

Meditatio Seminar
Meditation and Mental Health
Health of Soul: Seeing the Light
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The 14th century mystical classic *The Cloud of Unknowing* remarks on the benefits of the “work” of meditation on the whole person. The author says that meditation has a beneficial effect on every aspect of the person, temperament, relationships and not least the meditator’s physical appearance. If you are not well-favoured by nature meditation, it says, will make you much more attractive so that people will find your company charming and irresistible. The aspiring meditator is also advised to keep in good health because this will make the work of meditation much more effective and easier. Anyone who has tried to meditate while fighting even a common cold will appreciate this.

These two remarks strike an interesting chord with contemporary scientific research into meditation which has by now solidly established both the physical and psychological benefits of meditation. In the light of the physical benefits, the Cloud’s comment might seem naïve. The neurology of meditation research sounds much more complex and sophisticated. But the comment on keeping in good health in order to maintain your meditation practice reveals much more – a very different set of priorities. Most physicians and psychologists recommend meditation because of the health benefits. The Cloud says ‘stay healthy so that you can meditate’.

So, what more can you get from meditation that both looks and takes us beyond the measurable physical and psychological benefits? Are there spiritual fruits that may be less measurable than these undeniable benefits but that are even more significant for what we mean by human health, wholeness and well-being, even for human meaning itself?

The link between meditation and medicine is an ancient one, explored and understood long before the scientific method was developed. The prefix *med* suggests care and attention both in the work of the professional healer and of the meditator who can be seen in a sense to be healing himself or at least collaborating with deep and natural self-balancing and therapeutic processes active in both the body and mind. The notion of health itself is called into question.

For 3000 years Chinese medicine has focused on treating the root causes of disease rather than merely its symptoms. It is holistic in the sense that it addresses the lifestyle, body, mind, and emotions of the patient. Central to this approach is the idea of *Qi*, the energy that flows through the twelve meridians of the body which itself is understood as a microcosm of the universe, not as an isolated organism. Yin, yang and the five elements need to be regulated when illness, of body or mind has set in. But *Qi* is more than energy it is also intelligence. Thus re-balancing the patient is only the first stage of restoring him to health. The second and more highly desired state is to achieve a conscious and intelligent harmony within the patient and between her and

her environment.

This distinction between balance and harmony illustrates the difference between the approach of the *Cloud* and that of modern science to meditation. There are stages in the process and we must look beyond what is measurable to see the whole picture, which is the reflection of wholeness. The spiritual dimension – distinct from the religious, though not divorced from it – is part of the meaning of health. Can we accept and understand this dimension more clearly so that we can make meditation more fully available to people who are trying to find healing, balance and, ultimately, wholeness? This is what we are here to explore.

I'll make my contribution in and through the Christian mystical tradition, particularly that of the desert monks of the 4th and 5th centuries whose psychological and spiritual wisdom continues to refresh and inspire our contemporaries. They were not theologians or moralists in the ordinary sense. They were skilled, experienced physicians of the soul with an advanced and deep understanding of the meaning of health and wholeness that still exerts a strong attraction and relevance for our time.

Much of what we would call therapy they called *ascesis* or *pratika*. These terms referred to the initial work of healing. They are universally relevant because for them all human beings are sick – and, for different reasons, Freud thought the same

..you will readily understand that “being sick” is essentially a practical concept. But if you take a theoretical standpoint and disregard these quantitative relations, you can readily say that we are all sick, or rather neurotic, since the conditions favorable to the development of symptoms are demonstrable also among normal persons. (*A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis. Part 3: XXIII*)

The first stage of the healing for the desert therapists was *praktike*, the development of the practice of the virtues. *Praktike* was a term usually used for daily or economic work and used in this way it makes the spiritual work seem something quite ordinary and yet also necessary for survival, like food and exercise we are concerned so much with in modern culture. Nevertheless, it is work of an unusual intensity and depth because it involves the struggle with the inner demons of the psyche, gaining the strength to resist temptation and backsliding and the art of subduing *passions*.

This terms ‘passion’ refers specifically to a disordered or dysfunctional state of mind similar to what we would understand by neurosis, compulsion, addiction or phobia. The desert therapists were intent on getting to the root of these problems and for them prayer – by prayer they meant pure prayer, contemplation or what we would generally here call meditation – was the pre-eminent way to achieve this healing which was a purification of the whole system, a re-set of the psyche that leads to sustainable health and flourishing.

It sometimes seems they felt that only hermits could do this work completely, whereas monks living in community could only fight the demons indirectly. But we can read solitude today not only as physical withdrawal into a mountain cave but as the regular practice of meditation in the cell of one's own solitude, regardless of one's way of life. The busy homemaker, student or banker becomes a short-term hermit when they sit in meditation morning and evening. Their regularity of practice is what constitutes this aspect of their work. Practice is more important than theory although

it is necessary to have a right theory and introduction to meditation before we can get into developing a beneficial practice. But in terms of what the practice was dealing with, the desert therapists were not concerned so much with actions – the monks didn't have many opportunities for colourful sinning – but with thoughts, fantasies and mental states – what they called *logismoi*. Jesus expressed this when he said,

...But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Confronting these thoughts in the heart, the integral centre of the human being, means embracing conflict. It won't be easy and the nature of the conflict demands a high level of self-awareness to deal with it. Eight principal *logismoi* were diagnosed: gluttony, fornication, avarice, grief, anger, acedia, vainglory and pride. These are the staple elements of all therapy in every culture. We may meet them in the form of eating disorders, sex-addiction, narcissism or depression but they are the old friends of every therapy program.

The first stage of *praktike* is hard work, which is just what we discover in the first stages of meditation. The distractions we battle with are the results of an inner struggle which at times darkens the mind and seems to make meditation impossible. Desires, multiple levels of sadness and many passions flood the mind. Perseverance, patience, a non-judgemental attitude are the desert fathers' and mothers' recommendations for getting past this first hurdle. They also recommended psalm-singing because this 'calms the passions and brings tranquillity to the unruliness of the body'. The popularity of Gregorian plainchant today also points to this therapeutic effect of this form of sacred music.

Don't give up, is the repeated advice. Or, if you do, start again. John Main absorbed and transmitted this wisdom about practice in his teaching on meditation which he saw as a way of healing that led to the ultimate wholeness of all human destiny. Perseverance leads to self-understanding and then on to an effective way of dealing with the inner demons. Gradually the mind becomes its own physician and learns to recognise the 'healing command' embedded deep in itself which heals the forces that block the pathways to health. The meditator then uses the fruits of meditation to advance further on the way of meditation that eventually leads, as it were, beyond health to wholeness. Insights into the working of the mind become a major tool for the healing work. As the meditator becomes a physician to herself and the spiritual fruit of self-control develops, she becomes more able to help others. Self-knowledge, the desert monks said, is more to be desired than the power of working miracles. Jung echoed this when he said that the self-knowledge of the therapist is the critical element in the therapeutic relationship.

The dysfunctional passions generated by the four diseases of the soul - pleasure, pain, desire and fear – begin to come under control. The passions are not suppressed but transformed.

Every passion is curable by abstinence and love. (*Maximus the Confessor*)

Desire is then transformed in a paradoxical way. Once balance has been achieved and we are on the way to true harmony, the passions that arise from the needs of the body and from human relationships are re-oriented towards the highest degree of harmony which, of course, the Christian desert wisdom saw as union with God. In a

passionless way we begin to get passionate about God. As health advances the mind transfers its whole longing to God. By God here we have to understand a reality more experiential than imaginative or intellectual. The natural intuition for healing, health and happiness has its source in this reality.

But before we come to try to understand this highest state we need to look at what balance and the health of the soul really means – what the desert therapists call *apatheia*. They took this concept over from the Greek Stoic philosophers but gave it a radical Christian re-interpretation. For the stoics, a rather aloof lot of human beings, it signified a more cold and clinical, self-sufficient detachment. It is something like that expressed in the modern idea of ‘cool’ or the Madison Avenue image of the lean young meditator, alone in his loft apartment fortifying himself against the demands of the world around him. *Apatheia* in the desert understanding is more interesting and healthy than this.

Firstly, it is not about isolation. On the contrary it generates courage and boldness (*parresia*) which lead us into transformed relations with others, personally and socially. After his legendary twenty years of struggling with the demons in his desert solitude St Antony, the archetypal Christian monk, emerges sound in mind and body, with a good complexion and an attractive disposition (remember the *Cloud*). People were drawn to him and he did not reject them even when he withdrew into deeper solitude at different stages of his life. For the next thirty years he devoted himself to the healing of the sick, the comforting of the sorrowful and the reconciliation of the divided: surely the perfect fruits of meditation and a witness to the meaning of a good life.

One of the best analysts of *apatheia* is the 4th century desert abba, Evagrius Ponticus, a rare intellectual among the earthy and practice-minded desert teachers. Some of his short definitions reward memorising and long reflection. Interpreting them in contemporary psychological language would also go far to integrating the spiritual dimension of mental health:

The Kingdom of Heaven is *apatheia* of the soul along with true knowledge of existing things.

The proof of *apatheia* is had when the spirit begins to see its own light, when it remains in a state of tranquillity in the presence of the images it has during sleep and when it maintains its calm as it beholds the affairs of life.

The soul which has *apatheia* is not simply the one which is not disturbed by changing events but the one which remains unmoved at the memory of them as well. (*The Hundred Chapters* 2,64,67)

Resilience indeed.

Apatheia is not ecstatic and in fact the desert wisdom does not see even the highest state in terms of ecstasy or altered states of consciousness. It prefers to understand it as the realisation and illumination of the natural state of the mind. *Apatheia* allows the mind to contemplate the natural order of things with perception and insight and also – this goes a step further – to begin to discern the universal principles behind it. *Apatheia* leads into the ‘mind of the Word’, the logos of all things. This extends the journey of meditation beyond the measurable benefits and the healing of the passions.

It moves the mind onwards from the material to the immaterial. This immateriality does not mean a rejection of the corporeal, however, because by immaterial is meant simply a state of mind described as *gymnos* – the word we know as the gym but which means nakedness. Just as the Greek athletes trained naked in the gymnasium so the meditator comes to what, a thousand years later but in the same tradition, the Cloud calls a ‘naked awareness of one’s self’.

At first we might approach meditation in order to get certain benefits. We have goals and we have a way of achieving them. But with practice and perseverance, as the benefits appear, so we move beyond the goal-oriented approach. We come to see, paradoxically, that the way to gain is the way of letting-go.

For Evagrius, prayer (meditation for him was the real meaning of prayer) is not an activity as much as a state – a condition of translucent, transparent purity of mind. A *katastasis*, a state, rather than an *ecstasis* or ecstasy. It is the deepest nature of the mind to pray in this way. And so, we can see in this kind of prayer also the deepest natural therapy of the soul as it strives to regain its primal state at a higher level of maturity. Because it is so natural, children – whose brains are dominated by alpha waves until the age of five and so predisposed to the practice – take to meditation like ducks to water. For the same reason, teaching children to meditate as a normal life-skill diminishes the risk of mental illness in later life.

Undistracted prayer – undistracted that is by images or thoughts – is the highest activity of the mind in this tradition. A calm mind and low level of distraction indicates that we are on the verge of *apatheia* when the mind sees its own light and remains still undisturbed by strong dreams or unsettling external events. Seeing the light of our own spirit is not an ecstatic event. It signifies a newfound freedom to practice contemplation. This will be reflected psychologically, for example, in improved attention span. It also designates a growing self-knowledge, not only at the obvious psychological level of consciousness but at a more integral level of being *who I am*.

Although we can call this approach to meditation prayer, we should not assume it implies a dogmatic or even imaginative attachment to the idea of God. In fact, the reverse is true. Rather surprisingly, and shockingly to some, Evagrius says that

If you wish to pray you have no need of God, who gives prayer to the one who prays.

In other words, meditation at this level is essentially imageless and free of thought, even good thoughts. We should not loosely use the word ‘meditation’, therefore, to cover both guided and imageless forms of practice without clearly knowing what we are saying. But to encourage those who have not yet reached the higher state and never may – but who can still reap the benefits and fruits of the early stages of the practice – we are told that the Holy Spirit visits and supports even the weak and the unclean and that ‘through the mind the Lord himself calms the incontinence of the body.’

In the early stages of meditation it is the practice itself that focuses our attention. We are still acquiring the good habit of meditation and the mind is still accommodating to the new experience of being still and ungrasping. Periods of real calm and true *apatheia* come and go. But as *apatheia* imperceptibly settles in as our default state of

mind we begin to get a taste of the higher level. In the lower level the mind remains in a state of multiplicity. In the higher state it experiences unity, oneness. Here, too, the soul realises itself as pure mind (*nous*) and knows that it belongs to the great company of minds. Again somewhat surprisingly, the desert tradition says that the ‘mind is what it contemplates’ where knower and known are one. This, they say, is true theology.

Meditation seen in this way has gone a long way beyond lowering blood pressure, improving cholesterol and even reducing stress and insomnia. Wherever and why ever we began to meditate, the continuum of the practice has moved from benefits to fruits, from technique to spiritual discipline. Human health has started to flourish as human wholeness.

We have seen the transitions from asceticism (*praktike*), the hard slog of the therapy of meditation, to *apatheia*. And, far from being a merely stoical state, we have seen that *apatheia* is much more than a turning away or a giving up, it is also a turning towards and an arrival. Evagrius says that *apatheia* gives birth to a child called *agape* – this is the term for love that embraces all forms of love from the erotic to the platonic, from superficial to intimate levels of friendship. It is characterised by a bursting of boundaries, an irresistible inclusiveness and generosity. It is this child called *agape* that ‘keeps the door to the deep knowledge of the created universe’.

If we keep the ultimate goal of human wholeness in clear view – and meditation as a healing way towards it – we will see an essential and self-evident truth underlying all human happiness. It is that what matters most in the human journey and our coming to healing, health and wholeness at all levels of our humanity, is love. What is the point of going for therapy, of doing the hard work of regaining health, let alone of trying to maintain it in a disordered and increasingly insane world, if not that we protect and expand our capacity for love. We go to get a broken arm fixed so that we can use it again. We seek healing for the psyche because we want to love, to be loved and to love, to bestow and receive the mystery of the self, and so to discover ever more deeply what love is and what it means.

I began this talk with Freud. He was one of the great de-mythologisers of the modern era and one of the great myth-makers. If he had, at least for much of his career, one depressing attitude it was such an underestimation of the capacity of human beings for joy. Maybe his distrust and rejection of religion as a collective neurosis and the historical events unfolding around him made him wary of the dangers of facile optimism and utopianism. Perhaps too this has influenced psychology down to our own time.

But meditation puts all this in a brighter new light. Whether you approach it from a purely benefits point of view or add the fruits to it as well and therefore open the spiritual dimension to the idea of wholeness, meditation promises the possibility not just of ‘turning (your) hysterical misery into common unhappiness’ but of really becoming joyful in love. Because we are not just human beings on a spiritual journey, but spiritual beings on a human journey, we have this to discover in ourselves and to share it with others. Ultimately, how we see ourselves determines how we participate in the healing of others and of our world.

