

Meditatio Seminar

Meditation and Mental Health

Faithful and Mechanical Repetition: Kindling the Fire

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Augustine of Hippo is often credited with writing in the fifth century the first autobiography, as we understand it in the modern sense. He found himself fascinating. Repeating the story of his life, with commentary, enabled him to understand himself better. But the story is recited to God – a very patient listener in these circumstances - because the purpose of the self-narrative is to move from self-knowledge to the knowledge of God. Only in this knowledge – a peaceful resting in God – can he – or anyone, he claims – find respite from his own restlessness. Repeating our story is a first step in the healing process and our arrival into self-knowledge. Self-knowledge in the Christian mystical tradition is the necessary prelude and condition for the knowledge of God. In another place he put it like this:

A man must first be restored to himself, that making of himself a stepping-stone, he rises from himself to God.

I would like to explore the implications of this insight for the work of mental healing today, the human task of coming to health of soul and wholeness, with particular attention to the work of repetition in this process.

The decidedly anti-religious Sigmund Freud again gives us a good starting-point with his ‘Nirvana Principle’. I read somewhere but cannot find the reference that one day Freud was watching a child playing with a ball, repeatedly bouncing and catching and throwing it back on the ground. In this solitary game he saw a symbol of a process in the psyche by which, through repetition, the repressed elements are released and their discharge – katharsis or purification at the level of asceticism - leads to a new state of mind. So far we might see a parallel with the pre-modern insights of the spiritual psychologists of the desert tradition I discussed yesterday.

They too were aware of the need for repetition – expressed through perseverance and endurance in the ascetical practices of meditation and the other means that supported it. They accepted that this work would lead to inner conflict, purification and a liberation from the power of the demons – what we would understand as the repressed or compulsive elements entrenched in the psyche. And they also recognized the importance of the spiritual teacher, the *abba* or *amma*, someone in whom they could repose absolute trust and confidence. The bond of this relationship, as in the therapeutic relationship, is absolute openness and frankness with someone whose experience and own stage of integration affords them both empathy and authority in helping others. Truth, being the goal, must also be the means. Meditation is learning to be truthful in all relationships, beginning with our relationship with ourselves.

The difference between Freud and the desert teachers is not in the methodology so much as in the understanding of the outcome. Freud was notoriously pessimistic about

the goal of analysis – turning desperate hysteria into ordinary human sadness. But the longer he explored and revised his ideas of the Nirvana Principle – a major revision took place in his final phase of thought – the closer he seemed to come, at least from our point of view rather perhaps than his own, to the kind of optimism and vision of the human underlying the spiritual approach to the work of healing.

Freud saw the repetitive element of therapy as leading to a discharge of energy that illustrates the psyche's search for a homeostasis, a place of rest, comparable with Augustine called 'quies' or rest.. This is a search for the state of least tension and in Freud's thinking it is related more to 'thanatos', the death principle, than to Eros which is closer to the pleasure principle. So we would presumptuous to think that Freud's Nirvana Principle is some incipient Buddhist awakening or spiritual conversion. He remained resiliently non-religious and this is perhaps why his profound insights are of such value to religion in ways that even Jung's might not be. Yet Freud, ever the researcher, admitted that although he was sure he had found a sure principle of the psyche he did not understand it:

Pleasure and unpleasure cannot depend on some quantitative factor alone but on some qualitative characteristics. It might be the rhythm, the temporal sequence of changes, rises and falls in the quantity of stimulus. We do not know.

We might conclude that he was struggling with the problem of measuring the immeasurable. Yesterday we saw that there are two distinct approaches to meditation. One focuses on the benefits, physical or psychological. The other, in addition, focuses on the fruits which are more likely to be the ways we define and evaluate the quality of our humanity: love, joy, peace, patience, the ability to forgive and feel compassion and so forth. These are not contradictory or competitive approaches. Each has its place and might be the preferred and more appropriate approach in some circumstances. But in a comprehensive view of wholeness as the goal of all human effort, each must recognize the existence of the other and collaborate for the good of all when called to do so. This mutual awareness and respect is what our seminar is working to enhance.

The goal of spiritual practice like that of psychotherapy is to free the individual from the isolation and despair of suffering in order to become a fully inter-relating person. Both approaches recognize the need to detach from certain desires, fears or compulsions in order to reduce suffering and increase the level of liberty. The idea of discharge or kenosis – emptying – is central to Freud's researches and also to the clinical and experiential wisdom of spiritual teachers and therapists of all schools. Freud related this nirvana principle to the death principle because he felt that the psyche in this movement was controlled by the desire to return to a balance and homeostasis – staying the same. This he identified as the prelude to death. Where there is no change, biologically speaking, there is no life.

We have all probably felt this Nirvana Principle at times. I remember as a student in my gap year visiting a monastery and watching a monk sitting quietly at the porter's desk. Probably he sat there all afternoon, until vespers, and may have answered the phone or door once or not at all. I was fascinated, the more so perhaps because I was spending my time travelling on Greyhound buses from one city to the next. I saw something at that moment which it would not be right to say I envied but that I did

feel immensely attracted to – being still, in balance, without demand or expectation, and as I thought anyway, content. Maybe this was my nirvana principle briefly surging before the pleasure principle happily returned and I was off again. In later years I reconnected to this through meditation, ironically in the same monastery. Freud may seem to have a rather negative view of this principle relating it so closely to the death wish. But perhaps this need not be as negative as it sounds. In the spiritual wisdom death is not the end but a radical transformation. Surely in therapy too there is always the hope of resurrection:

Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. (Jn 12:25)

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies it remains that and nothing more; but if it dies it bears a rich harvest. (Jn 12:24)

Freud spoke towards the end of the ‘reincarnation’ of ego-structures and was fascinated by the apparent survival of aspects of the psyche through the discharge process. The gospel and the great mystical traditions see the death of the ego as leading to a transformation of consciousness beyond what we understood as ego identity until that point. It is hard to describe or even recognise what comes after death – the friends of Jesus usually failed to recognise him when he showed themselves to him after his death and even then distrusted their own perception. Even in less radical experiences of death and rebirth as in Augustine’s autobiography, or when we linger over old photographs of ourselves when no one is looking, we encounter a self that is indisputably us but, well, different.

At a certain stage in the practice of meditation – when the practice has become serious – a shift takes place in the motivational understanding of the meditator. Rather than seeing it in terms of benefits to be accumulated, a new dimension presents itself and beckons us in. We feel invited – though not necessarily inclined to accept – to continue the practice primarily as a way of letting go. We may still feel the benefits but now they are felt as by-products rather than priorities, whereas the fruits appear in more subtle, less measurable and often more paradoxical ways. We have reached the threshold of the spirit.

Repetition has led us to this watershed and repetition in a new sense will empower us to advance. Technique is essentially mechanical. It works if you do it and you do it because you desire certain results. This is the way we learn a language or a musical instrument. It’s the way to pass exams and get to the top. Techniques require practice and application but the motivation is external and goal-oriented. However in meditation this practice not only produces external benefits but also interior changes that eventually demand or attract our attention. Perhaps someone you live or work with will notice these changes before you do. You become aware of these changes when someone tells you that you are easier to live with, more patient, a good listener. These may sound like empty flattery at first and we don’t think we have changed very much. But then we glimpse what they are getting at and to our surprise have to admit it. We’re actually nicer than we thought. Henceforth, if we keep meditating seriously, the motivation becomes more that of a discipline than of a technique. The difference is subtle but important for the differences we are identifying in this seminar.

A good way to illustrate this distinction is to consider the difference in types of repetition.

You will say that I am saying something I have said before. I will say it again.

You say I am repeating/ Something I have said before. /I shall say it again.
Shall I say it again? (T.S, Eliot, *East Coker*)

We shall not cease from exploration/ And the end of all our exploring/ Will
be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time (T.S.Eliot,
Little Gidding)

We are repetitive beings. Let me say it again to make the point. In the Chauvet cave in France the earliest known paintings, 32,000 year old and strikingly beautiful representations of wild animals, were recently discovered. All art since has been a kind of repetition or representation of earlier experience. As children we ask to hear our favourite stories told over and over. As adults we record our favourite movies – in cult movies the fans learn the scripts and love to repeat them aloud during the performance. Singers and soloists have repertoires. Teachers give the same courses. Religious worshippers repeat the same rituals and words. Commuters take the same train or route every day. In therapists offices we tell the same stories that define us and hope that the retelling of the same events will help get back to a healthier, more normal life. We live today in the age of film, our favourite medium, which allows moments of the past to be accurately repeated visually and audibly. We go to bed at night and get up in the morning. All our synchronised time-clocks, biological, emotional and cultural, go round and round. The repetitive aspects of life can make us feel secure, reassured. They can be therapeutic in themselves as when we settle back comfortably into old routines after a time of disruption or anxiety. Repetition might, it is true, sometimes seem a sterile way of denying death – a pretence that we can fill our barns indefinitely and that nothing will change. But in itself repetition gives life the stability and foundation that we need for growth and expansion.

Repetition is built deep into nature and the cosmos. There are cycles of life and in all other processes, biological, seasonal, generational and cultural and in the smallest and greatest versions of the universe. Like dance or music the universe itself swirls round and round repeating itself.

What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun (Eccles: 1:19)

Repetition that is creative and life-giving is faithful repetition. Faith is not essentially about belief although we are usually faithful *within* a belief system. Faith is our innate capacity for commitment and loyalty and therefore for transcendence and for love itself. This is visible in a faithful marriage, promises kept, projects seen through to completion. Meditation is pure exercise of faith in this sense. We can be united with others of faith despite the differences of our beliefs and still create community with them. The other kind of repetition, a mirror image of this, is mechanical. The daily life of a prison, doing a job you hate, being stuck in a marriage you want to escape, the incarceration of addiction or compulsive behaviour: all these trap us in mechanical routines that stifle and enrage us. This kind of repetitiousness leads to violence against others or ourselves, that is towards division or depression.

Reality is known through its cyclical patterns. This is why repetition is so intrinsic to human activity. An essential difference between these two experiences – faithful or mechanical - of the cyclical nature of reality is this: in the faithful repetition there is

always a variant, a slight skip in the beat, something non-computable, asymmetrical, from left-field; in the mechanistic nightmare of institutionalised living as in many forms of mental illness this element of liberty of spirit is missing. There is no crack of imperfection to let the light in. Mechanical repetition is usually a product of the virus of perfectionism. The result is a feeling of entrapment and asphyxiation. Hell is unbroken mechanical repetition. Heaven has to allow variation because there are infinite degrees of perfection in heaven but only one, false perfection in hell.

The interesting thing about meditation is that no one can force you to do it. Meditation promotes freedom. And even democracy: visiting Haiti, just before the earthquake, I was convinced more than ever before that teaching meditation is a political act of enormous social potential for change and liberation. I was talking to a group of university students who, I realised, had almost no chance of reaching their personal potential. The best hope for them was a rowing boat to Miami. As I meditated with them and then discussed their questions I realised that meditation could bring them to a new sense of self based on a discovery of inner freedom, an affirmation of their human dignity and an awareness of their rights. In some of them this might lead to the courage and boldness (*parresia*) that the desert monks said is a result of *apatheia*. Sustaining the vision of freedom in non-violent action is the great challenge of all social reform as it is of personal conversion. Most of our good intentions like most utopian revolutions in history lose steam and even end in regression or worse because the disappointment of ideals is one of the hardest and most painful of human experiences. Meditation not only empowers us to survive the bitterness of disillusionment. It does so by deliberately activating the process of exposing illusions and embracing reality.

Meditation is repetitive – both in the daily discipline and in the interior work of returning to the single-pointedness of pure attention. But this work is the work of faith. The repetition is like pumping iron, building muscle, except that in this case it is the muscle of faith. Faith moves mountains. Faith heals. Faith is the vision of things unseen. Because of this faith-element the repetitive aspect of meditation is actually the agent of change.

Research suggests that our obsession with multiplying choice makes us feel bewildered and depressed. It weakens our power to make strong decisions. The root of this contemporary problem is not the wish to enhance the freedom of the individual but to reduce the individual to the status of a consumer pathetically grateful for new packaging and brands for things we hardly need. The jadedness of much contemporary society is related to this consumer culture – the shopping mall that has replaced the town hall or the forum where citizens shared community decision-making.

The reaction against this new form of enslavement and debasement of human dignity is essentially a spiritual movement. It is spiritual because it proceeds from and is in love with wholeness, seeks integration and embraces discipline willingly as the price of liberation. Voluntary simplicity then becomes an active principle both of personal and economic life as a result of this spiritual awakening and practice. We just find contentment in simpler and less expensive and compulsive ways. If we need therapy we turn to the mind as its own physician, in meditation, or to a professional therapist for as long as this is needed – rather than to retail therapy.

The social consequences of meditation are far-reaching. But they will only be felt in society if there are sufficient individuals practising. The drop-out rate will always be high or – this is a better way of seeing it – the take-up rate varies immensely. Some get it and run with it. Others catch it, fumble, lose it and start again. What can we do to help people follow through and persevere? This great variation was the motivation for the beginning of the monastic life in the desert in the 5th century. Community, the *sangha*, spiritual friendship (support groups) are the fruits of the practice as well as the requirement for completing the practice. All spiritual traditions, Buddhist, Christian or 12 step recovery programs highlight the importance of this indispensable asset of the quest for wholeness.

One day Ananda, his closest disciple, came up to the Buddha and said: 'Lord, I think that half of the of the Holy Life is spiritual friendship, association with the Lovely.' And the Buddha replied: 'That's not so; say not so, Ananda. It is not half of the Holy Life, it is the whole of the Holy Life.'

I call you servants no longer, I call you friends because I have shared with you everything I have learned from my Father. (Jn15:15)

To conclude then, let us reflect on what means we can develop or encourage for helping to restore the spiritual dimension to the field of mental health care. Our meditation community is, like all communities and balanced societies, a community of communities. Every week small meditation groups meet in churches, homes, schools, universities, hospitals, prisons and places of work. They follow a simple common structure – a teaching on meditation, a mediation period, a time for sharing. This allows some variation of course but the faithfully-repetitive quality of the group is enhanced by keeping it simple.

These groups can be encouraged to form but they also have an organic life of their own. They charge nothing. They are not hierarchical. They are local but also by being aware of the larger community, regional, national and international, they are global. They are small. Large groups above 25 are rare. The average size is about 8. Over time they form a core number of faithful members who become strong influences on each other's journeys and on those of beginners. The group is open to all people of whatever background or orientation. They are concerned less with differences of belief and more with the commonality of faith.

A social or mental health worker who has awakened to the spiritual dimension of their work will have little hesitation in recommending meditation to those they work with and care for – when the time is right to do so. They themselves might even lead an introduction to meditation. But the follow-up is all-important and pointing them to a weekly meditation group in their local area would maximise the possibility of meditation becoming an integrated and ongoing part of their mental health and their journey to wholeness.

So many of the issues we are considering at this seminar point towards a practice of meditation as the sustainable way to keep momentum on the way to well-being: the spiritual dimension of mental health care, both promotional and healing, the bridging of the gap between the carer and the cared for, inter-religious pluralism and education. Meditation is the oldest practice in the human treasury of wisdom. The question

facing us in the many challenges we wrestle with is increasingly not ‘why should we introduce meditation into this field of work?’ but ‘why on earth don’t we?’