ADAPTING EASTERN SPIRITUAL
TEACHINGS TO WESTERN CULTURE:
A DISCUSSION WITH
SHINZEN YOUNG

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The desire of intelligent seekers in the West today is for a balanced
doctrine and practical technique which will be free from all occult
mystification or religious bigotry, which will satisfy the cravings of
the heart and yet reconcile them with the conflicting claims of the
head, and which will be suited to the needs of modern people. Is it
not possible, out of the rich mystical and philosophic past of
mankind and out of the creative resources of present-day human
intelligence, boldly to bring to birth a comprehensive explanation
of the world and a practical method of self-discovery, which can be
followed by men and women who still work at their daily tasks in
the world? (Brunton, 1982)

INTRODUCTION

As Gautama the Buddha emphasized, a certain amount of pain
in life is inevitable, but the suffering of life is typically far
greater than the actual pain, and is largely unnecessary.
Suffering is our reaction to life events, an ignorant and
unskillful reaction which could be controlled so as to minimize
unnecessary suffering.

Why do we suffer so much, then, if we don't really need to? In
his Four Noble Truths, the Buddha gave the basic causes of
suffering as attached craving, attached aversion, and ignorance.
By a combination of understanding the ways in which we
are emotionally attached to our desires and cravings and
emotionally attached to our fears and aversions, understanding
these in the light of our to-be-discovered true nature, we could

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let go of all this unnecessary suffering and live in the inherently intelligent and compassionate nature that is our true heritage.

Why don't we do so? There are two major dimensions of this problem. First, we don't know how to really concentrate, and so much of the potential force of the decisions and insights that we try to use to guide our life is dissipated in distractions. Too many things easily divert our energies away from their intended goals. Second, we don't know how to study and observe ourselves to discover the way our mind works and our true nature. This is related to our inability to concentrate, for the ability to focus underlies the ability to observe. Thus we miss many important but delicate insights and intuitions because we haven't trained ourselves to "listen" to the quiet, rapid, more subtle levels of our mind, emotions, and body.

Concentrative meditation, where you learn to focus steadily on a selected aspect of experience, and insight meditation, where you learn to observe the rapid flow of experience in its totality, without becoming lost in limited aspects of it, are very useful in improving the quality of our ordinary lives. They have an even more important function of taking us beyond our ordinary selves and lives.

I had practiced various forms of meditation off and on for many years, but, like many Westerners, had never been very successful at it. I sometimes half-jokingly (and sadly) described myself as an expert on the difficulties of meditation as a result of so much experience of my mind wandering off instead of focusing! In spite of my intellectual knowledge of the importance of meditation practice, some confusion as to just what to do, and the consequent lack of results sapped my motivation, so I had not regularly practiced formal meditation for years until quite recently.

In January of 1986 I was fortunate to meet a remarkable man, Shinzen YDung. The occasion was the First Archaeus Congress at the Pecos River Conference Center near Santa Fe, New Mexico. This was one of the most exciting conferences I have ever attended. Shinzen Young's lecture on meditation and his subsequent early morning meditation practice sessions were the high point of the conference for me. He has the intellectual knowledge to bridge the gap between the Eastern meditative traditions and our modern Western minds as a result of years of graduate training in Eastern religion and philosophy. Even more importantly, he has spent years in the Orient as a student of various kinds of Buddhist practices, and so can speak from
direct experience, not just conceptual knowledge. His goal is to make meditative practice a viable path for Westerners, not just an exotic import from the East.

Shinzen Young was born in Los Angeles in 1944. He became interested in Oriental culture at an early age and was fluent in both written and spoken Chinese and Japanese before he finished high school. He did graduate work in Oriental religions at the University of Wisconsin with Professor Richard Robinson, one of the leading scholars of Buddhism. While carrying out field research for his dissertation in Japan in 1970, he realized that scholarly approaches to meditation could not begin to substitute for the knowledge gained from actual practice, so he became a monk (hence the name Shinzen) in the Shingon sect of Buddhism, a form of Vajrayana Buddhism preserved in Japan. His later studies as a monk included Zen and the Theravada tradition.

He returned to Los Angeles in 1975 and taught meditation in the traditional manner at the International Buddhist Meditation Center. Eventually he began his experimentation in adapting the essence of Buddhism to contemporary Western culture, founding the non-sectarian Community Meditation Center of Los Angeles in 1982. He lectures extensively and leads retreats at several locations in the United States each year. At present, his teaching is based primarily on the technique of vipassanī, a method of "just observing" associated with the Theravada tradition.

Shinzen Young's lecture and practice sessions changed my attitude and motivation about meditation drastically. He was so clear and lucid in explaining and in guiding meditation practice that, to my great surprise, I found myself looking forward to getting up at 5:30 each morning to meditate for an hour before breakfast! This is quite a contrast to my usual habit of waking up, getting a cup of coffee, and going back to bed with it until I feel awake.

I have continued regular meditation, of both the concentrative and insight kinds, since that conference. I would not describe myself as particularly "good" at it yet, but I am enormously better at it than I used to be, continuing to improve, and enjoying it.

I had the following discussion with Shinzen in 1990 to clarify the ways in which he had adapted classical meditative practice to make it more suitable for Westerners.
Charles T. Tart: One of the interests we share is how you take the spiritual wisdom of the East, the deep knowledge, and put it into forms that make it efficiently accessible to Westerners. Obviously people can take an attitude that, “These are the traditional, sacred forms: what was good enough for the Buddha should be good enough for me. If I struggle enough, maybe I'll get it.” As Westerners we are concerned that some of the traditional forms may actually be almost inaccessible or misleading to people in our culture. We want to transmit deep spiritual knowledge as efficiently as possible.

You have been trained in the traditional spiritual methods in the East in considerable depth, and I know that you have had to make many modifications in these methods in your attempts to share some of what you learned with fellow Westerners. So I would like you to talk about specific steps you have taken to adapt the Eastern technology you learned, using the knowledge that's behind it, so that it will come across in a form useful for Westerners.

Shinzen Young: I remember quite clearly the point in my practice when I made a conscious decision to experiment and Westernize. That was about eight years ago.

CTT: How long had you been back from Asia?

SY: About six years.

I took a cue from Buddhist history itself. As you probably know, there are three cultural regions where Buddhism has spread, Southeast Asia, Eastern Asia and Tibet. Within those three there is a convenient correlation between geography and the historical forms developed in India where Buddhism originated. The early form of Indian Buddhism is preserved in Southeast Asia, the middle forms went into Eastern Asia, and the later forms went into Tibet and Nepal.

Out of the three, Southeast Asia (Theravada) and the Tibetan-Nepalese tradition (Vajrayana) pretty much represent a preservation of Indian models. There has been, of course, some modification to fit into the cultures there, particularly in the case of Tibet. There you had the Tibetan shamanic influence, which easily combined with the Vajrayana Buddhism imported from India. But Southeast Asian Theravada and Tibeto-Nepalese Vajrayana are still basically preservations, with some amplification, of Indic forms.

In the Eastern Asian cultural area (China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam), however, we have much more modification and
change. That modification took place primarily in China. The situation Buddhism encountered in coming to China was quite different from that of either Southeast Asia or in Tibet. In the two latter cases, it came into basically tribal cultures. But China was already an ancient and distinct civilization when Buddhism was introduced there some 2,000 years ago.

At a certain period the Chinese started to "Sinify" the imported tradition, to make Buddhism into something Chinese. I think that happened when they had produced enough deeply developed meditators who were comfortable with modifying tradition. I took a cue from that. I thought: Buddhism coming into the West is equivalent to its coming into China: it is encountering a highly developed civilization. In fact, we have a lot of things the Chinese didn't have. Because the pace of cultural change here is much faster, we can expect that it's not going to take centuries, but perhaps just a few generations for Buddhism to become rather highly modified in the West.

CTT: Now that is a big difference, isn't it? When it went into China, it went into a very stable culture. Here it's coming into a rapidly changing culture.

SY: That's correct. What took centuries in China may take just decades here. So I took my cue from that. I consciously thought about the differences between my culture of birth, American, and the culture of Asia within which Buddhism is now embedded.

CTT: What were some of the main differences you saw?

FACTOR I: EGALITARIANISM VS. HIERARCHY

SY: First, Asian cultures are highly formal and hierarchical, American culture is quite informal and egalitarian. So I thought that a teaching style that would work here would not separate the teacher and students. You probably notice that when I teach I don't sit any higher than the students. I mean that both literally and metaphorically. That is an egalitarian kind of thing. As to informality, when I sit down to give a Dharma talk there is a chatty quality. When people come to me for interviews, they don't bow, they don't do anything in particular. We are just a couple of people sitting, talking, sharing the practice.

By the way, I should say before we get more detailed, that in no way do I feel that the Westernized forms of Buddhism are necessarily better than the Eastern ones, even for Westerners.
There are going to be some Westerners who really want the ambiance and the energy that goes with the traditional forms. Especially those who are drawn either to Zen or Vajrayana derive a lot from the milieu associated with those traditions. On the other hand, there are a large number of people who would like to get on with the work of enlightenment, and not have as a prerequisite for that, for example, the mastering of chopsticks or chanting in Sino-Japanese.

You know, you'll starve in some Zen centers unless you can use chopsticks really well.

*CTT:* I am reminded of a traditional story I've heard about the Buddha when he went to visit a king. The king was very interested in Buddhism and wanting to get enlightened, so the Buddha started to tell him about the rules of the monastic life. But the king said, "No, wait a minute. I like being a king, and I do the job well, and people need my services. I don't want to give up being a king." The Buddha supposedly worked out a different set of practices for someone who wants to continue being a king. That is rather parallel to the American situation in many ways: we like our rich lives.

*SY:* I don't think that what I'm doing in consciously Westernizing traditional practice represents an improvement in any absolute sense. I wouldn't want anyone to think that I was implying that one should come to this and not go to a very traditional type setting. I think it very much depends on the individual. I know some Easterners that prefer Western teachers and many Westerners who do better with completely traditional approaches.

*CTT:* I think you're quite right to emphasize that point. There is a distinction in Buddhism between the absolute and the relative levels. On the absolute level, truth is truth. It is on the relative level that we may talk about the "efficiency" or the appeal of various approaches. Clearly there are individual differences, as well as cultural differences in what works best. That is very important. For some people, the traditional Eastern approach might work well. But my suspicion is that it is not the way for the majority of us Westerners.

**FACTOR II: PRACTICALITY WITHOUT DOCTRINE AND RITUAL**

*SY:* A second deliberate adaptation of the teachings to Western culture involved pragmatism. Westerners want things that are practical, so I decided to teach something that is simple and really works. That led me to emphasize the meditation
aspects, because that is practical and gets down to the nitty gritty.

People have all sorts of belief systems in our culture. They have different religions, or may lack any religion. I wanted to develop an approach that would cut across belief systems as much as possible, so that people wouldn't think that they had to become "Buddhists" in order to do Buddhist practice.

So I boiled it down to the very basics of (a) developing concentration, and (b) of using this concentration to observe. This is something that a person with any belief system can benefit from.

I am quite aware that some people would say that this approach is pretty dangerous because your belief system is related to the experiences that you have. They would argue that people should be educated into a Buddhist belief system if they are going to practice Buddhist type meditation. I think it is a matter of judgment. I just decided that I was going to deemphasize doctrine and see how that worked, experiment with it.

CTT: Let me push you a little bit on that. From my research on altered states of consciousness, it is quite clear that the influences brought to bear on a person in an altered state can be extremely important in shaping the content of the experience. Not absolutely: some experiences have a certain inherent quality and content in and of themselves. But the set, the setting, the events of the moment and, particularly, the belief systems and expectations the person brings to the experience can have tremendous shaping influence when their consciousness shifts into a different mode.

So let me make the traditional argument even more forcefully: perhaps there is something inherently dangerous about shaking loose our ordinary habit patterns, our ordinary mental moorings and opening people up to many other possibilities unless you have already given them a quite thorough belief system, a set of expectations designed to make certain desirable events highly probable. Perhaps meditation will induce or reinforce quite negative things in people if their expectations have not been set up to protect them. So perhaps you are doing something dangerous by not being sure that people are thorough believers in a Buddhist view. I'm thinking particularly about the morality inherent in Buddhism as a religion as an important protective element.

SY: In point of fact, it is a relative, not an absolute deemphasis of the formal belief system in my teaching. There
has to be some appropriate belief structure in a person as a foundation for meditation. I deliberately picked what I consider to be the minimal belief structure necessary, but one that would also be sufficient to keep a person out of trouble. What that boils down to is describing the entire path in terms of four practices. We might call them (1) basic morality, (2) concentration power, (3) insight through observation, and (4) habitual loving kindness. The original terms in Pali, the classical language of early Buddhism, are *sila, samadhi, panna* and *mettd*.

I would argue that it does not take a conversion experience, a great leap of faith, or abandoning your present belief system to see the value of these four practices. As for the morality, I do not go into great detail. I just tell people that basic morality is five-fold: not to take life, not to take what is not given, not to lie, not to do sexual practices that are harmful to people, and not to indulge in intoxicants. The basis of Buddhist morality is not to harm. That's that. Everybody believes in these basic precepts, more or less!

No one can argue with the value of having a focused mind, as opposed to having an unfocused mind, even for the achievement of secular tasks. If a person directs his or her focused mind towards observing ordinary experience, insights will begin to come. Negativities will also come up; these should simply be observed until their force dies away. That leads to a natural state of love and good will. Well, what I've just presented to you is a belief system, but it is so universal and so minimal that just about everybody, from a Marxist to a Moslem should be able to accept it.

*CTT*: I could ask for more depth on this but let me bring you back. You were describing the important differences between our culture and Eastern ones. What are some others?

*SY*: OK, let me review a moment. The first thing I decided to do was to make the teachings informal and egalitarian. The second was to minimize doctrine and ritual so as to get the broadest possible base, to be practical. The most practical thing in Buddhism is meditation.

I should also say this: Buddhism is rather unique in the world's spiritual traditions in that it is the only religion in which you do not have to buy the whole package at once. If you become a Moslem, for example, it means you buy the whole Moslem package, the whole belief system. Buddhism encourages people to accept those aspects that work for them. For example, somebody may see the value of developing concentration or...
compassion but may find it impossible to believe in many lives, rebirth. All traditional Buddhists believe in reincarnation, and the Buddha himself definitely believed it, but if a person does not believe it, they can still take other parts of Buddhism, like the concentration and compassion, and use those, and that is fine. As experience grows, one may want to buy more of the package.

Buddhism may not be a religion in the usual sense of the word. Buddhism is more like a medicine, I would say, than a religion or philosophy. It is something with a practical goal, the permanent eradication of all suffering. Put alternatively, Buddhism is a technology for attaining happiness independent of conditions and circumstances.

Also, Buddha is the only major spiritual figure who denied the role of authority per se, including his own authority. He said you should accept something because it is reasonable to you or it agrees with your direct experience and you have found it useful. You do not have to accept it because it is in some old book, or even because he, the Buddha, said it. There is a very famous Sutra (scripture) the discourse to the Kalamas, where he talks about that.

_CIT_: Yes, there was an excellent translation of that Sutra in a recent issue of _Inquiring Mind_ (Gates, 1989):

Do not believe in anything simply because you have heard it.

Do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down for many generations.

Do not believe in anything because it is spoken and rumored by many.

Do not believe in anything simply because it is found written in your religious books.

Do not believe in anything merely on the authority of your teachers and elders.

But after observation and analysis, when you find that anything agrees with reason, and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it.

_SV_: Creativity and experimentation are what I find most exciting in the teaching of meditation. The Buddhist tradition gives me permission to do this. I am in no hurry, I will be spending the next several decades exploring this. Every retreat I lead is a little different. I keep questioning. What techniques
will bring the deepest experience to the most people in this culture?

CTT: Can you flesh that out by giving a couple of examples of traditional techniques you had learned in Eastern culture that turned out not to work well? And then a couple of techniques that you have modified through experimentation to a form that you have found does seem to work well?

SY: OK, let me think for a moment.

CTT: I almost started to tease you by saying, "Remember your failures as well as your successes," but, actually, once you are in the experimental mode, there are no "failures." You experiment to find out what happens. If you try certain techniques and they do not produce much in the way of results, that is new knowledge that you have gained. In principle, that is just as useful as finding you get results from some other sorts of techniques. I think of this experimental mode as quite Western, but perhaps when Buddhism was first introduced into China that experimental mode was quite popular for a while. But then, once some techniques that seemed to work well had been found, experimentation probably largely died out and Buddhism got more tradition bound. Anyway, what did you find?

FACTOR III: DRAWING OUT EXPERIENCE

OK, here is an example. When I first started to teach, I would have people meditate, observing some aspect of experience like their body sensations. This is basic Vipassana practice. Then I would ask them to try to see that all aspects of the experience were impermanent, insubstantial, that there was no ego inside of it. Experiences just happen, a spontaneous event in nature.

Impermanence and emptiness are very fundamental insights in Buddhism. But people would just sort of look at me; it would go in one ear and out the other. I would say, "Can't you see? It's all impermanent; it's constantly changing." It did not register too well.

So I changed strategy. I would say "Now, I would like you to observe the sensations in the body very carefully. Note each time there is any fluctuation in the sensation. For example, it might change its shape or its intensity or its "flavor." Each time that happens I would like you to verbally note the fact that a change has taken place. Every single time." Then they would sit down and pretty soon they would be noting, "Change, change,
change." Eventually my students would say, "Gee, it's constantly changing. There's nothing solid there at all!"

So what I discovered was that if I asked people to look for certain things, traditional Buddhist concepts, I wouldn't get the results. If I gave valenced, biased description, where I said "Can't you see that it is this as opposed to that?" people wouldn't see it. But if I did it without an agenda, then people got it right away.

When I guide someone in meditation, I have a whole agenda inside myself, a whole menu of possible experiences and insights I may take that person through. But in presenting the practice, I give no suggestions whatsoever that any experience is preferable to another. It took me quite a while to develop that completely unbiased language that draws the experience out of the person. That is an example of an important result of my experiment.

**CIT:** That is a particularly interesting example for me. For years, every once in a while during meditation, I have looked for impermanence and I have never found it. What I suspect is that impermanence is not a distinct experience per se; "impermanence" is a concept you use to describe a general theory about reality based on the actual experience of observing continual change. You can see continual change, but you can't see impermanence.

**SY:** If you can stay long and continuously enough with that simple awareness of constant change, it becomes "insight into the impermanent nature of all compound phenomena."

**CTT:** When I look for impermanence, it is like I can look for a sensation in my knee or my neck or my heart, and then I am looking for a sensation I call impermanence, but I can't seem to find that one. There is a big cultural difference here. Easterners in a Buddhist culture are exposed to the idea of impermanence from birth, but we are not exposed to that, and it is difficult for us to grasp. In fact, I have always tended to take it personally: I must not be meditating correctly if I can't experience impermanence.

**FACTOR IV: USING CONTEMPORARY TERMINOLOGY AND METAPHORS**

**SY:** Here is another way that I decided to Westernize the practice, again taking a hint from what happened to Buddhism.
in China. When Buddhism came into China, it interfaced with the native Chinese systems that already existed there, Confucianism and Taoism. Of those two, Taoism is closest to Buddhism. From early times Taoist spiritual terms were used in China to express Buddhist concepts. That was not always completely successful, but it did help in some ways.

I can give you an interesting historical example. It is said that the Buddha attained "enlightenment." The actual Sanskrit word, bodhi, means "awakening." Of course bodhi is not just any awakening; it is a really big awakening.

Although there are words in Chinese that mean awakening, they needed a term that would convey the absolute nature of bodhi. So they translated "The Buddha attained bodhi" into Chinese as "The Buddha attaining the tao." Tao, or "course," is the Taoist word for the Way, the ultimate truth.

The place where a Buddha sits when he or she attains enlightenment is called bodhimandala, or the circle of awakening. This was translated into Chinese as tao-ch’ang. By extension, in China, Buddhist temples were called tao-ch’ang and in Japan, by a further extension, the term was applied to places for martial arts training. In Sino-Japanese pronunciation the two characters are read do-jo.

So dojo, a word which is now known by anybody who does Eastern martial arts, is actually a Japanese extension of the Chinese term to include a place of physical as well as spiritual training. But most people are not aware that the word contains within it a little bit of the history of the Sinification of Buddhist vocabulary in China.

If Buddhism found it convenient to express itself in Taoist vocabulary in order to reach the Chinese masses, what vocabulary should I draw upon in the West? What is comparable? Wen, it seemed to me there were two areas. I have used them both. One is psychology and the other is the hard sciences, particularly mathematics and physics. In teaching meditation I draw heavily on the vocabulary of psychology and science. I hasten to say, however, that I am not part of the "Aquarian" movement that says, "Oh, this proves Buddhism is true because what it teaches sounds so similar to what quantum physics says."

*CTT:* Yes, you might analyze that kind of fuzzy thinking as, "I cannot really understand physics and I cannot really understand Buddhism, therefore they are the same."
So I am not trying to validate Buddhism by showing that it is similar to science. I simply point out parallel situations in the meditative experience to help make the meditative experience more comprehensible.

Let me give you an example of how science may provide metaphors for meditation. Physics teaches us that we may look upon events in terms of particles (things, entities) or waves (movement, processes). To acknowledge only one of these viewpoints is to miss the real situation. Now consider one's "sense of self"—the moment to moment perception of "I am." When it comes to this, most people are absolutely limited to the particulate paradigm—self as fixed entity, separate particle. Meditation provides an alternative mode of experiencing the self: the self as a fluid process, an interactive wave.

In physics and engineering, the wave paradigm is effective in some applications, while the particle paradigm works better for others. So it is in life. Sometimes, as when planning or reflecting upon one's conduct, we must fixate the self. Other times we need to let it dissolve in order to complete and liberate the self through engaging with people or objects. Furthermore, we need to be able to rapidly shift between these two modes of experiencing self many times during the day. Most people are one-sided, always experiencing self as particle, unfamiliar with us if as wave. The result is suffering and incompleteness.

Before we go any further, I would like to elaborate on one other point related to the issue of practicality we were discussing earlier. It deals with why I teach the form of meditation called Vipassana, as opposed to either Zen or Vajrayana. This was not because I felt that it was in some way superior or because Vipassana is close to the original Buddhist traditions. I decided to teach from the Vipassana tradition because (a) it is the easiest of the traditions to divorce from its cultural trappings, and (b) it is linear and step-by-step, perhaps to a fault. Vipassana can be flowcharted! Indeed, I once flowcharted the entire procedure, reducing the whole thing to looping and branching relationships, using standard flowchart templates.

**FACTOR V: THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORT IN PRACTICE**

If I asked you what were the most important things you have learned in teaching meditation in the West, what would they be?
the problem of constant reinforcement

SY: If I were to try to distill my fifteen years of experience as a meditation teacher, to report what stands out in my mind, I would emphasize two things. These are at the core of my efforts to develop an effective approach.

The first observation is this: When individuals who really want to grow and change, who really want to become free from suffering, are exposed to a presentation about how Vipassana meditation works, most of them want to pursue it. They say, "Yes, this makes sense, it is very rational, I can see how it is a step by step development. The underlying premise is consonant with my basic belief system, and it is something that I would like to do."

The great majority of people that I come in contact with, have a reaction like that. That is observation number one.

Observation number two is this: of those people, only a tiny fraction actually persevere with the practice.

What has come in between? What is the problem? I think the problem is that they do not get the constant reinforcement that they need in order to keep the practice up. They do not get it from the culture; they do not get it from their social milieu.

In the past, people traditionally went to monasteries for this kind of training. Those that do not know much about monasteries may think of a monastery as a place where you go to get away from things. I think of a monastery, however, as a place you go to get reinforcement for your practice. So it seems to me that what people need, especially in the West, is a structure that is going to reinforce their initial desire to do this practice.

So how can someone involved in family and career get support even remotely comparable to that of a monastery? What I would like to see is the creation of a new kind of profession—"meditation facilitator." This would be a kind of coach or sponsor who mentors the new meditator through the first critical years of his or her practice. The new meditator would see the facilitator on a regular appointment basis, not just to discuss practice, but also to get personalized, interactive guided meditation sessions. The facilitator would also communicate frequently by phone in order to reinforce meditation in daily life. The facilitators would be trained by senior teachers, and receive monetary compensation for their work. They would work on a sliding scale so that no one was ever denied this service because of lack of funds. This would provide a "right livelihood" for people who are on the path and would like to...
spend their days helping others. but are not interested in training to be psychotherapists or counselors.

Let me tell you how I got this idea.

**PSYCHOTHERAPY AND MEDITATION**

A number of years ago I taught a class on meditation just for psychotherapists. I taught them meditation from three perspectives. One, a therapist, being a human being, can benefit from meditating, because any human can benefit from meditating. From that point of view, the class was not meditation for therapists but just meditation for humans.

The second perspective was the advantage for the therapist of being in a meditative state while they conduct therapy. Such a state creates the attentional focus and emotional dispassion that is a good therapeutic milieu. Historically, Freud had emphasized a special, unfixated attentional state, which he called "evenly hovering awareness." He felt that it was absolutely pivotal to the success of the therapeutic process. So the advantage of a meditative state for the therapist was already known in the West, although it seems to have been downplayed after Freud.

The third thing I taught them was that some clients, but of course not all, could be guided by the therapist into a meditative state, talking about their issues and doing their therapy within the "witness state." I showed them ways of guiding clients into meditation.

One result was interesting and unanticipated. These psychologists and psychiatrists from my class started to come to me and say, "Shinzen, I would like to have a private, guided session with you? Can I make an appointment and how much do you charge?" I sort of freaked out, because I would never have thought of myself as charging for teaching meditation, or as working on a weekly appointment basis. I had strong misgivings about taking money for teaching the Dharma. But I was in an experimental mood, and I wanted to see what would happen.

**CIT:** What was the Buddha's traditional hourly rate?

**SY:** Yeah! I asked around and I found out the cheapest going rate for any kind of therapy was about $40 a session. So, with a straight face it was hard to maintain it, but I did-I said, "I charge $40 per session, and yes, you can make an appointment."
I will see you every week for the next two months and then we will re-evaluate the usefulness of these sessions." Traditionally a therapist works for 50 minutes, but I figured I would give my "clients" their money's worth; I stayed with them for at least an hour and a half, and meticulously guided them in meditation.

I would give them a focusing technique and after a little while have them report what had happened. Then I would access my own past experience in meditation, what I had done when similar phenomena had come up for me. Several possible strategies would present themselves. I would pick the one that I thought suitable for that person and suggest that they try it. After a few minutes I would get feedback and see whether to reinforce that procedure or try a different one. I call this "interactive guided meditation."

So I started to relate to meditators as though I were a therapist, and I discovered that I had keyed into an important archetype of the culture.

People that came for these sessions did so well in their meditation! They just skyrocketed in their retreat experience and in their daily sitting. It really worked! I think it worked for two reasons. It worked because many Westerners need that type of meticulous one-on-one personal coaching. It also worked because I was keying into an archetype of the culture. The Buddha with his psychic powers and his renunciation, his orange robe and begging bowl certainly represent an archetype for ancient India. "Therapist," a paid professional that one sees weekly for life guidance, is an archetype in our culture.

CTT: Summing up, what characterizes the serious lay practitioner, both Eastern and Western? What else is a part of practice besides a formal meditation period? What distinguishes one of your serious students from other people besides the fact that they may sit down for a fixed half hour each day to do something special?

SY: When you begin your meditation practice, you experience meditation as one of your activities during the day. Somewhere along the line, a figure-ground reversal takes place, and you begin to experience all of the activities of the day as happening within meditation. So actually only your body leaves the cushion in the morning, not your consciousness. It seems as though you are literally meditating all day. The events of life are surrounded by a tremendous sense of peace, presence and focus.
In addition to that, you carry with you a basic beneficence that comes through the pores of your being. It influences the people around you, in subtle, if not overt, ways. You feel that every single thing you do, even the most casual activity, is in some way purifying the environment around you.

In Buddhism, the word for heaven is "Pure Land." Each day through what you put out, you are making your world into a Pure Land. And this just happens, without effort. Life takes on a kind of magic quality.

I am not interested in taking people who are, say, Christian, and getting them to convert to Buddhism. I am interested in providing them with the internal skills that make it possible to take Christianity, or any other religion, to its seldom achieved ultimate.

REFERENCES


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