

Module 8: Meditation – Stepping Deep

“Come in the silence of solitude, and the vibration there will talk to you with the voice of God, and you will know that the invisible has become visible and the unreal has become real.”

Paramahansa Yogananda

Meditation: Cultivating Deep Listening

Meditation masters from a number of faith traditions have, for thousands of years, exclaimed, “You are more than your thoughts, feelings and sensations.” Or, as the Buddhist like to say, “The thought of your mother is not your mother.” At first, this may sound perplexing and, perhaps, elicit a sense of wonder at what else there might be. There may also be a simple curiosity, “So what? Why is knowing this important?”

The answer to this thoughtful inquiry is no less than profound as the experience of being more than our thoughts, feelings and sensations, witnessed through the process of meditation, begins to free us from the confines of our past conditioning, limiting beliefs and overpowering emotions. We begin to become familiar with the deeper truth of our being and, as a result, begin to free ourselves from limitation. It’s why Jesus said, “Ye shall know the Truth and the Truth shall set you free.”

For me, this experience began many years ago with the first form of meditation I practiced which was traditional sitting meditation, most often called *Vipanasa*, or insight, meditation. I would sit with mindful attention on my breath and later incorporated techniques from Buddhist meditation teacher, Jack Kornfield, such as observing sensations, thoughts and feelings, always using the breath as a kind of home base. It was at this point that I started to get it because, as I would sit, I could see, moment to moment, the continuous changing of sensations, thoughts and feelings. I began to understand, as Swami Satchidananda expressed in *The Living Gita*, “...if you truly *were* your sensations, thoughts and feelings, how could you be *watching* them?” Literally, I started to ask myself, “*Who’s* watching?” And, for the first time, I *knew* that my mind and body was not the same thing as my soul, or as C.S. Lewis said, “You don’t have a soul. You are a Soul. You have a body.”

Once the realization that *we are a Soul that has a body* begins to dawn in the psyche, the shift from looking for God on the outside to experiencing God on the inside can begin to happen. And, over time, a sweet awareness begins to blossom that every other person, whether they are aware or not, or have had the experience or not, also has the One watching from behind their sensations, thoughts and feelings. WOW! Over time, I began to understand that the God I had cultivated a living relationship with was, in fact, this very One watching! As Kabir said, “All know that the drop merges into the ocean but few know that the ocean merges into the drop.” Graciously, wondrously, I *knew*. Even today, so many years later, just the remembrance can cause an involuntary, ever so slight, catch in my breath.

And nothing is the same. With the experience of this realization, we begin to see what was truly there all the while yet were blind to see before. Swami Chidvilasananda (Gurumayi) said, “Know the One in your own heart, and then you will understand the heart of each person. Know the One in your own mind and then you will recognize the One in each person’s

mind. Know the One in your own life and then you will experience that One in everyone else's life. When you recognize the divinity within yourself then that is what you will long to see in others; and due to that longing, that is what you are able to see in everyone else."

Longing – the common denominator, the common heartbeat, of Souls from all faith traditions who yearn to live in the heart of the Beloved. Trouble is there is one formidable barrier standing in the way for most of us – our own mind! So often, when we try to quiet down enough to begin connecting with our inner Divinity, it is our mind chatter that comes in loud and clear! Like a radio not tuned into a specific channel, all we get is the same old familiar static. In Sanskrit, this mind chatter is called *chitta*. And, the whole purpose of meditation, as expressed in many eastern faith traditions, is to learn to control the mind *chitta* through attention to a focal point. In the Christian Contemplative tradition, this focal point is called a sacred word used when our thoughts pull us away from our intention to simply witness all with equanimity.

And, what does returning to a focal point or sacred word do when we find ourselves drowning in, or snagged by, incessant mind chatter? What does this practice have to do with connecting with our God? The answer is two-fold involving both our human self and our innate Divinity. In the early stages of practice, we begin to get better acquainted with our human journey, what is really happening for us in the moment, the nature and content of our thoughts and feelings. We are slowing down long enough to invite whatever is there, often just below the surface, to emerge. Gradually, we are inviting our unconscious to consciousness. Over time, we become a little more known to ourselves, a little more transparent, a little more light, and, as a result, a little less a problem to ourselves. Yet, though the fruits ripen sweet over time, the process can be quite challenging. Our resolve will be tested as we become more truly present to the truth of our inner life. Father Keating would say we are, slowly, giving up our false self and, rest assured, the ego will fight for its life every step of the way. Still, continuing with our practice, we *are creating the conditions*, the crucible, within which to transform the muck of our human journey into the rich compost necessary to flower a more God-filled life.

Secondly, as the unfolding of our human journey continues, we may also begin to become aware of our innate Divinity. The initial awareness occurs as we experience ourselves as the One watching our thoughts, feelings and sensations, much as was my experience which led me to ask, "Who's watching?" With steady practice, we may also experience, quite unexpectedly, a direct connection with our Divine core, moments when we no longer distinguish between our individual human self and our divine Self. As we practice bringing the mind back again and again to our point of focus or, as needed, to the sacred word, we *create the conditions* for the mind to be still and calm just long enough to allow an experience of the inner sanctuary, to have an experience of ourselves as the One who watches, to rest deeply in simple awareness, in the arms of the Beloved. We cannot *will* this to happen but we *can create the conditions* to allow this experience.

Such experiences come *through* the mind but are not *of* the mind. Using the earlier analogy of a radio, when the dial is set, the signal can be clearly transmitted. Yet, the radio is not the signal. When our mind is relaxed, calm and focused, the conditions are set for us to experience the signal, divine note, of our Soul within. Because the Soul does not exist in the realm of time and space, such experiences are often only recognized after the fact. For

example, we might have an experience in meditation that felt like only a few minutes but was actually much longer. In eastern traditions, this place has been referred to as the *Naad*, or the place of no sound. Such moments are *not planned nor imposed*. They simply happen and then graciously, such experiences, from beyond our understanding, inform us. Father Keating would say we're getting to know our True Self.

Such experiences give us a beautiful reminder of *who we really are – of who each person is looking back at us – of what's the same in all of us*. And, with this growing realization, we begin to truly know that we are one with all our sisters and brothers, with all of life. From this place, loving suddenly becomes a very concrete experience and extraordinarily ordinary. More often, I will ache a little when I hear an ambulance race by. I cannot hear about “collateral damage” without imagining the unknown faces. I cannot feel an ill thought about another without feeling ill myself. Yes, as we grow and cultivate our meditation practice, we discover how our time on our mat begins to inform the most routine aspects of our day. This is the true blessing of the practice.

Now let's look at the nuts and bolts of meditation. Every form of meditation uses a point of focus, a specific channel on the radio so to speak, something to which the mind can return when the extraneous thoughts, or static, dominate. Again, in Christian Contemplative practices the sacred word is used as the focal point when the mind gets snagged, or attached to, passing thoughts. In traditional sitting meditation practices, the focal point is often the breath. In addition, a visual, *yantra*, sound, *mantra*, may be used or simply sensing your feet touching the ground in walking meditation or moving into the stillness arising from simple, repetitive movements in movement meditation. Regardless of our meditation of choice, as we practice, we are slowly transforming our false self and beginning the process of realizing and becoming who we truly are – *the True Self*.

An important part of this realization is the awareness we gain about the nature of the mind. In the beginning, most of us are quite accustomed to believing our thoughts, what we think, are the *truth* of our experience and who we are. Yet, as we sit, over time, we begin to get that our thoughts, feelings and sensations, are just that – simply thoughts, feelings and sensations. Here one moment and gone the next. Forever changing and making commentary. Such thoughts from our human conditioning may tell us a whole variety of things that we truly believe and feel such as, for example, we are not enough or aren't good enough. And, left unexamined, such thoughts will continue to create havoc in our human dramas. Yet, as a child of God, the *truth* is we are completely enough and are, in fact, perfect *because* of our humanity, not in spite of it. As we slowly get this about ourselves, we can see the same in relation to others. As the Buddhist saying reminds us, “The thought of your mother is not your mother.” And, moving out into our life experience, Ariel and Shya Kane reflect the same sentiment, “Life is an exciting adventure. If it doesn't appear that way to you then there is something you are occupied with other than your life – probably your thoughts about your life.”

I have found that life is, indeed, an exciting adventure when I, or my mind, is relaxed enough to surrender into a deeper, sweeter, place of trust where my mind simply becomes like the radio, transmitting the most helpful signal in the moment. And, without fail, such moments are not at all what I might have *thought*. Yes, it is true, as many well known authors have claimed, that

we do create our life every moment with our thoughts. However, I would humbly offer that, depending upon where the dial is set on the radio of our mind, to the static of our human conditioning or to the calm emanating from core of our being, our creations will instantly bring bondage or freedom. The choice is ours. Through the practice of meditation, moment by moment, breath by breath, we can choose freedom – again and again.

Earnest Holmes, founder of the First Church of Religious Science and the author of *The Science of Mind*, describes it this way, “The finite [false self] has wrought and suffered. The Infinite [true self] lies stretched in smiling repose. God is always God. No matter what our emotional storm, or what our objective situation may be, there is always something hidden in the inner being that has never been violated. We may stumble, but always there is that Eternal Voice, forever whispering in our ear, that which causes the eternal quest, that thing which forever sings.”

I call the “eternal quest” our impulse toward wholeness. It’s why you’re in seminary. It’s why we get up for our practice and it’s why we begin again and again and again. *It’s how much we are loved by our True self.* And, the impulse is, in fact, the Love that is us.

And it comes when the conditions are set – when we have completely surrendered into unknowing. There, ever so softly, a whisper.

Yes, we are much more than what we may think, feel or sense. And, “God is God”, as well – regardless of what we may think or feel about God.

Thank God!