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F R O M : R Walsh & F Vaughan (eds) BEYOND EGO: TRANSPERSONAL DIMENSIONS IN PSYCHOLOGY. Los Angeles: JP Tarcher 1980.

Meditation: Doorway to the Transpersonal

In our modern world it has always been assumed . . . that in order to observe oneself all that is required is for a person to "look within." No one even imagines that self-observation may be a highly disciplined skill which requires longer training than any other skill we know. . . . The . . . bad reputation of "introspection" . . . results from the particular notion that all by himself and without guidance and training, a man can come to accurate and unmixed observations of his own thought and perception. In contrast to this one could very well say that the heart of the psychological disciplines in the East and the ancient Western world consists of training at self-study.

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Traditionally associated with religious or spiritual disciplines, meditation has recently become popular in the West as a tool for relaxation and personal growth. It is estimated that by 1980 over six million people in the United States alone had learned some form of meditation. The most common is Transcendental Meditation (TM), a form of Hindu practice adapted to an essentially secular practice suitable for Westerners. Other forms of meditation widely practiced in the West at this time include various forms of yoga derived from Hinduism, and a number of different types of Buddhist practice. Among the most popular of these are Zen

Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, and vipassana (insight) meditation. Other forms of meditation are associated with the Christian practice of contemplation.

For the transpersonal psychologist, meditation is of interest for several reasons. The altered states of consciousness and enhanced psychological development it elicits are both of central concern. The fact that it elicits measurable changes in behavior and physiology has made it the focus of interest for researchers who have hoped to find in meditation a way of bridging the practices of the consciousness disciplines and Western empirical science.

Basically, meditation can be described as any discipline that aims at enhancing awareness through the conscious directing of attention. Attention may be focused on a specific object, as in concentration meditation, or remain open in a choiceless awareness of all experience. The range of specific techniques is broad. In some practices one merely sits and attempts to remain aware of the ongoing flow of experience. Others involve focusing attention on specific objects such as the breath, sensations, sounds, or visual images. In others, specific emotions such as love or compassion are generated and experienced.

Beginning meditation may be difficult. Just sitting immobile for a half hour can be arduous at first and intensive practice over a period of days can be powerful and at times disconcerting. Any unresolved psychological conflicts tend to surface as soon as attention is turned inward and the restless agitated nature of the untrained mind rapidly becomes apparent. Powerful surges of arousal and emotion may alternate with deep peace and joy.

Even a few hours of intensive practice can easily demonstrate that our usual levels of awareness and perception are grossly insensitive, distorted, and outside voluntary control. Indeed, it rapidly becomes apparent that our usual degree of voluntary control of psychological processes is far less than commonly assumed. Amazingly enough, we can live a whole lifetime without recognizing the fact that these perceptual processes continuously control, create, and distort our reality as well as our ideas of who and what we are. Most people who have tried would probably agree that training the mind and bringing it under voluntary control is one of the most difficult tasks a person can undertake.

The rewards of meditative practice tend to be subtle at first. Increased calm, sensitivity, receptivity, empathy, insight, and clarity are some of the qualities that may be experienced early as a result of regular practice. Old assumptions about oneself and the world are gradually surrendered and more finely tuned, comprehensive perspectives begin to emerge.

Such immediate benefits, however, are only tastes of what is potentially a profoundly transformative process, for when practiced intensely,

meditation disciplines almost invariably lead into the transpersonal realm of experience. Advanced practitioners report states of consciousness, levels of perceptual sensitivity and clarity, and degrees of insight, calm, joy, and love that far exceed those experienced by most people in daily life. A progressive sequence of altered states of consciousness can occur, which may ultimately result in the permanent, radical shift in consciousness known as enlightenment or liberation.

The papers in this section have been chosen to reflect both Western and non-Western perspectives. In "Relative Realities," Ram Dass describes the initial stages of awakening that a beginning meditator may experience. When awareness is differentiated from objects of awareness such as thoughts or sensations, one is free to put awareness wherever one chooses. The meditator is then able to penetrate deeply into the psyche, to observe the flow of psychological processes and states of mind, to see through perceptual distortions, and to uncover the quietness and wisdom that lie hidden below surface agitation.

In "A Map for Inner Space," Daniel Goleman gives a detailed description of the sequence of experiences that practitioners undertaking advanced Buddhist meditation can expect.² In the path of concentration, increasing refinement of the ability to direct attention is developed, resulting in a progression of increasingly subtle states and imperturbability of concentration. However, this path is viewed as only preparatory for the path of insight, which aims at developing insight, wisdom, and ultimately full enlightenment. In this path, the meditator observes the processes of mind with increasing sensitivity and clarity and in so doing undercuts the prevailing distortions and disturbances of mental and perceptual processes. Once again a progression of altered states ensues, all of which lie beyond the ken of traditional Western psychological maps.

In "Meditation: Aspects of Theory and Practice," Jack Kornfield examines the effects of practice using the same Buddhist psychological model of mental factors that Daniel Goleman employed in his discussion of "Mental Health in Classical Buddhist Psychology." However, the meditation paper focuses on the seven "Factors of Enlightenment"; the factors said to characterize the enlightened mind. The recognition that the aim of diverse consciousness disciplines and religions is the cultivation of these mental factors makes sense of a range of seemingly unrelated traditions and practices.

In "Meditation Research: The Evolution and State of the Art," Roger Walsh reviews the past and present status of empirical research and its relationship to transpersonal psychology. Meditation research is still in its infancy but has already revealed a range of phenomenological, behavioral, chemical, endocrine, and neurophysiological effects. However, to date most experiments have employed relatively gross behavioral and physiological measures. Thus, while it is clear that meditation produces experi-

mentally verifiable effects, it is less clear how relevant the current measures are to the subtle subjective changes which are the goal of meditation.

We must close our eyes and invoke a new manner of seeing, a wakefulness that is the birthright of us all, though few put it to use. —Plotinus

Notes

1. Needleman, J. *A sense of the cosmos: The encounter of modern science and ancient truth*. New York: Doubleday, 1975.
2. The exclusive use of masculine pronouns in his article reflects the traditional language used in the ancient Buddhist texts.