

Meditation
as
Contemplative Inquiry

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When Knowing Becomes Love

Arthur Zajonc

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CHAPTER ONE

Overview of the Path

The longest journey is the journey inward.

— DAG HAMMARSKJÖLD

Before taking up specific exercises, we need to consider the nature of solitude and its place in contemplative practice. In addition we will concern ourselves with the ethical foundation of meditation, which is essential for a proper orientation to the contemplative path. With these preliminaries behind us we can then turn to the varieties of practice, first those that are intended to buttress our psychological health and secondly those that draw our inner gaze beyond the self. We will move from the establishment of humility and reverence as fundamental moods to the cultivation of inner harmony, emotional balance, and attention. With these inner accomplishments we can take up the selfless work of meditation and contemplative inquiry whose fruits can be of use to ourselves and others.

This chapter will provide a short overview of the path as I understand it. Consider it as an overture to the fuller treatment given in subsequent chapters. The elements, themes, and motifs announced here will be expanded and explored amply later. I will give a deeper treatment of the stages and difficulties associated with the contemplative journey, together with many suggestions for exercises. As we set out we should remember that although the horizon of contemplative practice is infinite, each and every step we take is already of inestimable value.

Contemporary Contemplative Inquiry

On August 12, 1904, Rainer Maria Rilke wrote to the young poet Franz Kappus concerning solitude:

To speak of solitude again, it becomes always clearer that this is at bottom not something that one can take or leave. We *are* solitary. We may delude ourselves and act as though this were not so. That is all. But how much better it is to realize that we are so, yes, even to set out by assuming it.¹⁰

Contemplative practice means, among other things, becoming practiced in solitude. This does not mean brooding or self-indulgent musing, but instead practicing a special form of recollection of the past, mindfulness for the present, and envisioning of the future in a manner that is enlivening, clear, and insightful. We learn to be properly solitary, and to carry the depth of our solitude into the world with grace and selflessness.

Therefore it is important to set aside times for reflection, contemplative exercises, and meditation. It may be thirty minutes in the morning or evening or both. Regardless of the amount of time spent, the fruits of such activity are many and significant. For example, when we practice finding a right relationship to the troublesome thoughts and feelings that occupy our inner life, we learn to form right judgments and habits of mind that benefit us in daily life. The angry reaction that would normally leap from our lips or the violence we might let loose on our momentary adversary is caught short. We have come to know the troubling dynamic well from having rehearsed it inwardly, and now the real-world version no longer finds us off guard and unaware. We grow to become, as Daniel Goleman terms it, “emotionally intelligent.”¹¹ I will return to this and other benefits of contemplative practice later, but my point here is that long after the practice session is over, its fruits continue to appear.

10. Rilke letter of August 12, 1904, to Franz Kappus, trans. Stephen Mitchell, *Letters to a Young Poet* (New York: Vintage, 1986), p. 87; or the German in *Von Kunst und Leben*, p. 159.

11. Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995).

We need not, in fact should not, attempt to meditate all the time. The time we set aside for it in the morning or evening should have a start and a finish. The fruits of meditation, however, will penetrate all aspects of our life, benefiting not only us but others as well. Setting aside times specifically for contemplative practice may be the most obvious and yet sometimes the most difficult part of the work. It inevitably seems that once the time and place to sit has been found, a forgotten cell phone rings, or the cry of a beloved child pierces the early morning air and closed door. In such moments we sense the truth of the saying that the descent into the stillness of meditation seems to evoke turmoil.

If we are able to move beyond such distractions, whether they are external or internal, the time we give to a practice session can change everything. This time is important, and our appreciation of that importance can help us to make space for it in our busy lives. Certainly contemplative practice can invigorate us and help to settle the turmoil of life, but it also offers the occasion for something more. Through meditation I turn to aspects of the world and myself that I otherwise tend to neglect (such as wandering attention, uncalled-for irritability, and the like), and I do so with a quality of attention that is rare in normal life. We often forget the grandeur of the world we inhabit as well as the mystery of our lives. The simple act of stopping to reflect, and then of holding our awareness—gently but firmly—on these forgotten dimensions of the world and our lives is a service and even a duty. Do you not pause to attend to the child you love even though you are busy? Can you not likewise pause to cultivate solitude, which is the true place of beginning?

Once recognized, silence can become as important as sound, inaction as essential to us as action. Each partner in the pair balances and grounds the other. Once we have discovered this sacral dimension of our contemplative work, its significance increases and we turn to it more readily. I come to realize that in the end this work is not about me, my improvement or development. Contemplation is far more objective and its value far more real than I first recognized. My inner activity while meditating has intrinsic worth. Getting started is important not merely for me, but for its own sake.

Contemplative practice within a group, especially with guidance from a trusted and competent teacher, is often experienced as easier. The

presence of others and the efforts they are making seem to resonate with our own effort, enhancing and compensating for the meagerness of our resources. Yet the work of meditation is, in the end, a solitary work. It is ours to do, and no amount of assistance can or should relieve us of it. Collective meditation should be guided by the principle of freedom within the group. As long as our individuality is honored, or, in Rilke's language, as long as our solitude is respected and protected, then our work in freedom with others can be an important aid.

Solitude is more than a key to contemplative practice. As Rudolf Steiner once stated and Rilke emphasized, solitude is in fact the main characteristic of our modern age, and will become ever more so in the future.¹² Rilke identified the origins of this characteristic with the birth of modern lyric poetry. In his essay "Modern Lyric" of 1898, the twenty-three-year-old Rilke pointed to 1292 as the dawn of the modern lyric, the birth of poetry and literature as we know it. The event to which Rilke refers is the publication by Dante of his small collection of poems entitled *Vita nuova* (*The New Life*) in which a description of his unrequited love for Beatrice was given to the world. For Rilke, Dante's poems and his solitary struggle with love marked the onset of the central characteristic of modern human consciousness: solitude. "Since the first attempt of the individual to *find himself* in the flood of fleeting events, since the first struggle in the midst of the clamor of daily life to hearken to the deepest solitude of one's own being—there has been the modern lyric" (Rilke's emphasis).¹³

Hence "in the midst of the clamor of daily life" we are already hermits and will remain so for a long time to come. As a modern soul one is called to the "deepest solitude of one's own being." Our task is therefore not to deny this fact but to accept it and move forward with that certain understanding. Through patient practice we can deepen the quiet we all carry in us. Surprisingly, we will discover through solitude that a new fullness to human relationships unfolds, and we will learn to practice a new kind of love that can flourish between solitudes. Instead of isolating us, solitude

12. Rudolf Steiner, *Die Verbindung zwischen Lebenden und Toten*, Gesamtausgabe 168 (Dornach, Switz.: Rudolf Steiner Verlag, 1995), pp. 94–95.

13. Rainer Maria Rilke, "Moderne Lyrik" in *Von Kunst und Leben* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 2001), p. 9 (my translation).

will connect us to the depth of the other in ways that were impossible before.¹⁴ The love that treasures the individual—the solitude of the other—is the principle on which we will one day build communities based on freedom.¹⁵ Going forward, solitude and love will be inseparable.

The Cultivation of Virtue

When the meditative schooling of attention first made its way into the West from Asia, one of the first groups to take advantage of it was the Mossad, Israel's version of the CIA. The usefulness of *samadhi* or "single-pointed attention" to them was obvious. The ends to which they were directing their attention were classified. Since then many military organizations, basketball teams, and businesses have used contemplative methods to enhance their performance and reduce stress. I raise this issue less because I want to debate the appropriateness of teaching meditation to commandos (the martial arts have long combined meditation with martial action) than because I wish to point out the disconnection between virtue and contemplative practice. Meditation, even meditative accomplishment, does not automatically guarantee that the meditator will possess good moral judgment or practice an ethical life.

Stories to this effect are legion, both ancient and modern. The Indian sage Milarepa (c. 1052–1135) is said to have used his miraculous *siddhis* or psychic powers to bring devastation to an avaricious landlord who treated his parents inhumanely. Anger management problems have evidently been an issue for a long time even among masters. In recent years it seems that nearly every spiritual tradition has been plagued by financial or sexual scandals. Skilled and well-intentioned teachers are not immune to these temptations. All this points to a fundamental truth, namely, for meditative practice to have value as a positive contribution to the world it must rest on the foundations of a separate effort committed to moral development. In the Buddhist tradition this is called *sila* or "virtue," and it is held to be

14. Thomas Merton, "Love and Solitude," *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1985).

15. Arthur Zajonc, "Dawning of Free Communities for Collective Wisdom," http://www.collectivewisdominitiative.org/papers/zajonc_dawning.htm.

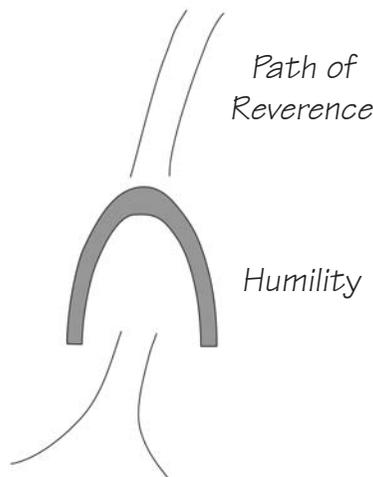
the cornerstone of the Noble Eightfold Path. Within this tradition the practices of right speech, right action, and right livelihood are understood as essential to moral development. For those undertaking training within the Buddhist tradition, ethical precepts or rules are observed: five for lay practitioners and 227 rules for a fully ordained monk.

In our own time the strict adherence to a set of precepts, no matter how carefully formulated and well-intended, rightly violates our sense of autonomy. We may value moral guidance, but we ourselves have become the final arbiters of moral judgment. We possess the ability, if we quiet our passions, to discern clearly the right choice in any situation. When the medieval mystic Marguerite Porete wrote of the virtues, "I take leave of you," she was burned at the stake for the "Heresy of the Free Spirit."¹⁶ She was ahead of her time in asserting that her love of God would be sufficient to guide her life. Linking her views to her renowned predecessor, she quoted St. Augustine's famous line, "Love, love, and do what you will," but that did not help. The Church could only envisage the chaos that would ensue if everyone followed his or her own sense of right and wrong. While we can sympathize with them, it now seems clear that the moral conditions for contemplative practice cannot and need not be imposed from the outside. In a sense, we are all (or should be) heretics of the free spirit.

Instead of rules, the practitioner can cultivate a set of moods or fundamental attitudes that are conducive to virtue. When practice is grounded in these moods or attitudes one feels that a proper moral foundation has been laid. The first mood is that of *humility*. Steiner calls humility the portal or gate through which the contemplative must pass.¹⁷ Through it we set self-interest aside and acknowledge the high value of the other. Humility leads out onto the "path of *reverence*." Here I am not speaking of reverence for a person, but rather of reverence for the high principles that we seek to embody. The fundamental moods of humility and reverence are incompatible with egotism, which is a source of much moral confusion.

16. Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of the Simple Soul in Medieval Writings on Female Spirituality*, ed. Elizabeth Spearing (New York: Penguin, 2002), p. 120ff.

17. Rudolf Steiner, *How to Know Higher Worlds* (Hudson, NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1994), p. 17.



How do we cultivate these attitudes at the outset of a practice session? Here, as always, the individual must be taken into account. What will work for one will hinder another. For the medieval mystics, prayer was a sure doorway; these meditants, like many today, used the words of scripture to cultivate humility and devotion. Other modern contemplatives, however, may find their association with traditional religion to be so problematic that prayer is simply impossible. Many find the way to humility and reverence more easily via the wonder and awe inspired by nature's splendor. Calling to mind the starry night sky or the blue vault of heaven, or perhaps a favorite retreat of our own, such as a special rock, tree, or riverbank, can help us find our way to the portal of humility and the path of reverence.

In many individuals with whom I have worked, I have sensed the deep peace and simple joy they experience on finding the place of inner devotion when they spend time in the practice of prayer or meditation on nature. They often wish to linger here and deepen their devotion, cultivating it not just as a step on the path to contemplative inquiry but as a practice in its own right. While I will speak to this possibility later, for our purposes now we will acknowledge the power of humility, reverence, and devotion, and recognize that these attitudes provide a sound moral foundation for meditation. Their cultivation is a practice in virtue. Every contemplative practice session should begin by passing through the portal of humility and finding the path of reverence.

Inner Well-Being

When first we withdraw from outer activity and attend to the mind we are amazed at the rollicking confusion that generally prevails. Thoughts careen in, as though from nowhere. Our mental day-planner suddenly shows up with three pressing and forgotten engagements that simply must be noted down before we forget them. Or our mind turns to a recent argument with our spouse, and what we should have said to make our case... and so on. At first the very idea that the mind can be still, lucid, and under my control seems a remote likelihood if not an impossibility. Emotions long forgotten or suppressed re-emerge; thoughts seem to possess an irrepressible life, spawning new ones via an associative logic all their own. With the mind in this state, little can be expected of meditation. Therefore the initial task is the cultivation of a mental and emotional balance or inner well-being. Think of it as inner hygiene, if you like. It is an essential and recurrent part of practice, one we never leave behind.

Taxonomies of mental afflictions and negative emotions can be found in Western as well as in Buddhist psychology. Indeed, Buddhism speaks of eighty-four thousand kinds of negative emotion! Yet all eighty-four thousand boil down to five core problems: hatred, desire, confusion, pride, and jealousy.¹⁸ Another useful way to organize disturbances is based on a threefold picture of the inner life of the human being: thinking, feeling, and willing. Each of these areas can show pathological tendencies, which can be noticed by the meditator and for which contemplative exercises can be given. The first order of business, therefore, concerns practices designed to mitigate such disturbances. While there are many such exercises, several of which I will give in chapter three, the exercise I give here is based on one suggested by Rudolf Steiner and concerns care for our emotional life.¹⁹

Normally, we view experiences, emotions, and thoughts from inside. We identify with them. They are us, we are them. In this sense we are

18. Daniel Goleman, *Destructive Emotions* (New York: Bantam Books, 2003), p. 78; B. Alan Wallace, *Tibetan Buddhism from the Ground Up* (Boston: Wisdom Publication, 1993), Chapter 5.

19. Steiner, *How to Know Higher Worlds*, pp. 26–31.

enmeshed in our emotions and thoughts, and we experience a sense of self or identity through them. Such an experience of self is a delusion and a source of problems. The first exercise, therefore, has been selected to provide us with some distance from our own experiences, allowing us to consider them from the outside and work with them from a new vantage point. The discovery of that new and higher vantage point is not always easy, but once we learn the way to it, then the narrow pathway to emotional equanimity can open and allow us to consider the most intense emotional struggles of daily life gracefully from the viewpoint familiar to us from meditation. By way of introduction, I relate an episode from the life of the American civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

During his years of work on behalf of black Americans, Martin Luther King ceaselessly advocated for nonviolent action as a means of drawing attention to the oppression of blacks, especially in the South. He received many threats and suffered several attempts on his life. In one instance his home in Montgomery, Alabama, was bombed while he was at a church meeting.²⁰ The porch and front of the house were heavily damaged. His wife, Coretta, and daughter Yoki were in the back of the house at the time, and no one was hurt. By the time the King arrived, an agitated crowd of hundreds of black neighbors had gathered, ready to retaliate against the police who were there. Their much-loved leader and his family had been attacked. Facing the strong possibility of a race riot, the police asked King if he would address the crowd. King went out onto what remained of his front porch, held up his hands and everyone grew quiet. He said,

We believe in law and order. Don't do anything panicky at all. Don't get your weapons. He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword. Remember that is what God said. We are not advocating violence. We want to love our enemies. I want you to love our enemies. Be good to them. Love them and let them know you love them. I did not start this boycott. I was asked by you to serve as your spokesman. I want it known the length and breadth of this land that if I am stopped this movement will not stop. If I am stopped our work will not stop.

20. Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson (New York: IPM/ Warner Books, 2001), Chapter 8.

For what we are doing is right. What we are doing is just. And God is with us.

When Martin finished, everyone went home without violence, saying “Amen” and “God bless you.” Tears were on many faces. Surely King had felt the same emotions of anger at the attempt on the lives of his family and himself, but he was also able to find a place in himself from which he could speak and act that did not answer hate with hate, but instead could meet hate with love.

In our own lives we experience similar if smaller affronts, but they can lead to long periods of brooding anger and internal agitation. The contemplative exercise begins by selecting from out of past experience an occasion of hatred, jealousy, desire, anger, etc. It should be strong but not overwhelming or too recent. Then, after having found your way to the gateway of humility and the path of reverence, relive the occasion selected. As you call the situation back to mind, it is important to allow the associated negative emotions (desire, pride, anger...) to rise up once again. Feel their force, sense the stir of feelings and the undertow that, if left unchecked, might well lead you back into the dark, uncontrolled emotions of the original situation. Only by allowing these feelings some sway can we practice overcoming them and so learn to hold the situation in a new light. As the emotions begin to take hold, like the arrival of Martin Luther King’s angry neighbors, look within yourself for higher ground, for a place from which to inwardly behold yourself and the entire situation. Encompass the conflicting parts of the drama with your field of attention. Feel the contention between two selves. Move away from the undertow of destructive emotions and take up your place as a witness. Find your way from the mentality of the crowd to the Martin Luther King in you. From your new vantage point, go on to experience the inner dynamics that are at play in the situation.

To come under the sway of negative emotions is to be blinded. When carried away by anger, lust, or jealousy we do not really see who or what is before us. We cannot judge the forces at play or intuit the right way forward. Now, from the new vantage point, attempt to see who really stands before you and what forces are actually active. In the midst of the occurrence, sense the history behind it and the possibility that lies

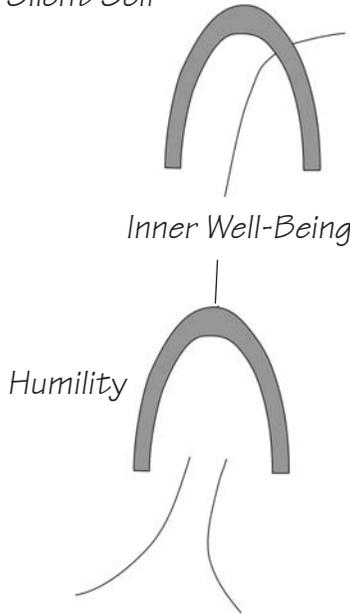
beyond it. The events of the day and indeed your entire life have led to the encounter and to the negative emotions. They are factors that can be seen and appreciated.

If others are involved, imagine them in like manner. They too bring a history and future to the encounter; they too lived through events unknown to you during that day. Do not psychoanalyze yourself or the other person. Rather, simply appreciate, sympathetically and objectively, the complexity and multiple dimensions of the drama that is unfolding. It is not a question of right or wrong but of compassionate understanding. The emotional force of the exchange, though still present, is now viewed and held differently. When we speak and act from this place of compassionate understanding, we are better able to disperse the angry mob, and to answer hate with love.

If we are sailing on the high seas and a storm hits, how do we respond? To simply curse the wind and crashing waves would be immature as well as ineffective. Far better to accept the fact of the storm, over which we have no control, and turn our attention to that over which we do have control, namely ourselves and the sailboat. How much sail should we have up, what should be the heading, is the cargo tied down and are the hatches shut? Life presents us with storms and trials. Often they are not of our making, but how we handle them is. This exercise is, therefore, not designed to empty us of emotion but rather to help guide us through high seas.

It should be clear that we cultivate equanimity *not* so as to be better prepared for a counter attack, but rather so we can find an opening for understanding and reconciliation. From the vantage point of the helm or the high ground we may well discover the petty basis for our jealousies or the illusory grounds for our desires. The insight so gained does not automatically lead to the destruction of jealousy and desire. It is much harder to live our insights than to have them! Nevertheless, a beginning is made by not giving ourselves over to our emotions, but pausing to set aside egotism, seek higher ground, discover the Martin Luther King in ourselves, and so hold the conflict in a far more generous pair of hands. I sometimes call this the Martin Luther King exercise because King, while still possessed of human frailties, seemed so often to live, speak, and act from a high place beyond ego that we can call the “the silent self.”

*Birth of the
Silent Self*



Birth of the Silent Self

In an essay for a student newspaper Thomas Merton wrote of the importance of creative silence in which one turns from what he called the “social self,” which is defined by our manifold interactions with others, toward a “deeper, silent self”²¹—the calm captain of the sailboat or the witness on the hillside. King had found his way innumerable times to this deeper, silent self and so could speak and act from it rather than succumbing to the mob mentality. To reawaken ourselves as Thoreau exhorts us to do, we need to give birth to the silent self in the midst of our conventional life of duty and desire. The cultivation of deep, inner well-being can culminate in the birth of the silent self that is usually obscured and forgotten.

The poet Juan Ramón Jiménez captures the mystery of our deepest identity—our silent self—in his poem “I am not I.”

21. Thomas Merton, reprinted in the *Bulletin of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue*, no. 67, August 2001, p. 1. Also online at www.monasticdialog.com/bulletins/67/merton.htm.

I am not I.
 I am this one
 Walking beside me whom I do not see,
 Whom at times I manage to visit,
 And whom at other times I forget;
 The one who remains silent when I talk,
 The one who forgives, sweet, when I hate,
 The one who takes a walk where I am not,
 The one who will remain standing when I die.²²

Jiménez touches here on the great mystery of our true identity. We will not unravel it in a few lines, but the experience is unmistakable. Having passed through the portal of humility and found the path of reverence, the gradual calming of the mind, together with the enhancement of attention, silences the social self. In the contemplative space that then opens out in us, the common ego vanishes and we begin to operate with what Jiménez calls the not-I. Typically unnoticed, only it endures, only it will remain standing when I die. That is to say, all outer aspects of my persona (gender, profession, factual knowledge...) will pass away, and only the not-I will endure. In Buddhism this is the turn toward *an-atman* or No-Self; in Christianity it is the discovery of the “not I but Christ in me” of St. Paul. It is as if we shift our mode of awareness from center to periphery and in doing so we experience everything anew.²³ An act that was met with anger, or an encounter that stimulated desire, shifts with the birth of the not-I. The anger may well be justified, and we can even value the feeling of moral outrage before turning toward the not-I. Yet once we do birth the not-I we meet our anger or sorrows differently, as King met the angry crowd.

Rumi began his life not as a poet and mystic but as a scholar of Islamic literature and philosophy. His meeting with the mystic Shams-i-Tabriz at thirty-seven began the profound transformation, but it took the tragic

22. In *The Winged Energy of Delight*, trans. Robert Bly (NY: Harper Perennial, 2005).

23. Language fails us in attempting to describe the not-I. As in negative theology or the *via negativa*, the dangers associated with describing the positive attributes of a higher self are unavoidable.

loss of Shams three years later, and the uncontrollable grief that followed, to open up the floodgates of poetry, song, and spiritual communion. It took Rumi many months to turn from the self that only saw loss to the no-self or silent self that could rediscover an inner relationship to Shams even after his passing. When we read Rumi's poem "The Guest House" we do well to remember the depth of his sufferings and sorrows.²⁴

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture, still,
treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

All that we have of Rumi, his poetry and dervish dancing, arose with the birth of his silent self, or with the birth of a higher I that has nothing

24. *Rumi: The Book of Love*, trans. Coleman Barks (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), p. 179.

in common with the conventional social self. The loss of his beloved Shams: even this, Rumi learned to welcome and treat honorably. Surely, his meeting with Shams—his true spiritual friend—was “sent as a guide from beyond,” but so too was his loss. From that loss streamed the thousands of lines that comprise his great poetic work the *Mathnawi*, known for centuries as “the Qur’an in Pahlavi.”

In my experience, if we have practiced the Martin Luther King exercise in the quiet of contemplation, then when we encounter a comparable situation in real life a new resource is available to us. We still meet our nemesis or have that dreaded, fearful confrontation, but now as our emotions rise and the undertow starts to pull, we turn automatically in search of higher ground. We seek out and find the narrow path that leads us to the silent self, a path we often missed in the past. When the onslaught hits we walk a path we have cleared from destructive emotions to generosity. As a consequence, our words and actions originate from a different source, one that seeks mutual understanding and reconciliation instead of victory. We may also find that this way of being in the moment calls forth a like response in the person opposite us. The people we encounter may find themselves speaking with uncommon generosity. It sometimes happens that, in place of violence, respect for one another may emerge, and with it a new beginning to a relationship.

This practice speaks to only one problematic aspect of the inner life, but it can be of enormous help if taken up and practiced consistently. I will describe other practices for inner well-being in chapter three. Through them we ultimately seek not merely to control our emotions but to so transform ourselves that we are generous and gracious by nature in life. Instead of managing our emotions, we are to become different people, in whom these positive characteristics are intrinsic. Such changes do not occur quickly. We are a medium that is remarkably resistant to change. If I use the metaphor of a sculpture, then we are at one and the same time the stubborn stone, the transforming chisel, and the artist’s guiding hands. The physicist Erwin Schrödinger wrote:²⁵

25. Erwin Schrödinger, *What Is Life? Mind and Matter* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 107.

And thus at every step, on every day of our life, as it were, something of the shape that we possessed until then has to change, to be overcome, to be deleted and replaced by something new. The resistance of our primitive will is the psychical correlate of the resistance of the existing shape to the transforming chisel. For we ourselves are chisel and statue, conquerors and conquered at the same time—it is a true continued “self-conquering” (Selbstüberwindung).

If we come even part of the way toward the goal of self-transformation, then the world about us changes as well. It is seen with delight and a steady, open heart. We feel nourished as if by a hidden stream; we have patience and display good judgment. The first Psalm must have been written with this in mind.²⁶

Blessed are the man and the woman
 who have grown beyond their greed
 and have put an end to their hatred
 and no longer nourish illusions.
 But they delight in the way things are
 and keep their hearts open, day and night.
 They are like trees planted near flowing rivers,
 which bear fruit when they are ready.
 Their leaves will not fall or wither.
 Everything they do will succeed.

Meditation and Contemplative Inquiry

The Martin Luther King exercise was concerned with the establishment of a stable and healthy inner life, and with the birth of the silent self or not-I. If this foundation is absent then all further work will be in vain, leading only to delusions and projections. For this reason, preparation is essential to all subsequent contemplative practice. Yet contemplative practice is not exclusively or even primarily concerned with our problems,

26. Stephen Mitchell, *The Enlightened Heart* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 5.

inattention, and afflictions, as important as these may be to us personally. At the center of practice is meditation proper, which is ultimately concerned with what is of value to all human beings. Perhaps better said, it is concerned with the true nature of things.

We understand that the laws of Euclidean geometry do not depend on me or my preferences. Likewise, the discoveries of science are true in all countries and in all times, otherwise antiretroviral drugs and cell phones would not work in Africa as well as America. The world is not organized around me, but has its own nature. When we go beyond exercises designed to promote inner hygiene, we meditate on the way things are. We seek what transcends our personal problems. This does not imply that we are disinterested in the human condition, only that the particular issues we struggle with are left behind. We seek through meditation to confront the depths and heights, the moral and spiritual realities that underlie all things.

I view this as a progression. Having entered through the portal of humility, found the path of reverence, cultivated an inner hygiene, and birthed the silent self, we undertake meditation proper. In meditation we move through a sequence of practices that starts with simple contemplative engagement and then deepen that engagement to sustained contemplative inquiry, which with grace can lead to contemplative insight or knowing.

Although it seeks for objectivity like conventional science, contemplative inquiry differs from science in a very important respect. Where conventional science strives to disengage or distance itself from direct experience for the sake of objectivity, contemplative inquiry does exactly the opposite. It seeks to engage direct experience, to participate more and more fully in the phenomena of consciousness. It achieves “objectivity” in a different manner, namely through self-knowledge and what Goethe in his scientific writings termed a “delicate empiricism.”²⁷

After working hygienically on one’s mental distractions and emotional instability, the practitioner turns his or her attention away from the self and toward a set of thoughts and experiences that reaches far beyond one’s

27. For more on Goethe’s science see David Seamon and Arthur Zajonc, *Goethe’s Way of Science* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), or Henri Bortoft, *The Wholeness of Nature* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1996).

personal life. The possible forms and contents for meditation at this stage are infinitely varied. Meditations can be word-based, image-based, sense-based, and so on. Each of these has something special to offer us, and each will be described in chapter four. Selecting a single flower from this rich bouquet, we can turn to the great spiritual literature of all times, or to the poets and sages who have given expression to thoughts and experiences that are of universal value. We find in them ample resources for meditation. For instance a passage from the Bible or the *Bhagavad Gita*, or a line from a poem by Emily Dickinson, can be used as the subject for meditation.

Take as an example the words attributed to Thales and which were said to have been inscribed on the wall of the Temple at Delphi: “Human being, know yourself!” At first this command seems to plunge us back into ourselves, but this need not be the case. We can take up these words in a way that addresses the human condition generally and not us particularly. At the outset of the meditation, we can simply speak the words, repeating them again and again. Then we can move deeper to “live the words,” holding each one at the center of our attention. With each word or phrase there is an associated image or concept. We work our way back and forth repeatedly between word, image, and concept. The words “know” and “yourself,” for example, take on a multilayered, even infinite character. The meditative verse or line is like a star on the horizon, infinitely far away but providing orientation and inspiration.

Because of its richness there are innumerable ways of working with every meditation. For example, first I slowly sound the line several times inwardly, speaking it silently to myself. I give each word my full attention, sensing the meaning of each word. Once I have settled my attention onto these words, “Human being, know yourself!” I then shift the speaking voice so the words are sounded from out of the periphery, as if they were coming out of the wide reaches of space or from the hills and sky and earth. The words are spoken to me; they are a call from the larger landscape surrounding me. The call is specifically to me as a human being. It is a call to self-knowledge. I hear the call, I pause, and I take up the injunction.

I turn first to myself as physical human being. I sense the earthly, substantial aspect of myself: my physical body. I begin with my limbs, my hands and arms, my feet and legs. I may even move them slightly to feel their physical presence more fully. I then attend to my midsection, my

chest and back. I feel my breath and the beating of my heart. These too are part of my physical nature. Finally I attend to my head, which rests quietly atop the body; its solid round form harbors the senses, now closed to the world. Limbs, midsection, and head form the physical human being. I picture each and their relation to one another. I know the physical human being. I rest for a time with this image and experience within me.

Next I turn to the inner life of thoughts, feelings, and intentions. I notice how my will is carried out mysteriously. My intentions to think or to act culminate, via ways that are unknown to me, in a coordinated flow of movement. I live in that activity, which I can direct. It is part of my nature. In addition I have a rich life of feelings. Feelings of sympathy or antipathy, of exhaustion or alertness, of excitement or remorse are present within me. I sense their importance for me, how much of my life is determined by them or reflected in them. Normally I am only partially conscious of their significance and only partly control them. Their domain is partly veiled yet open to my interest and responsive to my activity. No less than my physical body, these feelings constitute a part of my nature. Finally I turn to my thinking. My life of thought is at once my life and a participant in something that transcends me. I can communicate with others, share thoughts with them. This points to something universal in thinking: like all others, I participate in a universal stream of thinking activity. I know, through experiencing it inwardly, that thinking is a part of my nature.

All three—thinking, feeling, and willing—interweave to form a single self. I have intended every thought within my meditation (unless I have become distracted), and I feel the ebb and flow of feelings associated with each thought. Actions may well ensue from these. The three form a natural unity. They are like the limbs, the midsection, and the head: separable in thought but entwined in reality. All three are needed. All three are me. I quietly live into the three and the one.

Finally, I shift my attention away from the body and even away from my thoughts, feelings, and intentions. I attend instead to a presence or activity that animates but transcends all of these. It lights up in thinking but is not the thought content I experience. This third aspect of myself is the most elusive and invisible, and yet I sense it is the essential and universal aspect that is both truly me and not me alone. I only sense it in reflection. It might be considered my Self, but in a way that is not gendered

or aged or possessed of any particular characteristics. Without it I would be body and mind, physical matter, feelings, thoughts, and habitual intentions, but my originality and genius would be missing. In the language of Thoreau's morning reflections, I would forever be condemned to sleep, because this agency alone has the possibility to waken me to a poetic and divine life. In turning my attention towards this silent self, I sense the intimations of a Self that is no-self. I recognize it also as a part of me, or perhaps I am a part of it.

I then hold together all three aspects—body, soul, and spirit—in the space of my meditation. All of them are me; each is real and present. I feel their presence, their reality, separately and together. I sustain this feeling for as long as I can, and then with clear intention, I empty my consciousness of these images and ideas. I empty myself completely, but I hold my attention open and live silently in the meditative space thus prepared. I have shaped the emptiness with my activity. Now that the space of my meditation is empty of my content, of my thoughts and feelings, I can sustain an open attention without expectation and without grasping. Not attempting to see or hear, I nonetheless may sense or experience something echoing back into that space, presencing itself for a shorter or longer time, changing and then disappearing. Waiting, not grasping, one is grateful. In the words of the *Tao Tè Ching*,²⁸

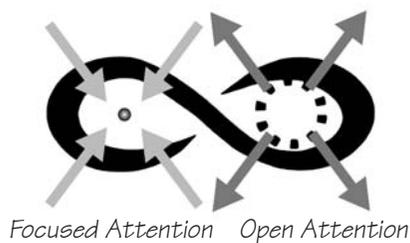
Do you have the patience to wait
till your mud settles and the water is clear?
Can you remain unmoving
till the right action arises by itself?

The Master doesn't seek fulfillment.
Not seeking, not expecting
she is present, and can welcome all things.

I have learned to welcome all things. A deep peacefulness settles into the body and mind. I rest within that peace in gratitude. Sensing that the meditation is complete, I turn back.

28. Stephen Mitchell, *Tao Tè Ching* (New York:HarperCollins, 1988), p. 15.

In meditation we move between focused and open attention. We give our full attention to the individual words of our chosen text, and to their associated images and meanings. Then we move to their relationship to each other so that a living organism of thought is experienced. We allow this experience to intensify by holding the complex of meanings inwardly before us. We may need to re-sound the words, to elaborate the images, to reconstruct the meanings, and to feel again their interrelationships in order to hold on to and intensify the experience. After a period of vivid concentration on the content of meditation, the content is released. That which was held is gone. Our attention opens. We are entirely present. An interior psychic space has been intently prepared, and we remain in that space. We wait, not expecting, not hoping, but present to welcome whatever may or may not arise within the infinite stillness. If a shy, dawning experience emerges into the space we have prepared, then we gratefully and gently greet it: not grasping, not seeking.



I view this as a kind of “breathing” of attention. First we are intently focused on an object of contemplation, but then the object is released and our open, non-focal awareness is sustained. We are breathing not air but the inner light of the mind—what I call *cognitive breathing*. In it we live in a slow tempo, alternating between focused attention and openness. As we breathe the light of attention, we sense a shift in our state of consciousness during the meditation. Feelings of expansion and union, vitality and movement may follow. Such feelings may become especially apparent during the phase of open attention.

While walking across the Boston Common in a state of reflection Ralph Waldo Emerson described his inner experience in vivid terms: “...my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space—all

mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal being circulate through me.”²⁹ In this famous passage Emerson writes of participating in a reality larger than himself, one that reaches far beyond the small ego of conventional consciousness. His social self, his persona has vanished, and the currents of the Universal being circulate through him. Emerson’s experience places before us the complex issue of contemplative experience.

The Journey Home

The journey home is as important as the journey out. Having lived our way out through the words, “Human being, know yourself,” we can sound them once again inwardly as we return. When we first heard these four words their fullness was not yet apparent, but now that we have meditated them a depth or aura of meaning pervades them. On the return journey we hear the words differently; they carry within them layers of experience and images. We seek to integrate that richness of experience into our lives as we journey home.

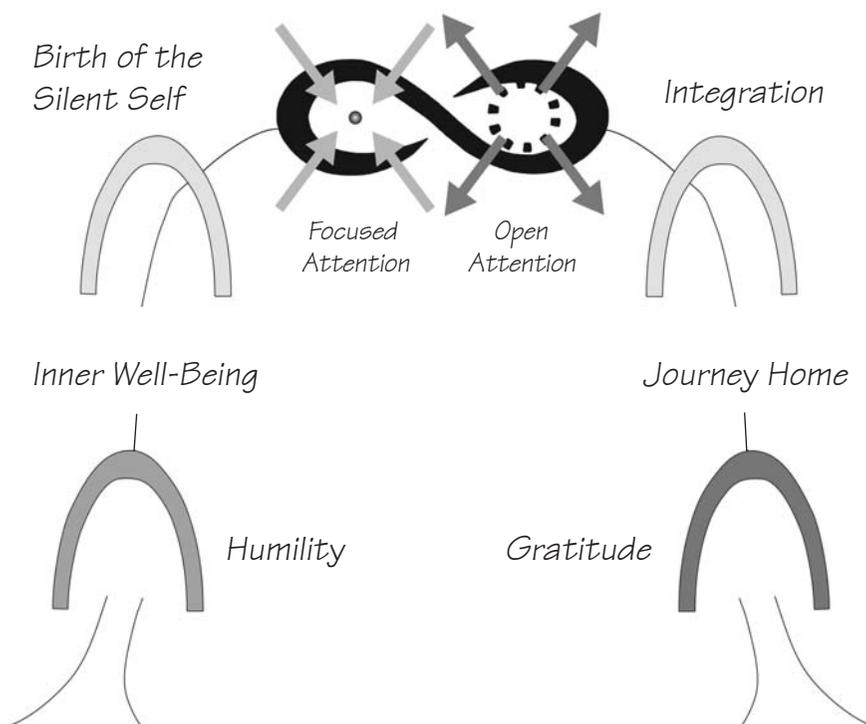
We have been born to a life of service and tasks. These are important. Meditation is no escape. It is only a preparation for life. We come back to ourselves deepened, more awake, and reaffirmed by our contact with the infinite, with the mysteries of our own nature, with the divine. If our meditation has been successful, we may even be reluctant to return home. Such reluctance, however, is not in keeping with the moral foundations of love and selflessness we laid at the outset. The fruits of the meditative life are not for us to hoard but to share. Contemplation is properly undertaken as a selfless act of service, and so the return home is the true goal. If we have lived rightly into the sacred space of meditation then we will be more fit, more insightful, more loving in life.

If we entered through the portal of humility, then we exit through the portal of gratitude. There are an infinite number of ways to say thank you. So too are there countless ways to close a meditation session. In the

29. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature 1836,” *Selected Essays* edited by Larzer Ziff (New York: Penguin Books, 1992) p. 39.

Buddhist tradition one seals the meditation by dedicating its fruits to benefit all sentient beings that they may be free from suffering. In other traditions one closes with a prayer of gratitude, such as Psalm 131:³⁰

Lord, my mind is not noisy with desires,
 and my heart has satisfied its longing.
 I do not care about religion
 or anything that is not you.
 I have soothed and quieted my soul,
 like a child at its mother's breast.
 My soul is as peaceful as a child
 sleeping in its mother's arms.



30. Psalm 131, trans. Stephen Mitchell, *The Enlightened Heart*.

Contemplative Experience

With contemplative practice comes contemplative experience, whether of the type reported by Emerson or myriad other variants. What are we to make of such experiences?

The contemplative traditions take a wide range of viewpoints concerning the significance of experiences had during meditation. What is the proper attitude of the contemplative toward such experience? At one extreme we find the sixteenth-century words of St. John of the Cross, himself a deep contemplative. After laying out with remarkable precision a list of contemplative experiences, he advises that we turn away from all such as distractions from the main task as he saw it, the establishment of faith.

We must disencumber the intellect of these spiritual apprehensions by guiding and directing it past them into the spiritual night of faith. A person should not store up or treasure the forms of these visions impressed within him, neither should he have the desire of clinging to them. In doing so, he would impede himself by what dwells within him (those forms, images, and figures of persons), and he would not journey to God through the negation of all things.... The more one desires darkness and annihilation of himself regarding all visions, exteriorly or interiorly receivable, the greater will be the infusion of faith and consequently of love and hope, since these three theological virtues increase together.³¹

Likewise, in the Buddhist tradition the experiences had during meditation are considered a sideshow on the path to enlightenment. They can become a new domain to which we become just as attached as to the sense world. As such, meditative experience can be viewed as another source of suffering and a detour or distraction from the ultimate goal. St. John of the Cross had many profound experiences, but like the Buddhists he also preached detachment, warning against our “desire to cling to them.” This grasping impedes us on our journey to God, as he puts it.

31. St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mt. Carmel*, Chapter 23.

St. John of the Cross therefore advocates that we embrace the deep and dark night of faith.

On the other hand, the Gnostic and mystical traditions of all peoples have treasured meditation's illumination of consciousness and the insights that derive from contemplative experience. Texts concerned with such experiences can be found in every indigenous culture and in every faith tradition. The Harvard psychologist William James sought out those who had had robust mystical experiences, and he wrote of the importance of a science of such experience. Rudolf Steiner's detailed presentation of his own experiences is an extraordinary example of a modern, scientifically oriented, and philosophically trained contemplative who is writing and speaking directly out of his meditative experience. I place myself within this contemplative lineage and believe that much benefit can derive from continued work in it. The potential value of contemplative experience—not only for the meditator, but also for society—requires that we take meditative experiences seriously.

In order for contemplative inquiry to take its place among humanity's cherished ways of coming to true insight, many must take up its methods, apply them with care and consistency, and communicate their experiences to one another to reach consensus. The stages of contemplative inquiry include all those I have described from the moral foundation of humility and reverence, through inner hygiene, to meditation on a particular content. That content can be a research issue or question. I will describe much more fully in later chapters the scope and practices of contemplative inquiry as I view it, but in brief it is the application of attentional breathing to one's research. I believe that in informal and unconscious ways this is already part of the discovery process of creative individuals.

While St. John and the Buddhists are right to warn us concerning the dangers of attachment to exceptional states of consciousness or extraordinary experiences, we can cultivate a healthy, non-grasping orientation toward them. Our attitude, not the experiences themselves, is the potential problem. It is therefore of paramount importance to create a right relationship to contemplative experience, lest it become a distraction from the main goal. In particular, one should refrain from exploiting experiences or even from interpreting them prematurely.

The healthiest attitude is that of simple acceptance, treating such experiences as unexpected phenomena whose significance will be given in time but that need not be understood immediately. The experiences had during meditation may be novel and wonderful, and we can note them appreciatively, but we should refrain from speaking about them except with a trusted teacher, colleague, or friend. In more advanced stages of meditative practice meaning does join to experience, but usually not at the outset. By this I mean that practices beyond what I have described in this chapter can so deepen our engagement that clear insight arises as an integral part of our meditation. We are on a path of knowledge, but patience above all is called for, and the egoism we aimed to leave behind at the first portal to meditation should not be allowed to cloud our vision here. The specifics of these practices will be described toward the end of the book.

While the meditative life is different for each person, key elements are common to most. As I have stressed, we must establish the right moral foundation for meditation through cultivating the attitudes of humility, reverence and selflessness. The true foundation for meditative life is that of love. Once we walk through the portal of humility we soon discover the turmoil of our inner life and the need to care for it. Exercises are undertaken to control and ultimately transform the turmoil of the mind into a state of calm clarity within which a new sense of self—the silent self—can emerge. We need not wait for this to be fully achieved (if we did, we would wait forever) in order to begin meditating on the sublime thoughts of scripture, the mysteries of nature, on our own human constitution, or the research issues with which we are struggling. Finally, we must journey back to life as a fully incarnated being, integrating our contemplative experiences into life, grateful for the time and experiences we have been given, and cognizant that our work in life will be enriched by them. Each day we begin again the patient work of renewal. As Thoreau wrote, “They say that characters were engraven on the bathing tub of King Tching-thang to this effect: ‘Renew thyself completely each day; do it again, and again, and forever again.’”³²

32. Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, p. 60.