

Meditation and A Course in Miracles

A Dialogue Between Roger Walsh and Robert Perry

The original article can be found here:

<http://www.circleofa.org/dialogs/MediationAndAcim.php>

Meditation is one of the most universal, time-honored, and effective spiritual practices. Its effectiveness is now being confirmed by an ever-growing mountain of research data. Yet its place in A Course in Miracles seems far more questionable and hazy. What most students don't realize is that meditation actually occupies a central place in the Course, being a main focus of the Workbook.

To explore the relationship between the Course's methods of meditation and the methods of other spiritual traditions, and to simply underscore the importance of meditation for Course students, we asked Roger Walsh to join Robert Perry for a dialogue on meditation. Besides being a student of the Course, Roger is a long-time practitioner and scientific researcher of meditation. His text on meditation received the Outstanding Academic Book of 1984 Award. He is a professor at the University of California at Irvine, author of several books, including *Essential Spirituality: The Seven Central Practices to Awaken Heart and Mind*, and coeditor with Frances Vaughan of a collection of quotations from the Course titled *Gifts from A Course in Miracles*.

A review of meditation research is available in the article: Walsh, R. & Shapiro, S. The meeting of meditative disciplines and Western psychology: A mutually enriching dialogue. *American Psychologist*, 61(3), 227-239, 2006.

Robert Perry has been a teacher and interpreter of A Course in Miracles since 1986. He is the founder of the Circle of Atonement and author of many books about the Course.

Defining meditation

Robert Perry: How are you defining meditation?

Roger Walsh: The term "meditation" refers to a family of practices that particularly train attention and awareness in order to foster psychological and spiritual well being and development.

I think there are a number of key features to that. First, meditation refers to a family of practices, so it's important for us to recognize that we're dealing with quite an array and constellation of practices, but practices which have a common core. Second, although meditation can do many things and can involve many components, meditative practices all seem to center around the cultivation of awareness and attention. That distinguishes them from psychotherapy, where there is more of a focus on the content of awareness,

rather than the training of awareness and attention per se. Third, meditation aims not only to enhance psychological and spiritual well-being, but also to foster development—to bring people to greater maturity, greater heights of developmental potential.

RP: I have a question then. I've always seen meditation as almost being defined by the quieting of the mind, by the reduction of verbalization and discursive thinking. What I've been wondering for quite some time now is this: Are there methods of meditation that break that mold, or would those characteristics hold true for all methods?

RW: My understanding is that the quieting and calming of mind is common to many meditations, but by no means all. Keep in mind that there are moving meditations, there are expressive meditations, and there are meditations which arouse energy, in addition to the many practices which attempt to quiet the mind and bring it to stillness, calm, and concentration. We could run through a list of various practices where there is more emphasis on movement, on energy, etc. But you are certainly right that a lot of practices have that quieting, calming, and stilling emphasis. I think certainly most of the ones in the Course do.

The Course's approach to meditation

RP: Shall we move on to talk about the Course's approach to meditation?

RW: Yes. Why don't you say something about that?

RP: First of all, before talking about the actual methods, I want to say something about the place of meditation within the Course, because I think this is something that is generally not very appreciated by Course students. And the place of meditation really starts before the Course starts coming through Helen Schucman.

Shortly after Helen and Bill Thetford had their joining in the goal of demonstrating a better way, Bill suggested that they both meditate. So, they were both doing that, and it was during meditation that Helen had the first of her inner visions that preceded the actual dictation process of the Course.

Then, the day before the Course dictation started coming through, the author of what would be the Course gave Bill a clear meditation technique. He told Bill to take the words "Here I am, Lord," and withdraw his attention from everything outside, everything else, and put it only on those words. This would enable him to still his mind and allow him to access higher guidance.

When the Course dictation did start the next day, there were several comments in that early dictation about meditation, all of which got edited out of the final, published Course. The actual passages in which they appeared made it in, but the word "meditation" was changed. For instance, a line famous among Course students—"Salvation is a collaborative venture"—was originally "Meditation is a collaborative venture."

RW: That's interesting.

RP: Very interesting. Essentially, these early passages affirmed meditation, but just warned against practicing it in isolating ways. Instead, meditation is meant to be combined with methods that would join you with other people. After these early references, meditation drops out of the picture for most of the Text.

But then, when the Workbook comes in, starting in Lesson 41, there is clear training in meditation. I think most Course students don't spot it because the word "meditation" is not used. But the concept is so clearly there. It's as if I told you I was traveling somewhere in a metal vehicle with four tires and an internal combustion engine. Even without using the word "car," you would know exactly what I meant.

So, starting in Lesson 41, there is this new "kind of practice," as it is called. There is a promise that there will be more training in it, and that sooner or later it will always work. This practice is aimed at experiencing God, and from that point on, meditation becomes a really major feature of the Workbook. By the end of the Workbook, we're expected to be doing a whole lot of it: morning, evening, and on the hour.

What I can discern in the Workbook are three broad methods. The methods are fairly fluid, so deciding where one ends and another begins is a bit tricky, but it seems to me that we can make some delineations. The first method, the one that begins in Lesson 41, is what I tend to call, for want of a label in the Course itself, "down and inward" meditation. What you do here is close your eyes, repeat the idea for the day, and then attempt to clear your mind. For the most part you will not be repeating words, but instead have a sense of sinking down and inward in the mind to some central place in the mind, in the process sinking past what the Course calls "clouds of insane thoughts."

RW: Yes, I know those thoughts well.

RP: So, you sink down and inward into your mind, while having an attitude of confidence that you can succeed at this, desire to reach that place in your mind, and a sense of the importance and holiness of what you are doing. When your mind gets caught up in the clouds, you draw it back by repeating the idea for the day. That's the essence, as I understand it, of that first technique, which is in the Workbook from Lesson 41 up to about Lesson 200.

RW: What did you call that again?

RP: I call it "down and inward" meditation, just because that's descriptive of what we're meant to do there.

Then, Lesson 183 gives us another technique, which again, for want of an actual label given by the Course, I call "Name of God" meditation. Essentially, it's very much like centering prayer, and very much like the technique that's in the mystical text *The Cloud of Unknowing*. You repeat a Name for God—no name is specified, so I assume we can

pick whatever we want—to the exclusion of all other thought. And here, you repeat it in a special way, as a call for the experience of what that Name represents: not only God, but our own true Self, the truth of our and all of our brothers' reality.

The idea is that the Name isn't just a sound being repeated—it's almost like a relational act, somewhat like that line "Here I am, Lord." And it is not just used regularly as a focus, but also as a response to wandering thoughts that may come in. So that's the second method, and there is little mention of that elsewhere. It's mainly in Lesson 183.

Then, as the Workbook enters the second half of the year, another technique comes in, which becomes the main focus of the second half of the year. This is the real crowning method of meditation in the Workbook, and I call it "open mind" meditation.

It's meant to be an almost entirely nonverbal technique, where there isn't a regular repeating of words, or even of one word. There is a conscious attempt to empty the mind of all beliefs, all concepts, all self-images, and create a kind of vacuum. But oddly enough, in the vacuum you're supposed to hold a sense of expectancy and anticipation. So it's kind of a formless expectancy, an emptiness and fullness in the mind. The expectancy is for the experience of God to dawn upon the mind. So there is, even in the absence of words, a presence of something.

The Workbook returns to that technique again and again, in the final two reviews of Part I- Review V and Review VI-in the introduction to Part II, and in the instructions for the last five lessons. The mentions of this technique tend to get subtler and subtler as you go; I assume this is because the author expects us to already know what this is about. The Workbook thus ends on its most formless technique. Apart from using words to recall the mind from wandering, this technique is meant to be nonverbal.

Similarities between Course-based meditation and other methods

RW: So, there is a division here, into form and formlessness. The "Name of God" meditation uses form in the sense of the deliberate use of thoughts, but in the other two meditation techniques you describe, the emphasis is on formlessness, on releasing thoughts. In the Christian tradition, that would be the distinction between *meditatio* and *contemplatio*: meditation on a particular thought or idea (*meditatio*), which merges into or extends into a release of the idea and a falling into open contemplation (*contemplatio*). Actually, that very much ties the whole method of the Course into the Christian contemplative tradition, because the threefold division for contemplation was usually *lectio divina*: *lectio*, the reading and savoring of the word; *meditatio*, the inner reflection on the word or phrase; and then moving into *contemplatio*, which the Course uses very skillfully.

RP: I think with all three of the Course's meditation methods, it's important not to overemphasize their differences, because they all share a focus on emptying the mind of normal thought and training the mind to center on one thing—something other than normal thought. In the first two techniques ("down and inward" and "Name of God"),

there is more permission to help that training of the mind with words: In the first one you can bring in the idea for the day, and in the second one you are encouraged to repeat that one word. But in both cases it's a minimum of words, and the word is really used to keep your mind trained in a stable way on a particular meaning which the word represents. So, in all three cases there is a reduction in normal verbalizing and thinking, accompanied by a focus on one thing. This one thing may sometimes be represented by a word, but I think it's understood that this one thing is mostly just a meaning that need not be verbalized.

RW: Right, and that's a common progression in meditative practices. It is a progression along several dimensions: from the use of thought to the release of thought, from control to a letting go, from a more active to a more passive approach to the mind. Eventually, we move into a condition of what is variously called wu wei in the Chinese tradition, or what Meister Eckhart called "acting without why." It's a relatively advanced stage in which the mind is allowed to be, and there is no felt need for active intention or interference.

RP: I'm not sure the Course talks about intention in that way.

RW: I would agree, but I think it's clearly where it seems to be heading. Or would you not agree?

RP: I think it sees intention as fundamental to the mind. So, I think it would probably be aiming for us to reach a state in which the intention is almost an experience of the mind's true condition, rather than something that has to be added by us. That's just my speculation.

RW: I would agree with that, and I think you're actually pointing to that condition of what Buddhists call "effortless effort," or even beyond that. Effortless effort is still at the level of separation. But the deeper of levels of wu wei—for example, the level of nonintentionality—go along with, at their deepest, the dissolution of the separate self-sense. The endpoint of this progression is this: If there is no longer any ego to defend, then what is left is—however you conceive it—"the Will of God," in the Course's terms. Certainly there is no sense of effort or struggle in that.

Differences between Course-based meditation and other methods

RP: We've already discussed the similarities between Course-based meditation and other techniques. Do any important differences jump out at you?

RW: I find that hard to answer, in part because there is such a wide array of meditative practices, and I can't think offhand of any type of practice that is unique to the Course, although it does have its specific emphasis.

Of course, it's a theistic practice. And there is an enormous and incredibly skillful emphasis on changing thoughts, which is done in many cases at a meditative level. In fact, I think of the Course as the world's best cognitive therapy. It's a brilliant system for

unveiling the distortions and limits of our usual egoic thought system, and replacing it with a substitute thought system which is conducive to both well-being and awakening. A lot of that is done in a meditative state. I think one of the most interesting examples of actual marriage between East and West in our time is the beginning emergence of so-called mindfulness-based cognitive therapy: the marriage of traditional Western cognitive therapy with Eastern meditative mindfulness. I think the Course is by far the most profound of those practices I've run across.

I think one can also look at the Course as a kind of jnana yoga—the yoga of discernment and wisdom. The Course clearly works with beliefs, discerning between skillful and destructive beliefs. And as with jnana yoga, it does that in a meditative way. It also has the bhakti or devotional aspect: love meditation practices, and repetition of phrases such as the Name of God to evoke love and transcendence.

I guess the distinctive practice of the Course is forgiveness, and it certainly uses a number of meditative practices for that. Forgiveness is not unique to the Course, but I know of no other tradition which has such a sophisticated psychological understanding of, or as wide an array of practices for, cultivating forgiveness. That is a distinctive if not a unique feature of the Course.

RP: I do think you're defining meditation more broadly than I am. And of course, I would cede to your greater knowledge and experience.

RW: Well, maybe you want to say a little more.

RP: When I think of meditation in the Course, I tend to focus on that small family of practices that I guess you would call concentrative meditation, where there is a narrowing or focusing of awareness onto one stable thing. I would distinguish what I'm calling meditation from a huge number of practices in the Course that are still disciplined exercises of the mind, but are more active, more verbal—there is more going on.

For instance, the Workbook lessons will often instruct us to enter a practice period in which we start with a very active phase. It might be applying an idea to certain things in our lives. We might be placing an idea in our mind and allowing what the Course calls "related thoughts" to spontaneously arise. Then, after that introductory active phase, we'll often be instructed to enter a receptive phase in which we try to clear the mind of that kind of activity and focus in a sustained way on one particular thing. That thing may be represented by a few words, or by no words. It's still a sustained, unmoving attention being put on that one thing. That receptive phase is what I tend to identify with the term meditation. And that goes back to my question at the very start of this dialogue: How do we define meditation, so we know what we're both meaning by the word?

RW: Yes, I am using the term more broadly, although as you've pointed out, there is a shading or gradation among these techniques. Traditionally, for example in *lectio divina*, one practice shades into the other, so where one draws the boundaries is a little unclear.

RP: Yes, I agree with that.

The role of meaning in meditation

RP: Let me move on to something that's very much on my mind around this whole meditation issue. That is, in studying and using what I'm calling the Course's meditation techniques—which I'm limiting to those three things I talked about—I've noticed a real strong emphasis on what we might call meaning.

In all three techniques, even though you're limiting or even excluding a focus on words, there's still a real focus on intent, on feelings, on expectancy (in the third technique). There's a determination, and confidence is frequently encouraged. Even though the mind is empty of its normal content, it's meant to be full of other content that in my mind clusters around this idea of meaning. Even when we're repeating, say, the Name of God, it's not just a word—it's almost like a relational act, a call.

And while I'm sure there's a vast number of techniques out there that I have no idea about, what I've noticed in the ones I seem to encounter on the American spiritual scene is that a lot of them seem to have that meaning element more stripped out. Along with words and discursive thinking, meaning seems to be removed from the process as well.

So maybe, for instance, you just focus on something physical, like the breath. Or, to use another example: I have read about centering prayer, and there you pick this name for God (at least if I've understood the instructions correctly), but you don't seem to inject much will, feeling, or meaning into the repetition of that name. The phrase, if I remember correctly, is that "you lay it on your mind like laying a feather on an absorbant piece of cotton." What I find interesting is that I believe that technique is pretty self-consciously derived from or a descendent of the technique in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. But in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, you say the name as a "dart of longing love." This seems to be a stark contrast to "laying it like a feather..."

RW: First, you're pointing to an interesting distinction between practices that deliberately evoke a particular meaning or cognitive tone, and practices that don't. I hadn't thought of that distinction before, but it's an interesting one. And I think you're right, there is a spectrum of practices. On one extreme are those which focus, as you said, on something like a physical sensation—the traditional one being the breath. On the other extreme are practices such as Lesson 183, in which there is a recitation of a phrase which is aimed to evoke an intense emotion, motivation, longing, and deep resonance, with a very profound meaning. So, that's an interesting distinction, and I think you're right that the Course does place emphasis on the more cognitive but extremely subtle element of meditative practices.

Now, how does that compare with other practices statistically? Well, there is a wide array, and it's true that in the West at the moment, there is a big emphasis on Buddhist and yogic practices, which do often focus on the breath, or the body, or some physical sensation, or even a meaningless sound, as in a mantra. And their primary aim is to strip

away thoughts, etc., and to come down to a level of primary sensation. But on the other hand, there are a lot of practices which are not quite as well known, such as practices for the cultivation of love, or any number of other qualities. These practices do emphasize a focus directly on the qualities themselves, or on phrases or images which will evoke them. So again, the Course is not unique in this, but it has its own unique flavor, that's for sure.

RP: I don't know much about Sufi meditation, but I suspect that with the devotional flavor you get there, there is probably some of that heart-mind-will emphasis—a focus on meaning—in their style of meditation.

RW: Yes, and again, they have an array of practices too. Their practice of chanting the Name of God is very similar to the Course's practice in Lesson 183. In fact, there is a saying in Sufism: "The breath that does not recite the Name of God is a wasted breath." This is very similar to the idea of bringing the Name of God to mind as much as possible and just letting it work its effects. So, that's one example of a meditation technique out there that seems to share the Course's emphasis on meaning.

RP: I just wonder why techniques like these aren't taking root much in the contemporary American scene. I wonder if there are currents in that scene—or assumptions or phobias around what we associate with the church of our youth—that filter out those techniques from the popular scene.

RW: It could be. Of course, it may be that the current interest in meditation was largely fueled by the influx of Asian traditions, particularly Buddhist and yogic practices, and in those practices there is an emphasis on things like focusing on the breath rather than using recitation, japa, etc. One still finds, for example in Buddhism, the primary practices that people have become aware of are either the vipassana or insight meditation of Theravada Buddhism, or the shikan taza or "just sitting" practice of Zen.

But there are many other practices in Theravada Buddhism. The insight meditation of focusing on the breath and whatever other experiences arise in the mind is often accompanied by practices of lovingkindness, compassion, and empathic joy—practices that specifically use phrases. And Tibetan Buddhism, which isn't quite as well known, has an enormous array of visualization practices. There is, though, a contrast between these Asian traditions, with their primary focus on the breath, and the Western monotheistic contemplative practices, which certainly place more emphasis on contemplation, use of thought, chanting, repetitive prayer, etc.

Now again, where the dividing line is between that and meditation is a question. Again, these practices certainly shade into meditations, such as those in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which you mentioned. These practices certainly have more of that active element.

RP: I think what I'm getting at is that when I think of the practices from the Course or *The Cloud of Unknowing*—practices where you take one word, but you repeat it as a

"dart of longing love"—it seems that in the contemporary scene there is a squeamishness about that sort of thing, like it's not in vogue. I'm wondering what's going on there. Is there some mood that's filtering out the full range of practices that have been developed out there from getting into our particular scene here?

RW: That's a very interesting question, and I think you may be right. I think one way of looking at it is that historically, we are still in what is presumably the very early phases of the reintroduction of contemplative practices into the West. What we have had so far is not only primarily an Eastern influx, but a narrow selection of Eastern practices—particularly vipassana and Zen in Buddhism, and yogic breath practices in yoga. So, I suspect that as the meditative practices take greater hold, we will see a wider array of practices. And the kinds of practices you're talking about, what are called in the Hindu tradition the bhakti or love practices, which have a great emphasis on acquiring "the unrequited longing for God," will become better known.

RP: That makes sense.

Why meditate?

RP: If we could change gears here, I would like to ask you for your thoughts on this question: Why would one meditate? What is it good for?

RW: "A lot of things" is the brief answer. We need to divide the possible benefits into various categories: the traditional spiritual benefits, and then the benefits which have been more recently discovered by Western researchers. Maybe we can start with the latter, because they're relatively simple and among the more mundane ones. We can look at physical, psychological, and spiritual benefits.

Physically, there's an ever-increasing array of benefits that are recognized. In fact, almost every month brings out another research paper suggesting yet another benefit, either physical or psychological, of the meditative practices. So, there are benefits on a variety of physical and mental health factors.

The most widely researched effects have been on stress. In the cardiovascular system, as we might expect, there are reductions in such things as blood pressure and heart rate. Meditation has been found useful as an adjunct for treating coronary disease, and all sorts of physical disorders from asthma to migraine to psoriasis—we could go through a whole list.

There is also an array of psychological benefits, which we can simply summarize as follows: increased perceptual sensitivity and accuracy, increased introspective sensitivity, increased psychological health and well-being, and greater psychological maturity as measured by such things as self-actualization, moral development, and ego development.

So, these are the somatic and psychological benefits. And it's interesting that meditation was designed to help none of these. These are just things that, from a spiritual perspective, are interesting byproducts, but they're not what the game is about.

Meditation from a spiritual perspective is regarded as a central and essential practice because it has so many benefits on both heart and mind. It trains attention, and that is regarded as an absolutely fundamental capacity for any advanced spiritual work. As any of us who has ever sat down to meditate knows, the mind is hyperactive—it jumps all over the place. In fact, from a spiritual perspective, we all suffer from attention deficit disorder. The untrained mind, as the Course says so beautifully, is out of our control. Meditation is a way of bringing the mind under greater voluntary control, of stabilizing attention, of focusing awareness. That brings a greater calm and stability to the mind, a greater perceptual sensitivity and clarity, and a greater capacity to see the workings of the mind, which enables one to work with it. Meditation has been regarded as the key practice for what the Buddhists call mental cultivation—*bhavana* is the Pali term—or in the Taoist tradition, refining of the mind. All the meditative traditions and contemplative traditions in general agree that the mind can be refined and developed, and regard meditation as an essential tool for doing that.

There are many secondary benefits. For example, when you can hold attention on a preferred object, then you can choose what you're going to pay attention to. Since the mind takes on the properties of whatever it attends to, this is a very valuable tool, because now instead of being captured by experiences and stimuli—having experiences evoked willy-nilly—one can now focus, for example, on the thought of a loved person, and thereby cultivate feelings of love. So, one can use the stabilized attention and greater sensitivity that meditation brings to cultivate a variety of other qualities.

RP: In some of your writings, the stories from advanced meditators were fascinating. For instance, there was the response in relation to the burn victim, where the advanced meditator, rather than having the common reaction of revulsion, had a spontaneous reaction of both tranquility and compassion. The stories like that really inspire me with the sense of what's possible.

RW: I think that's one of the exciting things about meditation and spiritual practices, and the research that is now being done on them. They make clear that we have underestimated our potential. They show that we are half-grown adolescents in terms of our potential mental-spiritual development, and that we and the mind are capable of so much more than we ever recognized. Advanced meditators have now demonstrated twelve capacities that psychologists previously thought were impossible. So, this is an extraordinary tribute to the potentials of a trained mind and the capacities and stages of maturity that are available to us.

RP: In the materials you sent, I found the section on the higher capacities particularly inspiring. There was one part about advanced meditators being able to hold their attention on something for hours effortlessly—on one thing. To be quite honest, I find that hard to imagine. That seems really important, and for me it underscores the crucial importance of

training the mind. I think with Course in Miracles students—because this is not an old tradition, and therefore we're often influenced by the currents of thought we pick up from the culture—we don't often realize that it takes a lot more than just reading and discussing the ideas. One has to actually train the mind.

RW: Yes, and I think the more of this we do, the more we are humbled, and the more we realize that this game we've gotten ourselves into is so much vaster than we imagined or even than we can imagine.

RP: I completely agree.

The limits of meditation

RP: One question I would like you to speak to is this: What aspect of spiritual development or psychological growth is meditation not good for achieving?

RW: You're actually getting at a question which I think will keep researchers busy for a century. I think the larger question you're getting at is this: What aspects of personality and being are transformed by meditation, and what are left untouched? I don't think we have a lot of answers yet, but I think we can take some educated guesses.

I suspect that meditation is less effective than other approaches for relationship skills, for work in the world, and for managing the nitty gritty of daily activity. It's not that meditation can't help with these—in fact, it can help by bringing a greater sensitivity and clarity—but that's not enough. We then have to use that greater sensitivity and clarity deliberately and intentionally on a regular basis in order to develop relationship or work skills that we need. And frankly, I think relationship with others is the advanced yoga course. There's a reason why the Course focuses so intensely on it. It is a truly demanding and humbling practice. Those are some things that meditation may not be immediately effective for.

There is also a question as to how effective meditation is for revealing shadow elements of oneself—that is, aspects of one's personality and psyche that have been defensively walled off. Again, we don't have a lot of information on this, but my sense is that people can do a lot of practice and still retain significant defenses. One of the things that meditation can do well is bringing issues into awareness, as so much of the Course helps us do. Let me back up by saying that there seems to be a general principle, well articulated by Fritz Perls: "Awareness in and of itself is curative." What we bring into mental awareness tends to be healed, transformed, and released, and the Course makes use of that principle a great deal. But to what extent meditation is able to break through defensive barriers, to unveil and bring into healing awareness aspects of mind that have been deliberately though unconsciously walled off—that is another question.

Then there is another really important question here, which again I don't think we know the answer to. It's clear now that development proceeds along multiple pathways. All of us are multifaceted beings: we have emotions, motives, perceptual abilities, ethical

inclinations, cognitive skills, etc., and it is increasingly clear that people can develop on one of those so-called developmental lines and leave others behind. Classic examples would be the Nazi doctors, who were very intellectually sophisticated, yet were moral morons. So one key question is this: Which components of mind and psyche and heart are cultivated by meditation, and which get left behind?

One thing that is apparent is that meditation does not necessarily bring into awareness the limitations and distortions of the cultural belief system. Think back, for example, to Plato and Socrates, those geniuses who had no trouble with slavery. Or think of great spiritual teachers who were not troubled by sexism. Now, we can't blame those people, because you can't attack people for the cultural blinders into which they were born. But if we look at meditative practitioners, it is clear that they may have some deep insights, but not necessarily insights into the cultural limitations and biases in which they swim. One more example: There is a recent book called *Zen and War*, which is a very disturbing account of the history of some notable Zen teachers in supporting horrendously jingoistic Japanese wars.

This kind of ethical and developmental split has been a great moral conundrum for ages. However, once you get the idea that there are actually different lines of development, then it becomes clear that one can have deep spiritual insights, yet still be bound by one's cultural belief system. For example, one could understand the nature of mind or even have great love, but that love could be very ethnocentric. It could still be limited to a narrow circle of people. So, although the practices are designed to move one from ethnocentrism to biocentrism and even cosmocentrism, a love for all beings, that doesn't necessarily mean they will always succeed.

RP: I just finished the Ken Wilber book *Integral Spirituality*, and of course I recognize that much of what you're saying is reflected in that. In a way, one of the main points was almost the insufficiency of meditation by itself to move one across all the lines to full spectrum enlightenment.

RW: Yes, and I think this gets back to the question you raised: What aspects of personality does meditation transform, and what does it leave relatively untransformed? This also points to the importance of embedding meditation, which is one practice, within the context of a whole spiritual discipline and spiritual life, which ideally will include many practices. This will provide a more rounded education.

Do different meditation techniques produce different results?

RW: I'll give my take on this question, and then maybe you can talk about the possible different effects that the different Course practices might have. I would be interested to hear your thoughts on that.

I think we can clear the ground quickly regarding research by simply saying that there really isn't any research. So far, the meditation research is focused on first-order questions such as these: What is the nature of the effects? What effects does meditation

produce, and how much and how helpful are they? There is almost nothing in comparative studies. So we're back to first principles, and I think there are some general ideas that we can certainly draw on here.

I think it is crucial first to look at the fact that there are two major types of practices. There are 1) general and nonspecific practices, which are aimed at psychological and spiritual well being in general, and then there are 2) more specific practices, which are directly aimed at the cultivation of a particular mental state or quality, such as love, compassion, or lucid dreaming, for example.

My own assumption is that the different types of practice probably have overlapping effects. If you remember those Venn diagrams of overlapping circles we all studied in high school, I suspect that's what it's going to look like. It's going to turn out that meditation and contemplative practices in general have overlapping effects in common, such as heightening awareness and sensitivity and developing concentration. So, I think those are some of the general effects that virtually all practices will turn out to share, and hopefully they will directly or indirectly foster psychological and spiritual maturation.

Now, psychological and spiritual maturation, as we all know, is a complex affair. There are many dimensions of growth, so another key question is, if we want to make the question more specific: What types of practice will foster what kinds of growth? Right now, we really don't know.

If we look at some of the specific practices, there are more specific techniques, such as concentration practices, practices for cultivating specific emotions, and dream yogas. I would bet, for example, that concentration practices will do a good, but slow, job of cultivating concentration and associated qualities, such as calm and mental stability. I would think that emotional cultivation practices and various yogas for the cultivation of love—of which the Course has so many rich examples—would do just that. They would cultivate love, and along the way also reduce conflictual emotions, such as anger, fear, and jealousy. Because as we all know, when we do a practice designed to cultivate love, what comes up is everything else that gets in its way. Spiritual traditions in general note that that's to be expected, so it's not something to be discouraged about. I would assume that a practice for the cultivation of compassion would tend to do that. It's certainly the experience of many people throughout history that such practices work with all kinds of emotions. There are also dream yogas—practices for cultivating lucid dreaming, for example—and for a subset of people that have that kind of gift, they do apparently work rather well.

Then there's another group of practices which relate to some of the Course practices. In some disciplines—most particularly, for example, in Tibetan Buddhism or some of the yogic practices—one does visualizations of a spiritual archetypal figure embodying a quality like wisdom, love, or compassion. In the visualization, the practitioner relates to, identifies with, and actually becomes that being. And supposedly, these practices cultivate the qualities that those archetypal figures symbolize: wisdom, love, dedication,

or purity, for example. This seems to relate closely to certain Course practices, so I would love to hear your thoughts on that.

RP: I don't think there is any direct analog in the Course for that, but I think there is something that is fairly analogous. There is a great deal of imagery in the Course—imagery which makes it into some of the practices in the Workbook—that focuses on standing before our brother and seeing him as he really is. The imagery tends to be of seeing this brother as actually a being of shining light, whose body is now inconsequential; at one point, the body is described as "little more than just a shadow circling round the good." Part of this imagery is that of Great Rays emanating from this brother, rays of holiness, which I think has parallels in some of the bodhisattva imagery in Buddhism. As we stand before this shining figure, we are having an experience of being completely absorbed. And so we are silent, in a state of rapture before this divine being. It's not quite the same as identifying with a being in order to gain the qualities of that being, but it's similar.

There is some of this identification in today's lesson, if you're doing the lessons according to the calendar. Today's lesson, Lesson 78, has some of this imagery where you stand before this brother and see him shining in light.

RW: I assume we've both been doing that today. But aren't there are a couple of lessons where one goes one step further and actually merges with the brother?

RP: Yes. In fact, today's practice ends with "that I may join with him." So there is definitely that element of joining with the brother.

RW: There is something very powerful about seeing another person as a spiritual figure, or as the embodiment of spiritual qualities, and then identifying with and joining with him or her. That has always been a very powerful practice. Any other thoughts you have on different practices?

RP: I think the Course's practice tool kit is truly vast. As I was saying earlier in this dialogue, my associations with the word "meditation," which aren't as broad as yours, lead me to think of the smaller subset of Course practices which really focus on what you and Goleman have called "concentrative meditation." These are practices where you're stilling the mind, you're trying to keep it free of extraneous thoughts, and you're really focusing on one thing. And I do think that within that small group of practices in the Workbook, there must be differences in effect. I say that because there is a definite progression as one goes through the Workbook. And the progression really has to do with decreasing reliance on repetition of words, and increasing focus on the meaning behind the words.

RW: That makes a lot of sense, because that is a general progression in meditation practices. You start with more effort, more content, more objects to focus on. Then gradually, as the mind becomes more trained (as the Course talks about), there is less need for that, and one can work in a less interfering way— a way that demands less

content to keep the mind entertained and focused, and also allows one to penetrate deeper into the meaning behind the imagery that one is working with.

RP: I've come to the same conclusion from the Course. It doesn't make sense that there would be that progression toward techniques with less reliance on words, unless those differences made a difference—unless somehow fewer words (or no words) allowed for a different experience to arise.

Beyond that, I think if we're talking about meditation in a broader sense—in which case more of the Course's practices would fall under that heading—at that point, the differences in practices would certainly yield different results. I know if I were to take what I consider my meditation time in the morning and devote it to one of the more active practices in the Course, it would definitely have a very different effect for me. The active practice might be geared toward changing my perception of a particular situation, in which case I probably would have a much more changed perception of that particular situation. But if I spent the time doing one of the practices that I consider meditation, I think my perception of the situation might be less changed, but my overall state of mind would be quite different. So, I would have a different state of mind to carry with me into my day, more so than if I attended to one of the more active practices. As part of this different state of mind, there's a different emotional orientation that generalizes to some degree to other things that I encounter in the day.

Also, as I look at the Course's techniques versus some of the other techniques I've tried, my experience has been quite different with each one. I know people who have reached tremendous depths just watching the breath, so I don't want to disparage that technique at all. But I know for me it didn't yield the same effect. I'm sure, then, that what you're saying is basically right, that wherever you train your attention, there is going to be an effect from training it on that thing or in that direction. That's definitely been my experience.

RW: Yes, and I think there is a very important general principle at work there. The mind takes on the qualities of what we attend to, and that's good news/bad news, because most of the things we attend to in daily life are not so helpful. Of course, on the other hand, there are some very wonderful things to attend to.

RP: A line comes to my mind that I think reflects the point you are making. It is a quote in the Course that says: "To be in the Kingdom is merely to focus your full attention on it."

How important is it to follow the instructions?

RP: My next question is this: In your opinion, how important is it to do a particular method according to instructions?

RW: I think there is an important, humbling fact that we all recognize when we take up any particular technique, and that is when we start, we can't do it correctly. That's why it

is a practice. It's amazingly humbling to try to focus one's attention on the breath or to hold one of the visualizations that the Course presents, and find that you can only do it for a matter of seconds, in most cases, before the mind wanders.

So, is it important to try to do it correctly? I think the answer depends on the stage of practice we're at with the technique. At the beginning, I would think it's useful to try to follow the instructions as closely as possible. I assume that a lot of wise people have thought about this technique and tried it, and hopefully the instructions embody a lot of accumulated wisdom. In addition, simply making a sustained effort has beneficial effects on the mind. It trains qualities such as concentration, mindfulness, and willpower. So, I think there is something to be said there.

Later on, I think it may be a somewhat different matter. After we have had some experience with the technique, it seems that it can be valuable to experiment with it. We may want to see if there are variations that work for us, or that add richness to the experience, or provide novelty to keep the mind attentive and interested in the practice. I think one key factor or deciding issue is motivation. That is, if we're not following the technique, why? If it's simply because we're bored and can't be bothered to make the effort, that may not be so helpful. If it's because we're genuinely curious about trying a variation and seeing how helpful that is, then that may be fine. I'm interested in your thoughts on this, particularly as it reflects on the Course.

RP: I think the Course straddles the fence to a certain degree. On the one hand, it openly acknowledges a certain kind of freedom of technique. For instance, in the basic beginning meditation, in which you sink down and inward toward the center of your mind, the Course says that it doesn't matter what way you do this. It suggests at one point visualizing holding Jesus' hand and letting him lead you there. It also offers images of sinking through clouds or of sinking below the churning surface of a body of water to the depths. I assume all of those are subtle suggestions for what specific form you might have in mind when you sink down and inward. The Course says it doesn't matter, do what works for you, and that the important thing is the spirit in which you do it—having confidence and a sense of the importance of what you're doing, etc.

On the other hand, where the Course is very strict with technique is specifically with wandering thoughts—I counted about twelve techniques for dealing with wandering thoughts. Some of them are quite wordy and firm. There is one where you say, "This thought I do not want. I choose instead _____," and you repeat the idea for the day. It's a very effective technique, in my experience, for pulling your mind back to center.

So, there's a lot of strictness around the wandering thoughts issue. One meditation in Lesson 74 specifically says that it is important not to mistake meditation for withdrawal from the troubles of your life into some sort of sluggish, sleepy peace. This lesson says that it's better to repeat the idea for the day to draw your mind back and not experience any peace than to let yourself float off into that drowsy peace. So you should be aiming for alert, joyful peace, but if you can't hit that, it's better to pull your mind back and back

and back if you need to, rather than let yourself sink into withdrawal. I think there is a certain strictness of technique there.

I also know that for me personally, with what I've been calling the three different techniques of Workbook meditation, none of them worked particularly well for me at all until I sat down at some point and did a real close study of the instructions. It was when I sort of got what the technique was about that it started to work for me. When I say "work for me," I mean that in modest terms—it has at least been very helpful for me, and I felt like I was doing something like what the instructions said. I recently read about the idea of being able to sit and count your breath to ten for an hour without losing count. Oh, my God!

RW: That's a very advanced practice. To get to ten once is a challenge.

RP: I'm not saying I'm doing these as instructed, but I have noticed that as I get closer, it works better. I also think there is a freedom in the Course to play with things, not based on laziness, but on finding what's best for you. And the Course signals that in a number of lessons.

RW: Nice. So basically, the Course makes use of the general principles we've been discussing.

RP: I think so. I was surprised to hear the list you went down—I could think of Course corollaries for each one of those.

RW: Well, the Course says it's a master training program. When it comes to the training of thoughts, the Course is cognitive therapy par excellence. I know of nothing like it.

General principles for beginning meditation practice

RP: If the Course wants us to take meditation seriously and truly advance, what do we do?

RW: I think you just gave us one important clue, and that is to get the instructions clear. Sometimes instructions are very simple, but deceptively simple, because we all know that "simple" is not necessarily "easy," particularly when working with the mind. So clearly, understanding the instructions is an important aspect.

Having a teacher or a group or both is a wonderful support for any meditation practice. The physical support of a simple aesthetic environment is also helpful. Having a place where one can practice undisturbed on a regular basis—a part of a room which can be used regularly and set up in a supportive way—is recommended as well.

It seems very important to recognize that meditation is, for most people, a slow but fortunately cumulative practice which gives incremental benefits. It's like mastering any

high-level skill—it takes practice, and there is no substitute for that. We can use the analogy of learning the piano. At first, when we're learning the keys, it's more hard work than fun. But we learn the keys so we can get to the fun part, and that's often the way it is with meditation. Given that progress tends to be slow, it's important to know that and not to make unrealistic demands of oneself. It's important not to have expectations of lights, bells, and whistles. We need to appreciate that the process is likely to be slow, and we will notice benefits gradually.

Given the fact that meditation is a slow, cumulative practice, it obviously makes sense to find a way of doing it on a regular basis—ideally at least once a day. That may be unrealistic for some people, but I do think it's very valuable to set some sort of goal. I often recommend that people make a commitment to sit a minimum of five days a week, and to choose a set length of time for each day—twenty minutes is often a good starting point.

It's very helpful to decide on a minimum time you want to do before sitting down, or otherwise the mind will create all sorts of wonderful reasons to stop, and you'll find yourself in front of the refrigerator instead of on the cushion. Setting up a daily routine for a regular practice for a certain amount of time is very valuable.

One other very valuable practice facilitator is the opportunity to do a retreat: a period of time set aside specifically for meditation practice, be it a day, several days, a week, or longer. A quiet, secluded environment, and undistracted focus on meditation, perhaps in solitude in nature are invaluable. Retreats are very powerful and a recommended part of every major spiritual tradition, and they do seem to deepen and accelerate the practice tremendously. Afterwards, you find your daily practice is deeper and more effective. Those are some of the things to keep in mind when beginning a meditation practice. What about your thoughts from the Course?

RP: While you're talking, I'm ticking off things that either match the Course or that aren't there. In terms of supportive environment—physical space, routine, etc.—the Workbook in particular tries to settle the student into a daily routine in which morning meditation is emphasized, but also evening meditation before bedtime. For morning meditation, the instructions for when and where are mentioned in several lessons. First and foremost, do it after you wake up, though this is qualified by "when you yourself feel reasonably ready," which I assume means "when you are fully awake." Second, you should do it when circumstances permit, and you can be alone in a quiet place where there will be few distractions.

Also, there is an emphasis on having a set time frame, and in some of the other practices there is a focus on a predetermined time frame. For instance, some lessons will have you set ahead of time how frequently you want to repeat the idea during the day. The Workbook also tells you how long to do its practices. As the Workbook proceeds, there is a bank of about fifty lessons that say to go for as long as you can. And there is one in that bank that says to give all the time you can, and then "give a little more." But later, it kind of backs off and says to use as much time as you need for the effect you want. It seems to

presume that you've gone through the phase of giving maximum time, and now you've matured enough to have established a stable practice, so now it's really about benefit.

I think that where the problem lies in relationship to the Workbook is that a tradition really hasn't grown up around these practices, and there are certain things that a book can't supply, or in this case just doesn't supply. For instance, with the Workbook meditation instructions, there are often different instructions for the same basic technique, and they really come alive when you put all of them alongside each other and make a synthesis, a whole picture. Because of this, I think the students going through the Workbook one lesson at a time are often not really understanding the nature of the instructions they're being given. So, I think clear understanding of the instructions is where one should start, and that clarity is going to come, to some degree, from a tradition that arises around these practices.

I think the role of the teacher is very important, and is mentioned in the Manual for Teachers. The Manual explicitly talks about a mentoring relationship between a more mature student of the Course and a brand new student, and puts great emphasis and importance on that.

There is no mention of retreats, and I'm really glad you've said something about that. I've been wondering for years whether a Course tradition should explicitly include a focus on retreats. I haven't taken anywhere near a three-month retreat; it's definitely harder when you've got kids. I can slip away for just a few days. There is something that happens during a retreat that you just can't get when you're coming in and out of meditation and dealing with life—when the stuff you have to deal with is scattered all around you on every horizontal surface, calling at you. So, I think there is tremendous benefit in retreats, and from what you're saying, that has been discovered over and over again in every tradition. I'd like to see a focus like that in the developing Course tradition.

RW: That certainly makes sense, and you alluded to two different extremes here. One is the potential value of Course students setting time aside and doing retreats. I have done lots of meditation practices, and I can't think of one which has not been enriched by retreat practice. So, I'd be very surprised if this weren't also true of the Course. While I've not done long-term retreats focused exclusively on the Course, all my retreats have included the Course, and certainly these practices have been deepened by the concentration, calm, etc., that mature in retreat. I think what you're saying makes perfect sense.

The other extreme you're alluding to is the busyness of life, and the value of the Course in that. The one thing we haven't talked about is that meditation is usually thought of as sitting on a cushion or chair and doing a specific exercise. But of course, that's somewhat analogous to learning to drive a car, when you go into a nice secluded byway where there isn't any traffic and you learn how to drive there. But the aim isn't to spend your life on the byway; eventually, you must go out on the freeway.

It's the same with the Course. The Course's design is very clear: you need to be able to take your peace out to where it's really needed. So, the aim of these practices is to deepen, intensify, and mature them on the cushion, but also to extend some of those qualities out into daily activity, and to be able to hold them during activity. This is actually a well-recognized problem in both psychotherapy and spiritual practices: How do you generalize the benefits of a specific practice out into daily life? It's called "the challenge of generalization."

RP: That's something I believe is front and center in the Course's mind. It talks explicitly about generalization—it's in the Workbook and throughout the Text.

My understanding of how the Course has designed its practice is in terms of what I call a pyramid of practice (if that doesn't sound too gimmicky). The idea is that the pyramid has levels. The broadest level—the base—is spending a longer time in formal sit-down practice, and the higher the pyramid goes, the more it's extending into the hustle and bustle of daily life. So, the bottom level is morning and evening meditations. The next level up is an hourly practice: a few minutes on the hour where you sit down and do a brief practice. The next level is what I call "frequent reminders," very brief practices that you do in between the hourly ones. Finally, the topmost level is what the Course calls "response to temptation," and that's where you're responding to upsets and irritations that occur in the stream of the day with some brief practice supplied to you by your lesson.

So, the idea is that once each level is in place, you have all the support you need underneath you to actually do your practice on the fly when you're upset in the middle of the day. I think that whole design is really carefully constructed. If all the pieces are in place, it does bring the effect of the practice into the midst of all the business of the day.

RW: I want to draw attention to something I think you're implying there. The Course is exquisitely designed for all of us who are engaged in the world and in the middle of busy lives. Some of the practices are superb for that, because they literally just require you to stop for a minute—or perhaps not even that—just bring a thought to mind in the midst of some activity. Those are just superb for the challenges of daily life.

RP: One of the things I've found really important is a statement in the Course about your practice on the hour. This statement follows a bank of about twenty lessons in which you practice five minutes on the hour every hour, which is not easy to do if you have a life. It says that if you miss a practice because circumstances didn't permit, you haven't hampered your learning, your advancement. But if you don't do it because you established a cloak of circumstances to camouflage your unwillingness, then you should actually make those missed practice periods up. That's requiring you to distinguish which is which.

I liked those instructions from afar for many years, but didn't like them in terms of actually applying them. But after awhile, I thought I should do that. I now keep a checklist, and if I really couldn't do that sit-down practice on the hour, I check it off as if

I had done it. If I really could have done it but didn't, then I'll make it up. I've found that really helpful.

RW: I'm interested to hear you're using a checklist, because it seems to me that the Course is helped by the use of some technological support. For example, I know we both have beepers on our watches. I use mine periodically for some of those lessons which request you to do them at certain times, and I think that is an enormous support. I hadn't thought of a checklist and I'm not sure I'm ready to make that jump, but I think it sounds helpful.

RP: I've been dragged to it. The fact is that I benefit from the practice, and I'm a nicer person to be around if I do it, and I do it more if I'm doing a checklist. In the last year, I've bought myself a small electronic counter about the size of a cigarette lighter, and I can keep that in my front pocket. I feel slightly silly about it, but the fact is if I'm carrying that thing around with me, I practice five times more.

RW: And the counter is to record how much you're doing it?

RP: Yes, I keep a record of each practice period.

RW: There was a paper in the psychological literature a few years back which was titled "We Gave Our Patient a Counter and Here's What Happened." And it was basically a description of the fact that when people are requested to keep track of how much they do a practice or intervention, it's more effective. So what you're saying makes total sense.

RP: There is a discussion in one of the lessons that basically says that ideally, you should practice out of a pure inner motivation. However, you're not there yet, so you need some structure in terms of time and numbers, etc. I'm still there.

RW: That makes sense. One of the recurrent themes in the Course is that actually you don't really need to do this, but where you're at right now, it sure would be helpful.

RP: I've benefited tremendously from these devices, and I'm a bit loath to tell Course students.

RW: I think it's really wonderful that you're doing it, and the rest of us can learn from you. Because as you said, we don't have a tradition. It's such a recent text and teaching that we don't have a tradition of practical wisdom as yet to accompany it. I think all of us are exploring and trying to find out what really supports our practice of it.

RP: Yes, and I think it is so important for such practical wisdom to arise, because most of us aren't going to get it just from the book. We need to augment the book with a supportive tradition that carries these bits of practical wisdom.

RW: One of the things I've been quite surprised to realize, having done a number of meditation practices, is that all meditation seems to be to a significant extent self-

instruction. You have the basic, crucial instructions, but then you really have to try them out, work with them, and see what works for you. So, there's a lot of learning how to do these apparently quite simple practices.

RP: I do think that we'll have to cover some of that ground individually, and I think we can cover that ground by sharing our experience. I don't know if it's just me or what, but one of the things I've taken years and years to learn is to practice in such a way that if I do a lot of practice, I don't accumulate tension in my head. This tension makes me unable to sleep and makes me cranky, just the opposite of the intended effect. And I've had to learn, over a long period of time, how to do a lot of practice and not accumulate that tension, but instead accumulate more peace. I haven't heard anybody talk about that, but I assume it can't just be me.

RW: No, it's a recognized phenomenon in a number of practices. Energetic complications are well recognized in many if not all traditions, but the yogic ones are most explicit about these difficulties. And of course, this issue comes up in the practices which deal with so-called subtle energies, which we can interpret in various ways. Even people who start a very simple relaxation meditation or TM will occasionally report that they get quite wired.

The fact is that meditation opens the psyche and releases some very wonderful things, but can also release difficult things, such as painful memories, anxieties, and intense emotions. But the general understanding is that when difficult experiences arise, they arise as a potential cathartic or purification process. TM calls it unstressing, psychologists call it catharsis, and centering prayer now calls it unloading the unconscious. These are well-recognized issues. This is an interesting example of a complication that the Course doesn't mention, but which is part of the accumulating practical wisdom that we need to make available.

RP: I'm reassured to hear that.

RW: If we got a large group of Course practitioners together who were trying to do the practice, I'm sure everyone would report certain "complications" of the practice. And I think the general principle is that any effective practice cultivates desired spiritual qualities, but as part of that process it also unleashes the blocks and barriers that are in the way of those qualities—the parts of the psyche that need healing. Fortunately, awareness is curative. But the Course talks about bringing material out of the darkness into the light, and it says this can be painful and difficult.

RP: I don't particularly associate that with meditation practice, but the Course does talk a huge amount about bringing the darkness into the light, and all that might go along with such practice.

RW: Hopefully this will be valuable to others.