

## Stages of the Journey

by KIM NATARAJA

I would like to talk to you about possible stages on your journey of meditation. Already, when I use the word 'journey', I'm not really happy with what I'm saying because a journey always means a purpose, an aim, an achievement. But actually it is not that kind of journey. It is a journey of growth. It is a journey of being in different parts of your being.

Let me explain this a bit more clearly. On the journey you have a relationship, a relationship with your thoughts and your images. And I can already see you smile and say, 'I know all about that. She's going to talk about leaving thoughts and images behind'. Yes I am, but I'd like to explain to you why we are leaving thoughts and images behind. What are our thoughts and images? You don't really think about them do you? You just have thoughts and you ignore them, or suddenly one pops up and just won't go. We don't think about where they come from and what they are. Thoughts and images, as you well know, give us our sense of identity. We think we know who we are when we have our thoughts and images. This gives us a sense of identity.

In fact, it builds up the ego. Now that is always a bad word in psychology, but not for me and I will explain that. We need to have a feeling of control – that we know who we think we are. Unfortunately, what we think is not necessarily

the truth. One reason is that what you think you are has been formed by not your thoughts but the thoughts of other people: the people around you, your parents, your siblings, your environment, your religion, your society, your culture. I could go on. And what does it mean? Why do we accept thoughts of others about ourselves? Why do we do this? Why do we not just ignore what others want? Well that's the crux and that's where the ego comes in.

It's because the ego is the gift from the divine which helps us to survive. Children of humanity take a long, long time to become independent – the longest of any creature that we know of. We need to be looked after and supported. So we are born with a very strong sense of what we need to survive. I can't go into the details at the moment, but you know you need love, you need security, you need esteem, you need power and control, and even pleasure. It's what keeps us alive. Those are the needs that are given to us so that we will survive. So why do we listen to the thoughts of others? Well that's exactly it, isn't it? Others are the ones who will give us the sense of being loved, secure, esteemed and so on. So what we do to survive is to adapt to the thoughts of others so that they accept us and we will survive.

That is why the picture we have of ourselves has been limited and shaped by our need to be accepted and loved in the environment that God has put us. So it's not who we are really. It's what we have left over after we have cut away all the things other people didn't approve of. Now, I won't talk to you about my favourite topic, the shadow – that is for another talk – but the problem is that we are left with a sense of identity which is not the pure ego, or a pure sense of identity, but a limited, shaped, conditioned one. And the

problem is that the thoughts people have about us and how we should behave is seen through their perception, through their perspective, and that may not at all be the right one. I've known some people who like me surprisingly or not, others who utterly dislike me, and that can have a simple explanation that has nothing to do with me – I may remind them of their mother or their aunt whom they adore, or their mother or their aunt whom they'd rather not have around. So that perception will mould their image. Now I don't take that on because it doesn't affect my sense of security or my chance of survival, but as a child I would take all that on board – people don't like me so I'm not likeable, people don't love me so I'm not loveable. So what we are left with is that ego, the ego that has been shaped totally through the perceptions of others. We don't really know who we are. In fact Ludwig Wittgenstein, one of the most important philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in my opinion, said: 'There is nothing so difficult as not deceiving yourself.'

So that's why the problem on the journey is these thoughts and images. Not just because they go through your mind but because they limit what you think you can do. How does this relate to meditation, because you know that everything we say is related back to meditation? Well, let me read for you a quote from John Main. First of all I'm very pleased to say that he agrees with what I have just told you.

Ego is essentially the image we have of ourselves,  
the image of ourselves that we try to project.

Remember I said that we behave the way others expect us to.

All illusion, all false perceptions of ourselves and of others and of God are the offspring of the ego.

So you can see that the ego we are talking about there is not the pure ego, the healthy ego, but the wounded, limited ego. That's the one we need to be careful of. That's the one that needs to be healed and will automatically be healed on the journey.

How does meditation help? Let me quote you again from John Main.

We are used to dwelling in a world with thousands of mirrors, seeing ourselves, seeing how others see us, constantly. Meditation is a definite smashing of all the mirrors. (John Main, *Moment of Christ*)

Now, that's quite violent for John Main, 'smashing the mirrors', but it is incredibly difficult to let go of that limited, wounded sense of self. But as he says meditation helps us to do that. By quietly letting go of thoughts temporarily so that we don't feel threatened, we may discover and we will discover that in fact that ego is only the surface of our being, our much wider being. It's a protective layer. The rest of our being is open, aware of others, connected with others with creation and with the divine. That's why it is often called a journey from the mind to the heart. The mind, the rational mind, is self-protective, always looking after number one, whereas our real being is one where we care about others. So meditation leads us to the heart where we discover who we truly are if we let go of who we think we are. Now, that's a journey worth making.

The journey is all about your relationship with your thoughts. Can you acknowledge them and then just let them go as thoughts of the past, no longer relevant? Well, the practice starts in your twice-a-day sitting down to meditate and just letting those thoughts pass by without

getting grabbed by them, without feeling you need to react. Sounds easy doesn't it? Well, we all know it is not.

The ego, I said, is our survival instinct and he or she has worked very hard to make sure you are sitting here looking and listening to me. He's made sure that you survived in some form that fitted in with your surroundings. He's done his job very well but I sometime think he oversteps his job description. He knows what he has to do, but we all sometimes do more than we should be doing. And so he becomes a kind of over-protective parent who doesn't want the child to leave home. He's looked after you all these years so why do you want to leave home? But you know you've got to leave home to grow. So the ego will make it difficult.

The first thing it does is that you are suddenly aware of how many thoughts you have. You never knew how many thoughts were going through your mind. So a little voice, your ego, comes up and says, 'Mmm... this is not for you really, is it? You're just sitting here. Just forget about this. This is not worth doing'. But don't listen. Just go further. Go deeper. Then the thought comes up. 'Don't just sit there. Do something.' Oh, that's such a good one. It's been used for centuries. Just ignore it. Then comes, 'Is that really the right mantra? Are you sure this is the right method for you?' And off you go, become a lovely spiritual butterfly, but you're not going anywhere on the journey from mind to heart. So just tell yourself, 'Ah that's Mum and Dad speaking, trying to protect me.' Go on. Just let those thoughts pass by as clouds in the sky. They're not important at this particular moment. Just let them go. A final one is, 'This is self-indulgent. You're only thinking of yourself.' Don't listen, because unless you first look after yourself and the health of

your being, your ego, and the rest of your being, how can you look after others? So, if every time these thoughts come you just say 'yes mum' and continue saying your word, I think you can let go of them. Slowly, as you know from experience, the gaps between the recurring thoughts get larger. And those gaps are like doors into the silence. And it's only into the silence that you will discover who you truly are, when you can leave behind the masks, the protective masks, the persona you play, and be who you truly are.

And then there is silence, but that silence is in a way like a forest where there are beautiful things but also not so beautiful – the forest of our unconscious, where the ego has hidden everything that threatened our survival. So what happens? There you sit peacefully meditating, congratulating yourself that at least for five minutes, five seconds at a time, you're not thinking, and suddenly you sit there and sob and cry; or you feel hooting and tooting mad for no reason at all; or incredibly irritated. Well, these are the feelings you have suppressed because they threatened your survival. If you were angry inappropriately and expressed that, it that may have threatened your survival – be angry at your job and you may well join the unemployed. A frivolous example, but nevertheless you realise what I am trying to say here. And the ego says at this point, 'What's the point of meditating if I feel worse afterwards? It's not for me.' Again, don't believe that thought. Because every time you cry, or feel irritable or feel angry, a frozen suppressed emotion has been released. And actually after a while you feel better than you ever did. Allow these feelings. We have this layer of thoughts and images and then feelings. Feelings are thoughts before they become thoughts. Ignore them as much as anything

else, as much as thoughts. So allow those feelings. Allow the healing that takes place the deeper you come to who you really are. In our terms we would say you come closer to Christ, the divine spark within your true being which we *all* have, not only the goodies but the baddies as well.

And then there is the third trick of the ego. Remember I talked to you about survival instincts? Well, if they haven't been met, then they start playing up here. If you believe that you are basically unloveable, no one really loves you or can possibly love you: 'If only you knew what I was really like, you wouldn't love me.' Has that thought ever occurred to you? Well, that's conditioning. That's not the truth about you, but if you believe that, how can you go into the silence where God who is love, dwells? How do you know that he will love you? Well, his love is unconditional, but we've been so conditioned that we believe in love only when we do the right thing. But God is not a judge. God just loves. Remember the prodigal son. You certainly could judge him. But God didn't. God doesn't. But if you feel unloveable, you can't carry on. If you've always felt out of control, to suddenly go into that silence and let go of your ego control and give over this control to you don't know who, that can terrify you. But again, remember the way you are feeling is not the truth. It is your conditioned self, not who you are. Believe that the fact that the entirety of your being is one with others and with the divine and it is basically essentially good. If there is any bad in us, it comes out of the woundedness of our ego. So these unmet needs – you're not loveable, you're out of control, it's not a good idea, or no-one prays like this, you're the odd one out – they are the need for esteem.

So this is what I meant by the relationship with your

thoughts. Just say, 'Yeah, you're there and that conditioning is tough.' There are moments when I have a thought which refers to what my husband calls 'Little Kimmie'. And then I look at that and I say, 'Oh my goodness! How we are shaped by the past!' It is a step back. I know I am no longer 'Little Kimmie'; I'm big now. It is the same with meditation. We start to detach from our thoughts and our conditioning, and what helps us is those doors of silence allowed us to experience a reality beyond our ordinary reality, often giving us a sense of love and peace and calm.

The fruits of meditation are exactly that. How much more loveable have you become? Because the more you let go of that wounded ego, the more you will feel in touch with love. Now do remember I said ego is not a baddie. Listen to what Laurence Freeman said,

Jesus had an ego. So it's not that the ego in itself is sinful. It is egotism, fixation on the ego that leads to the forgetting and betrayal of our true selves. Sin happens when the ego is mistaken for the true self.

And remember, we weren't even talking about the pure ego, we were talking about the wounded, conditioned one.

As we persevere on this difficult journey of forming a good, accepting relationship with all those thoughts, we are healed slowly. The thoughts are still there, but they don't have the same power over us. I chuckle at myself nowadays when I see myself nearly reacting according to conditioning. And sometimes I still do react according to conditioning. It's not easy. But when we continue this journey we gradually become what the Desert Fathers call 'pure of heart'. Pure, because the woundedness no longer dictates how we behave. It is purity of heart when we totally accept ourselves



as we are, and accept our situation as it is. We let go of all the false images we have of ourselves, all the exaggerated estimations of what we can do and should do. Those are the voices of conditioning and expectation. Let go of them. When we come to this pure essence, John Main said,

Then we are fully alive. And only when we live in and from love do we know that miraculous harmony and integration of our whole being which makes us fully human. (John Main, *Monastery without Walls*)

It's important that we don't lose the ego, but the ego gets healed and then slowly integrated in our whole being. So the ego gets permeated with love, with peace and we react quite differently. One of the reasons I'm still teaching instead of happily sitting at home knitting for my grandson, is the reason how important this is, that the whole world would be different if we all were on this journey.

Let me just finish with a beautiful quote from Thomas Merton which says it all:

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in the eyes of the divine. If only they could see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time, there would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed. (Thomas Merton, 'Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander')

Keep meditating and our world will become like that.