

INITIAL MEDITATIVE EXPERIENCES: PART I

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INTRODUCTION

This is an account of the subjective experiences of some two years of Vipassana or Insight meditation. During the first year this comprised an average of approximately one hour per day and during the second was increased to about two hours, as well as some six weeks of intensive meditation retreats, usually of two weeks duration. These retreats comprised about 18 to 20 hours daily of continuous walking and sitting meditation performed in total silence and without eye contact, reading or writing. While this amount of practice may be vastly less than that of more experienced practitioners, it has certainly proved sufficient to elicit a range of experiences beyond the ken of day to day non-meditative living.

Vipassana, or insight, meditation aims at a simple nonjudgmental, noninterfering precise awareness and examination of whatever mental or physical phenomena enter awareness (mindfulness). Usually one object is observed at a time, the object being selected by a process of "choiceless awareness" in which the attention is allowed to settle effortlessly on whatever percept is predominant. If judgments, attractions, aversions, thoughts, etc., arise in response to the percept, then these reactions are themselves allowed to become the primary object of awareness. This differs from the usual state in which there is no experiential recognition of the phenomenon of awareness per se, of the distinction between awareness and the object of awareness, and a greater number of reactions go unnoticed.

*insight
meditation*

*training
participant
observers*

In presenting this material I have several aims. The first is simply to share these explorations with the hope that they may prove helpful for other beginning meditators, since there is surprisingly little in-depth writing on initial meditative experiences (Walsh, 1977b). I would also like to examine them in the light of Western psychology, especially recent advances in learning theory, state-dependent learning, altered states of consciousness, behavioral self-control, and traditional psychodynamics. I also wish to do exactly the opposite: i.e., where possible to examine Western psychology within the light of these experiences. While there are a number of poignant, rich and courageous accounts of individuals' experiences and insights (e.g., Shattock, 1972; Lerner, 1977), they lack the precision and psychological background essential for scientifically productive analysis. Thus there have recently been repeated requests by a variety of Western psychologists (e.g., Shimano & Douglas, 1975; Tart, 1975a; Globus, 1976), for individuals with extensive training in the behavioral sciences to undertake the exploration of consciousness as trained participant observers. This paper seems to present an opportunity for beginning a preliminary testing of such a paradigm.

While a number of things led me in the direction of meditation, the major forerunner was clearly a year and a half of intensive individual psychotherapy which has already been described in some detail (Walsh, 1976, 1977a). Certain features of this therapy seemed especially conducive to meditation. These included a markedly increased awareness of, and perceptual sensitivity to, the formerly unrecognized stream of inner consciousness and a heightened ability to discriminate among altered states within this stream. There was also less fear of, and more trust in, this formerly subliminal realm of awareness and motivation, and hence a greater sense of trust in myself, "myself" having now been expanded to include this formerly unknown realm. In particular some of the states which emerged towards the end of therapy were characterized by feelings of peace, and a relative absence of thoughts, needs and "doing." These states readily became the objects of noninterfering awareness, and it felt inappropriate to "work with them" in a traditional psychotherapeutic way.

I began meditation with one-half hour each day and during the first three to six months there were few times during which I could honestly say with complete certainty that I was definitely experiencing benefits from it. Except for the painfully obvious stiff back and sore knees, the psychological effects other than occasional relaxation felt so subtle and ephemeral that I could never be sure that they were more than a figment of my wishes

and expectations. Certainly had it not been for these expectations, prior psychotherapeutic experiences, and the encouragement of more experienced practitioners, I would never have gotten beyond the first couple of weeks. The nature of meditation seems to be, especially at first, a slow but cumulative process, a fact which may be useful for beginners to know.

*a slow
process*

However, with continued perseverance, subtle effects just at the limit of my perceptual threshold did begin to become apparent. I had expected the eruption into awareness of powerful, concrete experiences, if not flashes of lightning and pealing of bells, then at least something of sufficient intensity to make it very clear that I had “gotten it,” whatever “it” was. What “it” actually turned out to be was not the appearance of formerly nonexistent mental phenomena, but rather a gradual incremental increase in perceptual sensitivity to the formerly subliminal portions of my own inner stream of consciousness, a process which had begun in therapy.

*a gradual
increase in
sensitivity*

At first this was apparent as the occasional ephemeral appearance of a sense of peace or some other subtle, hard to categorize affect interspersed among innumerable pains, itches, doubts, questions, fears and fantasies which occupied the majority of meditation sitting time. Usually one or more of these “events” would be deemed important enough to divert my attention from meditation. With increased practice the disruptive nature of these breaks became more and more apparent, and the stringency of the criteria for disrupting meditation became progressively higher. Interestingly enough the order in which the different kinds of distractions were given up seemed to provide an index of the strengths of my attachments. For example, I am an analytic, intellectually curious person who loves to understand things. This predilection runs counter to the Vipassana process which emphasizes just watching and observing the arising and passing away of all mental phenomena, thoughts, feelings, sensations, without analyzing or changing them in any way. Therefore, when something unusual occurred in meditation, I may have thought, “Wow, I could really learn something from that.” This thought was usually sufficient to jolt me out of a relaxed meditative watching and into an active analytic probing and changing of the experience.

*the strength
of attachments*

FANTASY

“When one sits down with eyes closed to silence the mind, one is at first submerged by a torrent of thoughts—they crop up everywhere like frightened, nay, aggressive rats” (Satprem,

*a torrent
of fantasies*

1968, p. 33). The more sensitive I became, the more I was forced to recognize that what I had formerly believed to be my rational mind preoccupied with cognition, planning, problem solving, etc., actually comprised a frantic torrent of forceful, demanding, loud, and often unrelated thoughts and fantasies which filled an unbelievable proportion of consciousness even during purposive behavior. The incredible proportion of consciousness which this fantasy world occupied, my powerlessness to remove it for more than a few seconds, and my former state of mindlessness or ignorance of its existence, staggered me (I am here using mindlessness in an opposite sense to the Vipassana term mindful, which means aware of the nature of the object to which the mind is attending). Foremost among the implicit beliefs of orthodox Western psychology is the assumption that man spends most of his time reasoning and problem solving, and that only neurotics and other abnormals spend much time, outside of leisure, in fantasy (Tart, 1975b). However, it is my impression that prolonged self-observation will show that at most times we are living almost in a dream world in which we skillfully and automatically yet unknowingly blend inputs from reality and fantasy in accordance with our needs and defenses. Interestingly this "mindlessness" seemed much more intense and difficult to deal with than in psychotherapy where the depth and sensitivity of inner awareness seemed less, and where the therapist provided a perceptual focus and was available to pull me back if I started to get lost in fantasy.

The presence of inner dialogue and fantasy seems to present a limiting factor for the sense of closeness and unity with another person. However, if I am with another person, and free of dialogue and fantasy, and feeling an emotion, especially a positive one such as love, which I know the other person to be also experiencing, then it feels as though there are no detectable ego boundaries; we are together in love. But if part of my mind is preoccupied with dialogue and fantasies, then my awareness is split; I know that my experience is different from the other individual's, and feel correspondingly distanced and separated.

*the subtlety
and complexity
of fantasies*

The subtlety, complexity, infinite range and number, and entrapping power of the fantasies which the mind creates seems impossible to comprehend, to differentiate from reality while in them, and even more so to describe to one who has not experienced them. Layer upon layer of imagery and quasilogic open up in any point to which attention is directed. Indeed it gradually becomes apparent that it is impossible to question and reason one's way out of this all-encompassing fantasy since

the very process of questioning, thinking, and seeking only creates further fantasy.

Meditation Exercise

Since the power and extent of this entrapment is so difficult to convey to someone without personal experience of it, I'd strongly encourage any non-meditator to use the following concentration exercise (Goldstein, 1976) before continuing.

Set an alarm for a minimum of 10 minutes. Then take a comfortable seat, close your eyes, and turn your attention to the sensations of breathing in your abdomen. Feel the abdominal wall rising and falling and focus your attention as carefully, precisely, and microscopically as possible on the instant to instant sensations that occur in your abdomen. Don't let your attention wander for a moment. If thoughts and feelings arise, just let them be there and continue to focus your awareness on the sensations.

Now as you remain aware of the sensations, start counting each breath until you reach ten, and then start again at one. However, if you lose count, or if your mind wanders from the sensations in the abdomen, even for an instant, go back to one. If you get lost in fantasy or distracted by outside stimuli, just recognize what happened and gently bring your mind back to the breath. Continue this process until the alarm tells you to stop and then attempt to estimate how much of the time you were actually mindfully focussed. As your perception sharpens with more practice, you would probably recognize that you have greatly overestimated, but this should be sufficient to give a flavor of the extent of the problem. "Your mind has a mind of its own, where do you fit in?" (Sujata, 1975).

*focussing
attention
on
breathing*

The impossibility of working or thinking one's way out of this multilayered, multidimensional fantasy world into which one falls, rapidly becomes apparent, even though it is very tempting to try to do so. That leaves within the experiential meditative world only the primary sensations, e.g., pain and breathing, on which to focus as perceptual anchors. By focussing attention back on the breathing it seems that the energy or arousal going into the fantasy by virtue of the attention being paid it is withdrawn, and it collapses under its own weight leaving only the primary sensations until the next fantasy arises. This is presumably an example of Tart's (1975a) statement that certain mental structures are dependent on a minimum amount of attention for their creation and maintenance.

Fantasy and Illusion

*the background
of dialogues
and
fantasies*

The power and pervasiveness of these inner dialogues and fantasies left me amazed that we could be so unaware of them during our normal waking life and reminded me of the Eastern concept of *maya* or all-consuming illusion. The question of why we don't recognize them seems incredibly important, but to date I have seen no explanations other than the almost universal ones among the meditative-yogic traditions that normal man is an automaton, more asleep than awake, etc. Several mechanisms seem to be operating here. Firstly, the dialogue-fantasy creations are completely congruent with the current ego state and with what Gendlin (1962) and Welwood (1976) would call the "felt meaning," i.e., that affective background or context which we assay when we try to answer the question "how do you feel right now?" It is the contrast between the dialogues-fantasies and the background affective state which makes the detection of their pervasiveness easier. It is therefore interesting that I have not infrequently found that when I am what initially appears to be dialogue-free, closer examination of my consciousness reveals dialogue with which I had been completely and unconsciously identified such as "I'm really doing this well, I'm in a really clear place, I don't have any dialogue going, I'm really getting to be a good meditator, etc." However, at such times a thought like, "I'm not getting anything out of this," stands out strongly and is readily identified for what it is, yet another thought. This fits well with the general neurophysiological principle that the brain is essentially a difference detector which picks up differences between stimuli or stimulus complexes rather than absolute levels of individual stimuli. Other factors possibly accounting for our inability or unwillingness to identify the extent of this dialogue-fantasy may be the extent to which we have habituated to its presence. Furthermore, it is only when we attempt to stop it that we become aware of its remarkable hold on us, a situation strongly reminiscent of addictions.

*the brain
as a
difference
detector*

A further masking factor may comprise the process of "time-sharing." Usually we are able to switch rapidly between focussing on real stimuli and fantasy in a manner analogous to the process by which a computer rapidly switches between different terminals which may be feeding in input simultaneously. Thus for "normal" levels of external sensory awareness and performance there may be relatively little functional impairment apparent, especially since the vast majority of the population is also functioning in this manner. It also rapidly becomes apparent that these dialogue-fantasies may serve a major (perhaps *the* major?) defensive function. If so then ob-

viously there would be major dynamics operating to prevent awareness of them (perceptual defense).

It is clear that fantasy plays a major role in psychological health and pathology. Obviously a full exploration of these relationships is beyond the scope of this article, but it is clear that meditation offers insights into the phenomena which may extend far beyond current Western psychological understanding.

Traditionally fantasy has been seen as ranging from being a source of creativity and pleasure in well-adapted individuals (e.g., Offer, 1973; Offer & Offer, 1974) to a central hallmark of psychopathology when excessive (Linn, 1975). When the individual believes his fantasies to be real, and they are discordant with those of the majority of society, the fantasies are called hallucinations and he is labelled psychotic. Also, when the fantasies are especially painful and egodystonic, the individual may experience himself, and be diagnosed, as mentally ill, even though he knows them to be fantasies. Thus in Western psychology, fantasies are seen as normal or even beneficial, unless they prove especially painful or overwhelming.

*fantasy
as viewed
traditionally*

However, a remarkably wide range of meditation and yogic disciplines from a variety of cultures hold a very different view. They assert that whether we know it or not, untrained individuals are prisoners of their own minds, totally and unwittingly trapped by a continuous inner fantasy-dialogue which creates an all-consuming illusion or *maya*.

*fantasy
as illusion*

We are what we think.
All that we are arises with our thoughts.
With our thoughts we create the world.

The Buddha (Byrom, 1976)

“Normal” man is thus seen as asleep or dreaming. When the dream is especially painful or disruptive it becomes a nightmare and is recognized as psychopathology, but since the vast majority of the population dreams, the true state of affairs goes unrecognized. When the individual permanently disidentifies from or eradicates this dream he is said to have awakened and can now recognize the true nature of his former state and that of the population. This awakening or enlightenment is the aim of the meditative-yogic disciplines (e.g., Ouspensky, 1949; De Ropp, 1968; Nyanaponika Thera, 1972; Ram Dass, 1974, 1976, 1977; Goldstein, 1976; Goleman, 1977; Wilber, 1977). However, according to Tart (1975a), there is as yet considerable resistance to this idea in Western psychology and psychiatry:

We have studied some aspects of samsara (illusion, maya) in far more detail than the Eastern traditions that originated the concept of samsara. Yet almost no psychologists apply this idea to themselves. They assume . . . that their own states of consciousness are basically logical and clear. Western psychology now has a challenge to recognize this detailed evidence that our "normal" state is a state of samsara and to apply the immense power of science and our other spiritual traditions, East and West, to the search for a way out (p. 286).

Perceiving and Labeling Fantasy

*quieting
the
internal
dialogue*

With continued practice the speed, power, loudness, and continuity of these thoughts and fantasies began to slowly diminish, leaving subtle sensations of greater peace and quiet. After a period of about four or five months there occurred episodes in which I would open my eyes at the end of meditation and look at the outside world without the presence of concomitant internal dialogue. This state would be rapidly terminated by a rising sense of anxiety and anomie accompanied by the thought, "I don't know what anything means." Thus, I could be looking at something completely familiar, such as a tree, a building, or the sky, and yet without an accompanying internal dialogue to label and categorize it, it felt totally strange and devoid of meaning. It seems that what made something familiar and hence secure was not simply its recognition, but the actual cognitive process of matching, categorizing and labeling it, and that once this was done, then more attention and reactivity was focussed on the label and labeling process rather than on the stimulus itself. Thus the initial fantasy and thought-free periods may feel both strange and distinctly unpleasant so that we are at first punished by their unfamiliarity. We have created an unseen prison for ourselves whose bars are comprised of thoughts and fantasies of which we remain largely unaware unless we undertake intensive perceptual training. Moreover, if they are removed we may be frightened by the unfamiliarity of the experience and rapidly reinstate them. This is reminiscent of the lines of a poem by Yevtuschenko, who on visiting a Canadian mink farm found the minks bred in open cages from which they never tried to escape despite the fact that their peers were slaughtered in the adjoining room.

He who is born in a cage,
shall weep for a cage.

Presumably this labeling process must modify our perception in many ways, including reducing our ability to experience each stimulus fully, richly, and newly, by reducing its multidimensional nature into a lesser dimensional cognitive labeling

framework. This must necessarily derive from the past, be less tolerant of ambiguity, less here now, and perpetuative of a sense of sameness and continuity to the world. This process may represent the phenomenological and cognitive mediational basis of Deikman's (1966) concept of automatization and Don Juan's "maintaining the world as we know it" (Castaneda, 1971, 1977). It is a far cry from the perceptual end state devoid of all this labeling described by the Buddha as "In what is seen there should be only the seen; in what is heard only the heard; in what is sensed [as smell, taste or touch], only the sensed, in what is thought only the thought" (Nyanaponika Thera, 1962, p. 33).

It also provides an explanation of the electrophysiological finding that experienced Zen practitioners may exhibit repetitive, non-habituating orientating responses to repeated stimuli during meditation (Kasamatsu & Hirai, 1966; for a review see Davidson, 1976). This is as would be predicted if they are in fact responding to the stimuli themselves rather than to the cognitive labeling process as described above. This also provides an explanation for the "deautomatization" which may occur with meditation (Deikman, 1966). One might also wonder whether these Zen meditators and also self-actualizers—who have been characterized among other things for their ability to repetitively experience things freshly and uniquely (Maslow, 1971)—display similar non-habituated patterns in daily living.

*developing
non-habituated
responses*

This perceptual process might also provide support for, and a substrate and an explanation of, constructional realism. This is the philosophy which suggests that we do not simply learn to recognize reality, but rather learn to *construct* reality. This philosophy has recently been rediscovered by researchers in a diverse number of fields such as neuropsychology, developmental psychology, philosophy, and consciousness (Piaget, 1960; Pribram, 1976; Wilber, 1977). Although not yet widely recognized, it may be that this philosophy should be expanded to include the idea that we may construct *a* reality, rather than *the* reality. In any event, the above phenomena may provide an initial suggestion of the cognitive-perceptual processes by which this is achieved.

*constructing
our reality*

THE FIRST MEDITATION RETREAT

The first meditation retreat, begun about one year after commencing sitting, was a very painful and difficult two-week affair. I had never meditated for more than an hour at a time and so continuous walking and sitting brought me to a

*a marked
hypersensitivity
to all
stimuli*

screaming halt. Within three hours I literally felt as though I had ingested a stimulant, and by six hours there were significant psychedelic effects. A marked hypersensitivity to all stimuli both internal and external rapidly developed, resulting in intense arousal, agitation, discomfort, and multiple chronic muscle contractions, especially around the shoulders. This agitation was associated with an increased sensitivity to pain which seemed like part of a more general hypersensitivity. This was particularly apparent during the first three or four days and any exercise such as running would result in extreme tenderness in the corresponding muscles.

*vivid
hallucinations*

One of the most amazing rediscoveries during this first retreat was the incredible proportion of time, well over 90 percent, which I spent lost in fantasy. Most of these were of the ego self-aggrandizing type, so that when eventually I realized I was in them, it proved quite a struggle to decide to give them up and return to the breath, but with practice this decision became slightly easier, faster, and more automatic. This by no means happened quickly since over the first four or five days the proportion of time spent in fantasy actually increased as the meditation deepened, and on days three through five of the retreat literally reached psychotic proportions. During this period each time I sat and closed my eyes I would be immediately swept away by vivid hallucinations, losing all contact with where I was or what I was doing until after an unknown period of time a thought would creep in such as, "Am I really swimming, lying on the beach?" etc., and then I would either get lost back into the fantasy or another thought would come: "Wait a moment, I thought I was meditating." If the latter, then I would be left with the difficult problem of trying to ground myself, i.e., of differentiating between stimulus produced percepts ("reality") and entirely endogenous ones ("hallucinations"). The only way this seemed possible was to try finding the breath, and so I would begin frantically searching around in this hypnagogic universe for the sensations of the breath. Such was the power of the hallucinations that sometimes I would be literally unable to find it and would fall back into the fantasy. If successful, I would recognize it and be reassured that I was in fact meditating. Then in the next moment I would be lost again in yet another fantasy. The clarity, power, persuasiveness and continuity of these hallucinations is difficult to adequately express. However, the effect of living through three days during which time to close my eyes meant losing contact almost immediately with ordinary reality was extraordinarily draining to say the least. Interestingly enough while this experience was uncomfortable and quite beyond my control, it was not particularly frightening, if anything the

opposite. For many years I had feared losing control if I let down defenses and voyaged too far along the road of self-investigation and discovery. This appears to be a common fear in most growth traditions and seems to serve a major defensive function. Having experienced this once feared outcome, it now no longer seems so terrifying. Of course, the paradox is that what we usually call control is actually exactly the opposite, a lack of ability to let go of defenses.

*the fear
of losing
control*

During moments of clarity a process occurred which seems supportive of Goleman's (1976) hypothesis of global desensitization as one of the mediating mechanisms of meditative effects. During this first retreat a lot of old, almost forgotten, highly charged memories would arise into consciousness, remain for a moment, then slowly sink back out of awareness. Not infrequently as they did so I would be aware that the affective charge, e.g., anger, sadness, etc., which was originally associated with them would tend to diminish while they were held in awareness, and that they had not infrequently attained a neutral status by the time they disappeared back into the unconscious. It was also interesting that some of these memories ranged all the way back to age three or four, and to the best of my recollection I had never recalled them previously since their original occurrence. This phenomenology seems highly consistent with Goleman's proposed desensitization mechanism.

*the arousal
of early
memories*

While a good 90 percent or more of this first retreat was taken up with mindless fantasy and agitation, there did occur during the second week occasional short-lived periods of intense peace and tranquillity. These were so satisfying that, while I would not be willing to sign up for a life-time in a monastery, I could begin to comprehend the possibility of the truth of the Buddhist saying that "peace is the highest form of happiness." Affective lability was also extreme. While more than 80 percent of the time of the first retreat was sheer pain, there were not infrequently sudden apparently unprecipitated wide mood swings to completely polar emotions. Shorn of all my props and distractions there was just no way to pretend that I had more than the faintest inkling of self-control over either thoughts or feelings.

With continued practice and greater sensitivity I began to gain an experiential sense for the meaning of a word which is widely and loosely used within meditation-yoga circles, namely the type of "vibrations" that I was experiencing. It appeared that in any sensory modality at all, there is an endogenously generated continuous flux of perceptual-neural noise. Both figure and

*greater
sensitivity
to
neurocybernetic
signals*

ground, or signal and noise, are at least partially generated by this process. What gets interpreted as signal or figure are sometimes simply the larger fluctuations in neural activity of sufficient magnitude to stand out effectively against the remaining background. During periods of agitation these “vibrations” appear stronger, larger, more frequent, and more variable, whereas the reverse is true during periods of calm. Presumably this simply represents a subjective correlate of the neurophysiological activity and disturbance of the nervous system. Since one of the aims of meditation is calm, this suggests a basis for the advice given by several meditation teachers to do that which “fines down the vibration” and avoid those things which lead to “heavy coarse vibrations” (Ram Dass, 1976). Thus these subjective sensations can be used as a sensitive self-guiding neurocybernetic signal to move one in the direction of increasing calm and peace.

This also suggests a further basis for the heightened sensitivity of meditators, namely, the reduction in the magnitude of background fluctuations or noise. This would result in a greater signal:noise ratio. It also raises the interesting question of whether what is noise at one level of perceptual sensitivity may not be signal at another more subtle level. Indeed this leads to the ultimate question of whether there is in fact any neural “noise” within the brain at all, or merely unrecognized signals?

*the
disrupting
power of
attachments*

It soon became apparent that the type of material which forceably erupted into awareness and disrupted concentration was most often material—ideas, fantasies, thoughts, etc.—to which I was attached (addicted) and around which there was considerable affective charge. Indeed, it seemed that the stronger the attachment or charge, the more often the material would arise, a fact which suggested that we may all be subject to an at least partially conditioned hierarchy of attachments as well as a more biologically based hierarchy of needs à la Maslow. There was a definite sense that attachments reduced the flexibility and power of the mind, since whenever I was preoccupied with a stimulus to which I was attached, then I had difficulty in withdrawing my attention from it to observe other stimuli which passed through awareness. This is reminiscent in a more subtle form of a phenomenon called “stimulus boundness” which is found in brain damaged individuals who, once their attention is fixated on a particular stimulus, experience great difficulty in transferring it to another object. Interestingly enough, the attachment or need to understand, itself proved a perceptual and information limiting factor. As long as I needed to understand something it was necessary to keep

that something around in awareness until it was understood rather than allowing it to pass away of its own accord to be replaced by the next object, i.e., “to understand” my experience I had to retain and analyze it and thereby stop the free-flow of awareness.

Paradoxically it seems that a need or attachment to be rid of a certain experience or state may lead to its perpetuation. The clearest example of this has been with anxiety, which I worked quite hard to reduce in my psychotherapy with considerable success. However, some six months ago I suddenly began to experience mild anxiety attacks of unknown origin which curiously enough seemed to occur most often when I was feeling really good and in the presence of a particular person who I loved. At such times I would try all my various psychological gymnastics to eradicate it since it was clearly not OK with me to feel anxious. However, these episodes continued for some five months in spite of, or as it actually turned out because of, my resistance to them. During this time my practice deepened and I was able to examine more and more of the process during meditation. What I found was that I had considerable fear of fear and my mind therefore surveyed in a radar-like fashion all endogenous and exogenous stimuli for their fear evoking potential and all reactions for any fear component. Thus there was a continuous mental radar-like scanning process preset in an exquisitely sensitive fashion for the detection of anything resembling fear. Consequently there were a considerable number of false positives, i.e., non-fearful stimuli and reactions which were interpreted as being fearful or potentially fear provoking. Since the reactions to the false positives themselves comprised fear and fear components, there was of course an immediate chain reaction set up with one fear response acting as the stimulus for the next. It thus became very clear that my fear of and resistance to the fear was exactly what was perpetuating it.

anxiety

*the
perpetuation
of
fear*

This insight and the further application of new meditative awareness to the process certainly reduced but did not eradicate these episodes entirely. Paradoxically they still tended to recur when I felt very calm and peaceful. It was not until the middle of the next meditation retreat that the reasons for this became clear. After the first few days of pain and agitation I began to feel more and more peaceful and there came a sitting in which I could feel my meditation deepen perceptibly and the restless mental scanning slow more and more. Then as the process continued to deepen and slow I was literally jolted by a flash of agitation and anxiety accompanying a thought—“But what do I do now if there’s no more anxiety to look for?” It was

*the paradox
of anxiety*

apparent that if I continued to quieten, there would be neither anxiety to scan for nor a scanning process itself, and my need to get rid of anxiety demanded that I have a continuous scanning mechanism, and the presence of the mechanism in turn created the presence of anxiety. My “but what do I do now?” fear had very effectively removed the possibility of the dissipation of both, and its occurrence at a time when I was feeling most peaceful, relaxed and safe, of course explained why I had been subject to these anxiety episodes at the apparently paradoxical times when I felt best. Paradoxically then it appears that within the mind, if you need to be rid of something, then not only are you likely to experience a number of false positives but you may also need to have them around continuously so you can keep getting rid of them. Thus within the province of the mind, what you resist is what you get.

*paring away
attachments*

Since the things which tend to preoccupy consciousness and disrupt meditation tend to be those things with strong attachment, it becomes apparent why the paring away of attachments is one of the three aims of the triune path of purification (Pali: *silya*), discriminating wisdom (*panna*), and concentration (*sammhadi*). These three are said to interact in such a way that the deepening and increasing of one deepens the other two and hence the whole meditative process. It took no more than a few days of the first retreat to make this painfully obvious. Any time I did something which broke the rules or consciously disturbed other people’s practice or well-being, I found myself agitated and disturbed in a way which affected my own meditation as well as other apparently unrelated aspects of my behavior. For example, one of the rules was that we could shower only during two or three set times during the day so as to minimize the possibility of disturbing other people’s meditation. However, I soon found that showers were an excellent, if only partial antidote to the intense agitation and dysphoria that I was experiencing. Thus I was certainly not about to let a minor matter like the disruption of someone else’s meditation stand between me and my comfort, and so for the first five or six days I averaged perhaps six showers a day. However, by about the fifth day my meditation had deepened to a point where I was more aware of the emotional reactions I underwent during this transgression. What I eventually noticed that I was doing was minimizing the effects on me of their imagined discomfort by creating a psychological distance between us. To do this I found myself creating feelings of anger, separation, and superiority toward them so that the discomforts which I imagined them to be experiencing, I could now justify, defend against, and even feel righteous about. By the seventh day this process had become too painful and ugly

to watch and I was forced to at least partially give up my attachment to showers and to resign myself to showerless agitation. This devaluation of people who are wronged is consistent with cognitive dissonance theory, which is concerned with the effects of incongruity between expectation and actuality (Festinger, 1957; Malmo, 1975). If this process is generalizable, then it obviously holds widespread implications for understanding the dehumanization which occurs with crime and warfare.

Using the example above, and I could if necessary present several others also, it has become apparent that greater inner sensitivity reveals more clearly the multiple yet often subtle ways in which we harm both ourselves and others by behavior which is not marked by authenticity and integrity. Furthermore, the reason we act without integrity is to avoid confronting and having to possibly give up our attachments. On the other hand, if we wish to speed up the meditative process of increasing concentration, insight, and reducing attachments, then living with as much integrity as possible will bring us up against the greatest number of attachments in the shortest possible time. Although this will, of course, be uncomfortable, it will afford, if we wish, the opportunity of most speedily recognizing and letting go attachments and hence progressing most rapidly. This provides a rationale for many of the ethical precepts of most of the meditation-yogic traditions and seems analogous to Don Juan's concept of impeccability (Castaneda, 1971). It also fits with the hypothesis that the more mentally healthy person will tend to be motivated by approach rather than escape and avoidance (Walsh & Shapiro, 1978). Certainly it is apparent that perceptual sensitivity and integrity are both mutually interactive rate-limiting factors for this process.

*living
with
integrity*

BELIEFS

As with psychotherapy (Walsh, 1976), the limitations and self-fulfilling prophetic nature of beliefs and models again became apparent. Once again John Lilly's (1972) statement proved awesome in its power. "Within the province of the mind what I believe to be true is true or becomes true within experimental and experiential limits. These limits are further beliefs to be transcended. Within the mind there are no limits." Usually it has seemed that my beliefs and models of who and what I am seem to lag behind the changing reality and to be closer to what I was than what I am now. In areas where there is growth this can be especially limiting because I then find myself fighting and dealing with an outdated chimera rather

than acknowledging the reality that is. Although at the present time it is very subtle and often at the limits of my perception, at times when I become aware that I have been operating out of a model rather than out of the current reality, then I am able to detect the following: Firstly that my awareness is split with a major portion fixed on the mental model, some sense of repressing the awareness of the here and now, and a sense of lessening being and flowing and heightened active "doing" to match the expectancies of the model.

Another limiting belief, derived in part from my Western psychological and psychiatric training, is that I cannot change my mental state—e.g., affect, state of consciousness—without adequately working through all the intervening determining psychological material; e.g., if I feel guilty, then it is necessary to work through the determining factors before I can expect to feel good again. A mere moment's consideration will show the inaccuracy of this assumption, but it's amazing how often it has caught me and others.

BEING AND DOING

The theme of allowing and "being" versus "doing" has been a central and recurrent one for each and every retreat. It gradually became apparent that the sense of doing actually represents a form of paranoia, a readiness to correct the ongoing automatic process of being, for fear that it will be inadequate or suboptimal. This fear leads to hypervigilant surveillance of both the present and anticipated situations and behavior, coupled with an emergency readiness to deal with any shortcoming of being. We are thus continuously and needlessly on emergency alert, derived from a basic pervasive fear that we will not be sufficient in any moment.

The process of doing became most forcefully apparent during the second retreat, by which time I was attempting to passively observe as much as possible. However, if any stimulus, of seemingly greater significance than others came into awareness, then I would immediately cease passive observation and go through a series of stages of first actively directing my attention towards the stimulus, secondly focussing on it intensely, thirdly attempting to identify it, and fourthly sometimes to transmute it in some way, e.g., from fear to excitement. However, by the end of the first week when my mind had become more sensitive there was an almost continuous stream of surfacing of "significant" awarenesses. So much so that I was fatigued and unattracted to working with them and no

*directing
attention
to the stimulus*

longer attempted to transmute them. Then with more time I did not even bother to identify them, next could not even be bothered focussing on them, and finally could barely raise the interest to turn my attention towards them. This sequence thus evaporated in accordance with the sequential loss of the links of a non-reinforced behavior chain. This fatigue led to an increased willingness to just be, to just watch, to surrender and to recognize that I really did not have to do anything with the contents of awareness. At first this type of trusting was very difficult, but was necessary out of sheer fatigue, a situation reminiscent of the spontaneous recovery of some neurotics who literally wear out their own defenses and themselves. With time, however, there was an increasing sense of letting go, surrender, less need to react and to work to change experiences, and a greater sense of just allowing them to be whatever they were, e.g., it was OK to be scared rather than having to try to change it.

One question of both theoretical and practical importance which comes up repeatedly not only in meditation but in all the growth disciplines, is whether thought and behavior patterns, habits, conditioned responses, etc., are ever fully extinguished. Learning and behavior theory suggests that they follow declining asymptotic curves. My own experience suggests that the same thing happens in meditation. As a behavior pattern is eradicated at one level this in turn increases perceptual sensitivity so that one is now more likely to become aware of it operating at an as yet uneradicated and more subtle level. This process can recur many times, each in a more subtle, sensitive, exquisite, and more difficult to detect manner than the time before.

*different
levels of
behavior
patterns*

At my next retreat, some five months after the previous one, it should have been no surprise to me, although it was, to find myself amazed and astounded at the amount of “doing” that I was doing. Whether in fact I was actually “doing” more or whether I was simply more sensitive to it, I cannot be certain, though subjectively it felt more like the latter. In any event by the second or third day of the retreat it was apparent that a large proportion of my mental time and effort went into an active, anxious doing attempt to change the mental contents to fit a variety of predetermined models. Subjectively it seemed that a percept, thought, feeling, etc., would arise and would then be immediately anxiously scanned for its threat value and to determine how well it matched whatever the relevant model was of the way it and I should be. The most frequent model was one of an idealized end state, e.g., happy, clear, perspicacious, insightful, aware, deeply meditative, etc. Whenever the

*monitoring
an object
of attention*

mental object of attention was found to be lacking in any way, as surprisingly enough it not infrequently was, then immediately a whole series of corrective measures would be taken to try to align it with the model. These corrective measures would include all the psychological, mental, and meditative maneuvers that I had learnt over the previous three years, e.g., relaxing, letting go, taking the energy up, attentional focussing, etc., ad infinitum, ad nauseam, all within the space of seconds or less. If the corrective actions were successful, then they would tend to diminish, but if not then they would increase in intensity and there would be a detectable mounting anxiety. To complicate matters still further these corrective actions would themselves in turn be contrasted with specific models of the way they ought to be, judged, and modified in turn so that there could literally be chain reactions cascading out in all mental directions until something else became the focus of attention.

It felt as though the process I was now witnessing was a faster and more subtle version of the one I had seen in the previous retreat where I had initially semiconsciously turned my attention towards and then tried to modify prominent percepts. Now I was observing the same process at work on larger numbers of more subtle mental events.

In the midst of this dilemma it felt as though any doing, any volitional activity, involved an active modification or correction of what was, and only trapped me more in my own reactivity. This raises the interesting question of whether doing, as opposed to just being, is always reactive and therefore always follows some stimulus, and therefore always adds more conditioning and perhaps what might be viewed as *karma*. This was certainly the subjective experience and if so would explain the Buddhist and many other meditative teachings that it is literally impossible to “do” anything to get oneself out of one’s mental trap.

*“doing
the
right
thing”*

Similarly my attachment to getting ahead with and speeding up this process became patently counterproductive. It became apparent that periods of intense well-being lasting even only a matter of several seconds, tended to elicit thoughts and concomitant anxiety along the lines of “but what if I’m not doing the right thing?” The *right* thing was of course that maneuver which would propel me forwards at the fastest possible rate and which had to be constantly searched and selected for, a process which could not continue if I was just sitting feeling calm, peaceful, and happy.

Interestingly enough this achievement need also trapped me in an endless treadmill. It turned out that one of the little games I was playing with myself to supposedly speed up my growth was to retrospectively negatively distort my self-image. Thus the memories of myself and my behavior that I retained across the years, and even across the duration of a meditation sitting, were negatively tinged and biased. One of the beliefs out of which this process sprang was that these negative memories would prove aversive enough to provide the motivation to keep me working on myself as intensively as possible. The only problem with this was that of course I spent years trying to chase and correct chimeras, and chimeras turn out to be hard things to improve, especially when all you have to go on are *negative memories of how poorly you dealt with them last time*. In rereading it, this description of the memory distortion feels rather gross since the process itself was very subtle, though not without pervasive effects, so subtle in fact that it was only in the depths of a retreat that I became aware of the operation of the mechanism at all. It does seem important, however, since once having recognized the mechanism, I was able to see how much of my current behavior is motivated by beliefs about who I have been and hence am. The awareness that those beliefs were subject to specific detectable distortions was a powerfully relieving one.

Associated with doing and “doing the right thing” was, of course, an incredible amount of judging. This thought was good, that was bad, this feeling was OK, that was not, this experience really shouldn’t be allowed into awareness, etc., in an initially continuous and never ending process in which things, e.g., thoughts, feelings, etc., *actually felt* good, bad, right, wrong, etc. with increasing recognition of it, this process became quite distressing, since it became apparent that I could do, think, or feel, almost nothing without being subjected to a barrage of judgmental reactions, and even judgments of judgments. These so clouded my perception as to significantly and continuously distort it. Now I could understand the words of Sengstan, the Third Zen Patriarch (Clarke, 1975):

judging

When thought is in bondage, the truth is hidden,
for everything is murky and unclear.
And the burdensome practice of judging
brings annoyance and weariness. . . .
Indeed it is due to our choosing to accept or reject
that we do not see the true nature of things.

With increasing mindfulness, however, an interesting change began to develop in which I became aware of the temporal and

mental gap between the percept and the judgment. Thus a thought which originally would have "felt bad" and possibly ugly and painful was now experienced as "just a thought" without any particular affect attached to it. Then a small but detectable time after, there would be a wave of affect corresponding to the nature of the judgment, e.g., distasteful affect for a negative judgment, but this affect was now no longer identified with the original percept. The original percept, e.g., thought, sight, etc., was just whatever it was, and in another time and space there was an affect which represented a judgment. With still greater mindfulness and the passage of time, the strength of these judgments began to diminish and there was a slight but detectable sense of things just being a little more "what they are," rather than being good, bad, etc. The range and pervasiveness of this judging process is difficult to convey, but there were times when I felt almost mentally crippled by the constant checking, limiting, deleting, and proscribing of whole ranges of thoughts and feelings, a process which formerly had been below the threshold of awareness.

*effort
and
achievement*

There are several other counterproductive factors involved in efforting and achievement in meditation. Firstly these motives seemed to produce agitation and anger, both of which appeared disruptive and reduced sensitivity and insight. In addition the attempt seemed somehow intrapsychically splitting since it had the feeling that "part of me is trying to push another part which the first part doesn't trust." The result was a subtle but significant sense of dissociation in which I felt aware of the energy, agitation, and sometimes strength and power, but also somehow felt very superficial as though I was out of touch with my deeper awareness, a situation which would follow, I suppose, naturally from the process of separating myself from it in order to manipulate it. This seems analogous to the process of objectification which Bugental (1965; 1976) has noted to be a common pervasive feature of existential numbing.

If you determine your course
with force or speed,
You miss the way of the law.

The Buddha (Byrom, 1976)

PERCEPTUAL RECOGNITION PROCESS

The perceptual process of recognition, categorization, and naming or labeling a stimulus seems to be important and central to a number of psychological processes. The process

seems to be similar for both internal and external stimuli and to be multiphasic. To date I have managed to identify the following components. At the first awareness of the stimulus there is an arousal and an orientation of attention towards it coupled with an active attempt to recognize it. When the stimulus is identified, there may sometimes be a sense of relaxation or alternatively there may be a fraction of a second of what feels like searching past memories in order to decide how to respond to it. At this stage more attention is focussed on the category or label and less on the stimulus itself. This whole process, however, is markedly susceptible to modification by meditation and this modification is discussed below. The interesting point is that once the stimulus has been identified and labeled, then habitually most of the responses to the stimulus-label complex are actually determined by the label rather than the stimulus per se. Thus, for example, if I experience a feeling which I label either correctly or incorrectly as fear, then I will tend to respond to “fear” with all its connotations and associations rather than to the percept itself, which may be so mild as to warrant very little reaction or may actually have been misidentified and not be fear at all. However, if it has been misidentified, I will continue to react to it as though it were fear unless I choose to go back and reexperience the feeling directly.

*labeling
stimuli*

Interestingly the extent of reaction to the stimulus itself as opposed to the label seems to be a direct function of the degree of mindfulness or meditative awareness. If I am mindful, then I tend to be focussed on the primary sensations themselves, to label less, and to react to these labels less. For example, there was a period of about six weeks during which I felt mildly depressed. I was not incapacitated, but was uncomfortable, dysphoric and confused about what was happening to me throughout most of the waking day. However, during daily meditation this experience and its affective quality changed markedly. The experience then felt somewhat like being on sensory overload, with many vague ill-defined somatic sensations and a large number of rapidly appearing and disappearing unclear visual images. However, to my surprise, nowhere could I find stimuli which were actually painful. Rather there was just a large input of vague stimuli of uncertain significance and meaning. I would therefore emerge from each sitting with the recognition that I was actually not experiencing any pain and feeling considerably better. This is analogous to Tarthang Tulku’s (1974) statement that “The more you go into the disturbance—when you really get in there—the emotional characteristics no longer exist.” It is also reminiscent of the state of affairs in quantum physics. “Our conception of sub-

*becoming
more
mindful
of primary
sensations*

stance is only vivid as long as we do not face it. It begins to fade when we analyze it . . . the solid substance of things is another illusion" (Commins & Linscott, 1969). Therefore, it may be that appearances of solidity and stasis in both the inner and outer universe are merely illusions reflecting the limitations of our perception.

However, within a very short time I would lapse once more into my habitual *non-mindful* state and when I next became mindful once again I would find that a powerful regression had occurred. That is, I would find that I had been automatically labeling the stimulus complex as depression and then reacting to this label with thoughts and feelings such as "I'm depressed, I feel awful, what have I done to deserve this?" etc. A couple of moments of relaxed mindfulness would be sufficient to switch the focus back to the primary sensations and the recognition once again that I was actually not experiencing discomfort. This process repeated itself endlessly during each day. This effect of mindfulness or phenomenology and reactivity should lend itself to experimental neurophysiological investigation.

The subjective experience above of the perceptual recognition process with its initial arousal prior to identification, identification and sometimes concomitant relief and relaxation, may represent the subjective analogue of the psychophysiological phenomenon called the orientation reaction (for reviews, see Lynn, 1966; Raskin, 1973; Pribram, 1975; Waters, *et al.*, 1977).

*the
orientation
reaction*

This reaction is important at both behavioral and physiological levels and has been postulated to be a mechanism mediating environmental effects on brain anatomy and chemistry (Walsh & Cummins, 1975, 1976a,b). As described objectively the orientation reaction consists of a complex of behavioral and physiological responses which orient the subject to a stimulus and increase perceptual sensitivity. The reaction is most readily elicited by stimuli which are either novel or of historical significance to the subject. Sokolov (1960) has proposed a neural matching model to explain this in which the stimulus initiates a response in the cortex and this response is then compared with cortical neural models of previously experienced stimuli. If the stimulus matches any existing neural model, then the orientation reaction is blocked, but if no match exists, i.e., if the stimulus is a novel one, then the reaction occurs. With repeated presentation of the initially novel stimulus, habituation of the reaction takes place. This would seem to fit with the subjective experience above inasmuch as the initial subjective arousal ceased upon recognition.

If the arousal prior to recognition is aversive, as indeed it is sometimes felt, then an interesting situation arises which may provide the basis for explanations of psychopathologies such as paranoia and intolerance of ambiguity. It should be noted, however, that Sokolov's model does not explain the activation of the orientation reaction by familiar but significant stimuli (Lynn, 1966). Thus the finding as described above, that a major portion of reactivity is in response to cognitive labels rather than the percepts which elicit them, is especially interesting since it would provide an explanation of this phenomenon.

In moments of special clarity it has seemed that the recognition (labeling) of a stimulus is followed by an extremely rapid process, of recalling how I responded to it in the past, and choosing a current response. It may be that the existence of this instant of choice represents a crucial demarcation between different psychological models of man. Skinnerian behavior modification at one extreme sees responses as merely choiceless conditioned automaticity. On the other hand, psychologies which emphasize the importance of cognitive mediating processes in determining responses—from several branches of behavior modification (Mahoney, 1974; Thoresen & Mahoney, 1974; Bandura, 1977a,b), all the way through to transpersonal psychology—recognize and emphasize the existence of this choice process even though it may normally reside below perceptual awareness. However, it must be noted that recognition of this choice process tells us nothing about whether it itself is merely a conditioned choiceless stimulus-response chain, but rather merely brings the level of observation and analysis to a much finer level.

*the
stimulus-
response
chain*

Subjectively it is clear that habitual interpretation of stimuli according to expectations, mental set, etc., may lead to misidentification. For example, during the anxiety episodes mentioned elsewhere which occurred most commonly while with someone that I felt very close to, I initially labeled these as due to a fear of intimacy. Having done this the process generalized (stimulus generalization) to situations with other people which I also began to label as fear of intimacy, where in point of fact as detailed elsewhere, these episodes actually turned out to be determined by a number of processes, none of them in fact related to intimacy. The experiences described above all suggest that unconscious labeling and conceptualization is a highly significant process with far-reaching and pervasive effects which when performed without mindfulness may cause a shortcircuiting and misinterpretation of, and loss of contact with, experience resulting in a limiting automaticity and sterotypy. On the other hand, increasing mindfulness may per-

manently weaken and disrupt misinterpretation, automaticity and conditioning. "Any label is entrapping, because labels are limiting, they are finite, they have suffering connected with them" (Ram Dass, 1977, p. 114).

FEAR

*over-
interpreting
and
mis-
labeling*

Fear, in one form or another, was a not infrequent experience especially during the earlier phases. However, during the second retreat, the nature of this experience began to change rather dramatically, and it became apparent that I had been overinterpreting (misattributing) a number of emotional experiences as fear. For example, after the first few days of the retreat as my mind became a little more sensitive, it became apparent that there was a whole range of emotional and somatic responses which were automatically mislabeled as fear. For example, the sudden slamming of a door would elicit a strong sensation in the abdomen and chest which I initially assumed to be fear, whereas a closer examination of the sensation revealed it to be an affectively quite neutral arousal response.

Similarly it became apparent that many of my reactions, e.g., fear, sexual, came not out of an accurate identification of the primary response but rather out of old expectations about the way I would react. Thus, for example, a stimulus would elicit the thought-feeling "I should be scared of that," followed by an emotional reaction which was initially labeled as fear but which on closer examination had a different flavor to it and did not actually seem to be fear. This seems to represent a specific example of the post-stimulus recognition choice point which was discussed above. It also raises, together with the previous discussion on depression, the question of whether the actual sensations underlying any emotion are actually inherently aversive or whether their aversive quality comes purely out of the labeling and expectations that we ascribe to them.

*the
fear
of
death*

One of the major recurrent fears has been of what will happen to me if I continue on this path. This has manifested in a variety of ways and provides an interesting lesson in psychodynamics. Fear of death has been especially prevalent, especially the fear of death of a particular sub-personality or personality complex, and this is described in more detail in Part II. It seemed that this basic fear activated a variety of more superficial ones in ways which interfered with my meditation. Thus, for example, there was a period of several days in which I had intense visual and somatic imagery of

having my toenails ripped off, a fear which had lain dormant since an adolescent reading of Nazi tortures. For several days I was unable to get past this fear until eventually I went into it deeply and found myself suddenly experiencing terror that if I continued with the meditation and did not heed the fear I would die. A similar process occurred with a number of other fears, and I gained the impression that a part of my personality, or what would be called ego in Eastern terminology, was literally fighting for its survival. In doing so it seemed to be activating other latent fears in a way which would interfere with the meditative process and therefore presumably abet its survival. This has also emerged in more subtle ways such as procrastination, forgetting etc., suggestive of Freud's (1914) "psychopathology of everyday life." For example at one stage it became very apparent that to be optimally effective the meditation procedure or mindfulness was going to have to be continuous throughout the day. I therefore decided to draw up a plan of how I could best attempt to work towards this. Some two months later, after almost daily decisions to get it done that day, I began to suspect that perhaps I might be exhibiting a little resistance and so decided to do it that hour. Two days later I felt pretty confident that I had been right about my resistance since there was still no plan in existence. Having decided to do it there and then, within minutes I was in the middle of a full-blown panic attack and watched myself crying "No, no, please don't make me do it, I'll die, don't make me do it, please, please." At times like this the strength of the resistance and defenses against awareness seem remarkably powerful.

As more and more anxieties were confronted and the feared catastrophes failed to materialize, there gradually began to develop a deepening trust in the process. It gradually became more apparent that fear was certainly not necessarily a reason to avoid something. Indeed often it served as a useful signal that here was something which needed looking at and experiencing. In addition it became apparent that there was a certain pattern to at least some of my fears of meditation. Particularly clear patterns included the fear of becoming amotivational without a desire to produce, achieve, or contribute to others. This would come up especially whenever my striving, controlling, and obsessional defenses were under examination. Another factor which assisted this increasing trust was the recognition that any experience could be used as grist for the growthmill. Certain experiences were not necessarily any more growth evoking than others, but rather what was important was the way they were used. This was a recognition of one of the major Vipassana precepts that it is the process of mindfulness

*a deepening
trust
in the
process*

which is important rather than the object, or experience, which is being observed. This is reminiscent of Rajneesh's (1975a) statement that "the only sin is unconsciousness."

*allowing
things
"to be"*

With lessening fear and increasing trust came a greater willingness to allow things to be the way they are. This transition represents an interesting example of interaction between meditation and other inputs. Thus my third retreat was marked by significantly greater "allowing things to be" than previous ones, and this was almost certainly due to a conversation the day prior to the retreat in which a close friend had pointed out how much difficulty I had in "allowing things to be as they were" without worrying, thinking, and planning how to change them. This retreat was marked by a number of new experiences which felt secondary to this thematic switch. There was a considerable increase in feelings of peace and a heightened awareness of the incredible number of models I have of how things should be, and the amount of judgment that goes along with this.

Finally towards the end of the retreat there was a powerful experiential recognition that I do not have to try to change any part of my experiential process. All I need to do is to watch it. The next thought to follow this was the recognition that to some extent I had misused what I had learned over the previous three years of therapy and meditation. I had taken the skills and tools and used them to try to more adroitly change and manipulate my experience. In terms of the approach-avoidance model of health (Walsh & Shapiro, 1978), I had used the information in order to more skillfully approach and avoid rather than to transcend this dichotomy.

Paradoxically, allowing an experience to *be* rather than attempting to change it, seemed to modify it in a beneficial direction. Thus when a percept which I would formerly have changed now arose and I allowed it to be as it was, e.g., anxiety, I would not infrequently have a thought such as "this feeling can't be too bad if I don't have to change it," and as I did, some of the aversiveness of the percept would be reduced and I would feel less need to change it.

Several reactions to this increased allowing became apparent over the weeks succeeding the retreat. There were occasional eruptions of self-punitive anger and hatred (see the section on subpersonalities in Part II) associated with the idea that I had given up striving and was thus weak and cowardly.

There was also an episode involving the eruption of a number of what felt like formerly repressed fears. While sitting quietly

I began to experience a familiar fear, and rather than resisting and attempting to change it as I was accustomed to doing, I just allowed it to be. Shortly thereafter another fear also arose and I allowed it also to be there. There then followed an increasingly rapid eruption of fears until I felt myself to be physically encased in them to the extent that my body felt stiff and difficult to move, and I had the visual image of being completely surrounded by them. It also felt as though it was the allowing which made it possible for them to erupt and, interestingly enough, also seemed to serve to minimize my discomfort. For a while I felt surrounded by and physically encased in the fears, but I also felt remarkably unperturbed and continued to observe them with only minimal discomfort. There was also a gradual but perceptible change in behavior along the lines of reduced worrying about what people would think of me. This was translated into action as a greater willingness to say and do what I thought. This is reminiscent of Rajneesh's (1975b) assertion that "first change your consciousness and behavior will change automatically."

*the
eruption of
formerly
repressed
fears*

The increased allowing also resulted in a greater sense of congruity between different aspects and levels of being. Whereas formerly a percept might be created and then judged and changed, and possibly the judging and changing mechanism in turn would be judged and changed, now it felt as though these formerly disparate and warring factions were more at peace and more closely aligned. This may be akin to Rogers' (1961) concept of self-acceptance and Bugental's (1965) concept of authenticity.

SURRENDER

These experiences have led to a greater understanding of and willingness to surrender to the meditative process. In the West surrender has connotations of succumbing or being overwhelmed but here it is employed more in line with its use in the meditative traditions. Thus with increasing experience I have begun to surrender to the process in the sense of trusting, following, and allowing it to unfold without attempting to change, coerce, or manipulate it and without necessarily requiring prior understanding of what I may be about to go through or predicting the outcome. Thus, for example, one of my major fears has been the threat of losing certain psychological and intellectual abilities, e.g., of losing control, intellectual skills, and scientific capacities. This seems reminiscent of Fadiman's (1977) statement that one of the major barriers to moving on to the next level is always the fear of losing that which we have.

*trusting
the
process*

Thus although I need to make it very clear that this surrender is far from complete for me, it has come a long way since first beginning. The experiences which seem to have contributed to this are as follows. First of all, to the best of my knowledge the feared catastrophies have not eventuated. Thus, for example, my intellectual and scientific skills seem to have remained intact although there has been a shift in the major areas of interest. In addition, meditation seems to have provided a range of experiences, insights and developments formerly totally unknown to me. Thus, to expect, demand, and limit that which is novel to extensions of that which is already known can prove a major limitation. This is similar to the statement by both Bugental (1965) and Rajneesh (1975a) that growth is always a voyage into the unknown. "Freedom has now become Spinozistic, i.e., the freedom to embrace and love one's own destiny . . . by the discovery of what and who one is, of one's Real Self (à la Horney), and of being eager to surrender to it. This is to let *it* control; to choose freely to be determined by it; this is to transcend the dichotomies 'freedom versus determinism' or 'freedom versus control' " (Maslow, 1966, p. 43). Thus the fear of the unknown has diminished somewhat.

*using
each
experience
for
growth*

Furthermore it now seems clear that allowing experiences to be as they are, and experiencing them without forcibly trying to change them, is effective. This is especially true when viewed with the recognition that any experience can be used for growth even to the point of perceiving the experience as necessary and perfect for the process. Indeed, recognizing the perfection and functionality of each experience appears to be a highly productive perspective for several reasons. Firstly, it reduces the deleterious agitation, resistance, and eruption of defenses and manipulations which occur secondary to judgment and negative perspectives. Secondly, contrary to my previous beliefs, acceptance and a nonjudgmental attitude towards an experience or situation does not necessarily remove either the motivation or capacity to deal with it in the most effective manner. Thus my prior beliefs were that I *needed* my judgments, aversions, and negative reactions in order to power my motivation to modify the situations and stimuli eliciting them. It should be noted here that the experience of perfection is just that, an experience, which may say more about the psychological state of the individual perceiving it than about the stimulus per se, and may not necessarily in any way vitiate the perceiver's perception of the need to modify it. Finally, there has been recognition that the great meditation teachers really knew what they were talking about. Time and time again I have read descriptions, explanations, and predictions about meditation, the normal psychological state, the states that arise

with more and more meditation, latent capacities, etc., etc., and have scoffed and argued against them feeling that they were just so removed from my prior experiences and beliefs that they could not possibly be true. However, by now I have had a variety of experiences which I formerly would have believed to be impossible and have gained the experiential background with which to understand more of what is being taught. Thus I now have to acknowledge that these people know vastly more than I do and that it is certainly worth my while to pay careful attention to their suggestions. Thus experiential knowledge may be a major limiting factor for intellectual understanding of psychological processes and consciousness, and even highly intellectually sophisticated non-practitioners may show a grossly deficient comprehension and interpretation of such experiences (Deikman, 1977).

*experiential
knowledge
as a
major
factor*

It is interesting to note the changes in the nature of the predominant motivation at different stages of this journey. While there has obviously always been considerable seeking and exploring (approach), this seems to have increased with time, while on the other hand the initial levels of avoidance of various experiences seem to have decreased. Most recently there seems to have been some transcendence of this dichotomy as I have begun to allow experiences simply to be and not to do anything to myself or them in response. This is consistent with the recently proposed hypothesis that the approach: avoidance ratio provides a measure of psychological health until it is transcended. At this point the ratio of reactivity to nonreactivity provides a supplementary measure (Walsh & Shapiro, 1978).

IDENTIFICATION

Another change which has occurred especially in the second year has been a sense of less identification with and susceptibility to, inner processes and experiences, e.g., affect, pain. Thus, for example, the experience of physical pain during meditation now tends to feel more physically distant, less influential, and less part of, me. Thus I experience a reduced susceptibility to the motivational forces of these stimuli and feel less identified with them. This phenomenon first became apparent shortly after the initial experiences of allowing things to be. This description of disidentification from, and diminished influence of, pain is reminiscent of the phenomenology of pain reduction following narcotics where the pain is described as still there but not so worrisome.

*disidentification
from
pain*

A further level of disidentification occurred as a result of adopting the procedure of naming percepts and processes, e.g., "thought thought, feeling feeling, pain pain, etc." The result was a marked increase in disidentification from the internal process and this was particularly noticeable with regard to thoughts. For the first time I now had the experience of my mind being extraordinarily vast and stretching in all dimensions, and of thoughts passing through this vast space in a relatively calm and nondisruptive fashion while I merely sat and watched them. Clearly there was now a nonidentification with some thoughts with which I would have identified previously.

*disidentification
from
mental
content*

In the light of these experiences it is interesting to consider the role of identification in concepts of health and psychology. Goldstein (1976) has suggested that the degree of disidentification from the mind is a measure of psychological health since disidentification is the primary process for extracting awareness from the conditioned tyranny of the mind. In addition, Walsh & Vaughan (1978a,b) have proposed that differing concepts of identification constitute a major differentiating factor between transpersonal and traditional Western psychologies. Traditionally the latter have recognized only identification with external objects and have defined it as a largely unconscious process in which the individual becomes like or feels the same as something or someone else (Brenner, 1974). Recent views in transpersonal psychology and a variety of Eastern psychologies on the other hand, recognize external identification but state that identification with internal (intrapsychic) phenomena and processes is even more important (Walsh & Vaughan, 1978a). Furthermore they state that this type of identification goes unrecognized by most people, including psychologists, therapists, and behavioral scientists, because we are so involved in this process, i.e., so identified, that it never even occurs to us to question that which it seems so clear that we are. Thus contrary to other Western psychologies, the transpersonal therapist may hold "disidentification from mental content" as a major though advanced therapeutic goal. Since, as described above, reactivity to nonidentified processes is significantly reduced, this raises the interesting question of whether nonidentification may be one of the major mechanisms underlying the attainment of the so-called free or unconditioned state. Supposedly in this state of consciousness the individual is free from all past conditioning (Goleman, 1977). This difficult to comprehend state is described in a variety of traditions and so presumably exists as an at least phenomenologically real state.

As I have gradually passed through an increasing number of barriers over the last few years, there has developed a sense of increased psychological flexibility and potential. Along with this there has gradually emerged into awareness an increasing perception of the power of intentionality. With fewer barriers to its effectiveness there is a sense that simply intending to obtain a goal may be sufficient for the mental machinery to complete the task without additional efforting or strain. Thus at this stage it is beginning to feel as though one of the major limitations is the extent to which I can be mindful of and clear in my intention. For example, meditation continues to be marked more by mindlessness than by concentration and on first examination it feels as though the problem is simply forgetting to concentrate. However a more precise examination of the process suggests that at least some of the time the "forgetting" may be an active process in which feelings of not wanting to concentrate and of wanting to direct attention elsewhere arise, and then I identify with them and at this stage actually intend to lose the initial focus of concentration.

*the
power of
intentionality*

An interesting extension of this is contained in the close examination of experiencing some unpleasant internal state, e.g., anxiety, depression. What I usually identify with is the experiencer of the unpleasantness and forget that I am also its creator. When I try to change the unpleasantness, I sometimes find that I am blocked, and that subliminal (formerly unconscious) mental maneuvers occur which keep me exactly where I am until I am forced to the conclusion that I am experiencing exactly what "I" (and here I mean an "I" identified with a larger portion of consciousness than simply the experiencer of the unpleasantness) intend. Thus another perspective from which to view this situation is that I am doing an incredible job of creating exactly the experience that I want to create.

THOUGHTS

During the last retreat I sometimes found myself experiencing mind as a vast space in which thoughts could be observed to materialize, move, and disappear. They would first be detectable as a physical sensation soon to be accompanied by a visual image. To the physical sensations would soon be added an affective tone and then also a body of information. At my clearest I could watch thoughts materializing into consciousness in the form of a visual image of a bubble arising from the surface of some invisible material, arcing up into the mental space, and then if not identified with, diminishing in

*watching
thoughts*

size and brightness and disappearing, sometimes back into the material from which it arose. In some cases bubbles would begin to form but then would merge back into the invisible medium from which they appeared without breaking free and reaching clear awareness. The image of an individual thought appeared to be composed of two spherical parts of unequal size and intensity. The largest sphere appeared dull and amorphous, seemed to be composed of affect, and to be carrying a smaller sphere within it. The smaller one appeared brighter, to be situated within the upper portion of the larger, and to be composed of a highly compact body of information, i.e., the cognitive component of the thought.

It seemed that the positionality of the thought in the visual image was directly related to, and informative of, my degree of identification with it. Thus thoughts which I was clearly observing without identification appeared to be in front and to arise out of and return to unconsciousness below me (here I am using "me" in the sense of the observer). However if a thought arose and, after it had appeared, I identified with it, then it seemed that in a very small fraction of a second my awareness moved towards and centered in the sphere, and perhaps especially the brighter information component. Thus I would suddenly find myself in the middle of and surrounded by a complex three-dimensional fantasy. On the other hand, if I gradually became aware that I was already in and identified with a formerly unrecognized thought, then that thought would appear from behind and gradually separate from me.

*the
relation of
thoughts
to
feelings*

The nature of the thoughts which would arise seemed clearly related to the affect which I was experiencing at that time. Furthermore both would elicit further thoughts and feelings of a similar kind. Thus, if I was experiencing anxiety, then anxiety provoking thoughts would appear and elicit more anxiety in a self-perpetuating stimulus response chain. In this case the background affect, which might be very subtle, would comprise the "felt meaning between the thoughts" as described by Welwood (1976) and would function as an "operator" (Globus, 1977), or context (Erhard, 1977) determining the nature of thoughts and a perspective from which they were viewed.

What then is a thought? Usually we tend to think of thoughts as being distinct from emotions but these experiences would suggest that the demarcation is not so clear. Rather thoughts appear to be comprised of both informational and affective components. Subjectively it seemed that the affect acted as an energizer or carrier wave to power the information component,

or signal wave, into awareness. Certainly at a grosser level it is clear that affective arousal tends to increase the number of thoughts, and this carrier wave–signal wave concept provides a rationale for the meditative approach of reducing desires and arousal as a means of reaching a thought-free state.

The obvious capacity of thoughts to act as components of stimulus-response chains raises some extraordinarily interesting questions concerning conditioning and identification. It seemed that if I was watching as a non-identified observer then one thought did not necessarily stimulate another. However, if I did identify with it, then it seemed that there would very rapidly arise multiple cascades of further thoughts so that I would rapidly be buried within thoughts and fantasies within thoughts and fantasies. That is, I would almost immediately be back again in my multilayered fantasy universe. Thus identification with a single thought may be all that is necessary to remove us from the here and now and to initiate stimulus response chains.

During the brief (seconds at most) formless experiences free of identifiable thoughts and feelings, another phenomenon emerged. It seems very difficult to stay in these states apparently because of the mind's active radar-like searching for stimuli. At other times when there is no shortage of stimuli the searching seems to be for specific categories of percepts, e.g., threat, fear, etc., but in this state the sought characteristics seem to be broader, i.e., form or differentiable stimulus of any type as opposed to the formless. As previously discussed, the searching process itself appears to generate stimuli and to thus end the formless or stimulus-free period. This is consistent with Ram Dass' (1975) statement that it is ultimately necessary to give up attachment to all form. Some of these states, as well as others, may be extraordinarily pleasurable and may give one the sense of being totally surrounded by, bathed in, and composed of, such feelings as love, compassion, lightness, and bliss. Indeed, the intensity of these pleasures may far exceed the range of most nonmeditative experiences.

*staying
in
thought-free
states*

PERCEPTUAL SENSITIVITY

One of the most fundamental changes has been an increase in perceptual sensitivity which seems to include both absolute and discrimination thresholds. Examples of this include both a more subtle awareness of previously known percepts and novel identification of previously unrecognized phenomena.

*enhanced
sensitivity
and
clarity*

Sensitivity and clarity frequently seem enhanced following a meditation sitting or retreat. Thus, for example, at these times it seems that I can discriminate visual forms and outlines more clearly. It also feels as though empathy is significantly increased and that I am more aware of other people's subtle behaviors, vocal intonations, etc., as well as my own affective responses to them. The experience feels like having a faint but discernible veil removed from my eyes, and that the veil is comprised of hundreds of subtle thoughts and feelings. Each one of these thoughts and feelings seems to act as a competing stimulus or "noise" which thus reduces sensitivity to any one object. Thus after meditation any specific stimulus appears stronger and clearer, presumably because the signal:noise ratio is increased. These observations provide a phenomenological basis and possible perceptual mechanism to explain the findings that meditators in general tend to exhibit heightened perceptual sensitivity and empathy (Lesh, 1970; Brown, 1971; Upadua, 1973; Leung, 1973; Davidson *et al.*, 1976; for a review see Shapiro & Giber, 1978).

*visual
images*

Visual images during meditation constitute another example. Visual images go through a process of appearing and then after a variable period of time disappearing, or rising and passing away. Thus when an image arises there is the possibility that I will become completely lost in and identified with it so that my experience is of living in the fantasy and experience created by the image. On the other hand, I may recognize the image for what it is and be able to watch it without identification or getting lost in it and forgetting that I am meditating. This recognition may occur at various stages which seem to come more rapidly with practice.

*the
changing
nature
of
experience*

With increased sensitivity has seemed to come an increased awareness of the continuously changing nature of experience. More subtle awareness leads to finer and finer and more and more rapid discriminations of change within what formerly seemed to be a static experience. Thus, for example, during the periods between thoughts the general background of awareness may initially appear uniform and relatively constant, but with a finer awareness each of the smallest component areas seems to be in continuous flux. A useful analogy to this might be the phenomenon of "flicker fusion threshold." Thus, for example, when a light is turned on and off more and more rapidly there comes a point at which the flicker can no longer be noticed and the flicker fusion threshold at which this occurs is a function of perceptual sensitivity. Accounts by advanced meditators suggest that this phenomenon of continuous

change ultimately reaches dramatic existentially threatening levels at which the impermanent nature of all phenomena is recognized and the individual is left with the realization that there is nothing which can afford permanent security (Buddhagosa, 1923). This is reminiscent of progress in modern philosophy and physics which now advances a dynamic ontology of reality as an ever-changing process (Heisenberg, 1958; Capra, 1975).

This also raises the question of an interesting experiment to perform with meditators; namely, determining the flicker fusion threshold and tachistoscopic recognition skills at various stages of meditation and comparing it with that of nonmeditators.

One unexpected demonstration of greater sensitivity has been the occurrence of the synesthetic perception of thoughts. Synesthesia, or cross modality perception, is the phenomenon in which stimulation of one sensory modality is perceived in several, as for example, when sound is seen and felt as well as heard (Marks, 1975). Following the enhanced perceptual sensitivity which occurred during my prior psychotherapy, I began to experience this phenomenon not infrequently, suggesting that it may well occur within all of us though usually below our thresholds (Walsh, 1976). Now during moments of greater meditative sensitivity I have begun to experience this cross modality perception with purely mental stimuli, e.g., thoughts. Thus, for example, as previously described I may initially experience a thought as a feeling and subsequently become aware of a visual image before finally recognizing the more familiar cognitive information components. This mental synesthetic perception has interesting implications inasmuch as it lends support to Buddhist psychology which views mind as a sensory modality analogous to vision and hearing (Buddhagosa, 1923).

*the
synesthetic
perception
of
thoughts*

Another novel type of perception seems to have occurred as a result of a change in meditative technique in which I began the process of naming mental phenomenon. As previously described, this resulted in less identification with thoughts and feelings, less active focussing of attention on them, and hence a sense of being further removed from them and less able to clearly identify their precise nature, e.g., anger, greed, etc. However, with continued practice I have begun to find myself gradually but increasingly able to recognize their nature without close focused attention. This has resulted in an increased recognition of affects, motivations, and subtle defensive ma-

neuers and manipulations. Indeed these latter recognitions seem to now constitute the sensitivity limiting factor since the discomfort which attends their more frequent perception is often sufficient to result in a defensive contraction of awareness.

The following hypothesis is experientially derived and highly tentative but may provide a useful model of growth through meditation and be open to empirical testing. In both therapy and meditation it feels as though the greatest potential for change occurs during the moments of mindfulness. Furthermore, the greater the perceptual sensitivity, the greater is the range and depth of experience. Thus the rate of growth may be proportional to the product of perceptual sensitivity and the proportion of time spent in mindfulness.

OTHER MEDITATIONS

*meta-
meditation*

All of the previous discussion has concerned insight meditation, but there are two other varieties with which I have experimented briefly. These are the Buddhist meta-meditation or loving-kindness meditation, and mantra. Meta-meditation consists of the repetition of simple phrases such as the following.

May I be happy,
May I be free of suffering,
May I be free,
May I be liberated.
As I am happy,
so may all beings be happy, etc.

This can be varied to emphasize family, friends, adversaries, etc., and is then sometimes used in a progression from those people for whom you have most affection to those for whom you have least. For me this meditation has been of varying effectiveness, but has certainly sometimes resulted in feelings of intense love. The most outstanding example was when I used it frequently during a one-week retreat and found it very effective in eradicating long-standing feelings of resentment towards a particular person. The technique of generating feelings of love and then focussing in a hierarchical fashion on people for whom one feels varying degrees of affection seems analogous to the behavior modification procedure of systematic desensitization (Hilgard & Bower, 1975; Rimm & Masters, 1975), except that the state which is being conditioned is love rather than relaxation. The use of such states may have

considerable implications for the extension of behavior modification and suggests that the Buddha was familiar with the principles of this science some two and one half millenia before its official birth.

The second approach was the use of mantra, a single phrase repeated for prolonged periods, e.g., days or weeks. For some two months I attempted to maintain a mantra continuously during all waking hours. For the first week I used an English phrase, but found that it felt somehow discordant and so began using the most common of all mantras, "*Om mane padme hum.*"

*using a
mantra*

To date it has proved extraordinarily difficult to maintain the repetition and I would guess that I was unable to do this for more than about five percent of the time. The extent to which I could maintain the mantra during various activities seemed to provide a good index of how much attention they commanded and how lost into them I became. Thus, for example, walking and driving were relatively easy, whereas reading, writing, and conversing proved very difficult.

However, even this small five percent proved sufficient to elicit detectable effects. These seem to be of four major types and to be mediated by a somewhat larger number of mechanisms. The first effect was to increase the amount of time in which I was mindful. This seems to result from prolonging an episode of mindfulness because of having a clear perceptual focus for it. In addition, during periods when I became unmindful, the mantra sometimes continued unattended long enough for me to recognize it and be reminded.

*the
effects of
using a
mantra*

A second function seems to be one of attitude change. Thus while the mantra was going, I was reminded that my intention was to use this present experience, whatever it might be, in order to learn and grow, i.e., karma yoga, rather than just to deal with the situation.

Thirdly, maintaining the mantra seemed to reduce my identification with, and tendency to get lost in, fantasies and emotional reactions. Maintaining the mantra meant that part of my awareness and intention must remain consciously focussed and could not be swallowed up with consequent loss of mindfulness and self-awareness, by the emotions and fantasies. Thus, their ability to motivate and compel was reduced and it seemed impossible to become completely lost in them while even a small proportion of awareness was under conscious control.

Finally, the mantra seemed to provide a microcosm of my relationship with everything else. Thus, there were times when it sped up, slowed down, I forgot, I forgot again, and barriers to continuing it arose as did all sorts of emotional reactions, e.g., anger, frustration, embarrassment, etc. Thus, I found myself having to give up my models of the way it is meant to sound, of how long it should take to get it going, to let go my frustration, etc. It thus seems a deceptively simple tool with far reaching potential and one which I certainly intend to pursue further.

Part II of this discussion is scheduled to appear in the next volume of the Journal.—Editor.

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