covered with thick treacle so it was sticky on the soles of the feet. If you were walking really close behind someone else, you had to concentrate very hard so as not to walk on their heels! This slow walking delighted one person. "When I walk really slow, I can hear my proper self better."

People who are handicapped have often been socialised into seeing their bodies as ugly and clumsy. "Look at me David - I can't do it. I'm just too clumsy. Got two left feet my Dad says."

If taught sensitively, these movements can get people to feel and move gracefully and delicately, to begin to uncover who and what they are. Dance can help immensely.

People are very diverse. Fortunately meditation is an old and vast treasure house full of different traditions and systems. However, it is important to practise what you preach. If you are going to share meditation with anyone take part yourself. There are few things worse than a pseudo healer who does not take their own medicine! It is necessary to understand this

particular medicine from the inside as well as the outside. There is usually an appropriate method or a combination which suits each person.

People with a mental handicap have often been trained into seeing themselves as 'failures'. They can't really succeed at anything considered worthwhile - can't get a paid job or go to real school. They can't 'fail' at meditation. It is not about 'success' or 'failure'. It is about learning more thoroughly to be who we are already. Cleverness can be such a massive obstacle to wisdom.

1 David Brandon (1988) Report on an Occupational Strategy for People with Severe Learning Difficulties in West Lothian. *West Lothian Voluntary Council for People with Disabilities*.

2 David Brandon & Julie Ridley (1985) Beginning to Listen *Campaign for People with Mental Handicaps*

3 David Brandon A Look behind the Incense Smoke (1987) *Community Living*

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Psychotherapygroups For MEN

THE INNER FATHER

▶ 7-Weeks Groups
new groups are commencing on 1 March and 7 June 1992 each running for 7 Wednesday evenings 7-10

▶ 1-Year Group
commences October '89 for 30 three hours sessions (on Tuesday evenings 7-10pm and 3 Saturdays 4-10pm)

THE WILD MAN

To get in touch with our feminine side and to explore our feelings has been an important step away from the stereotype 'man': the macho, the thinker.

However, to get a clearer understanding of our true identity as males, of the meaning and purpose of our lives, and to be able to use our energy and drive more fully and creatively, a further step needs to be taken.

Since we all are brought up mainly by our mothers we obviously have to take a feminine attitude towards father and therefore look from a feminine point of view at our masculinity.

To look at father with his own eyes and at our masculinity from a male point of view can only be done amongst men and will help to open up an entire new kind of energy.

Recommended Reading: "The Wild Men", Interview with Robert Bly (in: *Human Potential*, Oct. 88)
"The Inner Father", Jochen Encke (partly in: *Self & Society*, May/June 88)
Both articles are available through the practice.

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