



The Wise Brain Bulletin

News and Tools for Happiness, Love, and Wisdom

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Relationship: The Heart of Christian Contemplative Practices

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You may know that among the many things neuroscientists are learning from contemplatives is this: many (if not all) contemplative practices contain certain foundational, beneficial ways of directing *attention* and *awareness*¹. For example, a *shamatha*-like practice that invites us to focus on the breath as it passes through our nostrils highlights the capacity of attention (“Now draw your attention to your breath...”). And a *vipassana*-like practice might particularly engage the capacity of awareness by simply inviting us to notice emotions or thoughts that emerge into our consciousness (“Allow yourself now to become aware of whatever is rising into your experience...”). Contemplative practices that emphasize these contemplative capacities of attention and awareness have been studied with increasing frequency and care over the past decade. Why? Because the honing of attention and awareness through contemplative practices enhances wellbeing in two ways: (1) by increasing the ability to concentrate and (2) by regulating negative emotions². If you are a regular reader of the Wise Brain Bulletin (and/or a regular meditator) none of this may surprise you; we find again and again that our lives benefit from being able to focus on tasks

Greetings

The Wise Brain Bulletin offers skillful means from brain science and contemplative practice – to nurture your brain for the benefit of yourself and everyone you touch.

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Rick Hanson, PhD, edits the Bulletin. Michelle Keane is its managing editor, and it's designed and laid out by Laurel Hanson.

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at hand (i.e., concentrate) and from being able to free ourselves from the destructive power of certain emotions (i.e., engage in emotion regulation).

But concentration and emotion regulation are not the only contemplative capacities at work in meditative practices. Many practices also highlight processes of “relationality,” a contemplative capacity that has received very little research attention. This capacity is what psychological theories of “Attachment” point to as the innate, hard-wired characteristic of humans (and of all mammals) that makes us social animals³. As you probably know, research shows that if we do not receive caring, intimate contact as infants our physical and emotional growth will be stunted. Further, it is becoming clear that caring social contact into old age cultivates cognitive, emotional, and physical wellbeing.

Social neuroscientist Michael Spezio, one of the few researchers who have studied this relational capacity within contemplative practices, writes that “relationality is understood [in spiritual practices] as being oriented toward and engaged by other agents, such as human persons, divine/spiritual persons/beings, and/or nonhuman nature.” Spezio notes that “at least some practices in most contemplative traditions (e.g., those from Bahá’i, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Sikhism, and Unitarian-Universalism) are relational in their focus. For example, Metta practice in Buddhism...orients the practitioner to friendship for, the wellbeing of, and compassion for others.” In addition, “even practices that are themselves not relational in focus can be motivated by or framed in terms of relational outcomes, as when *vipassana* practice is framed as leading to better relations with other people.”⁴

Spezio’s observations remind us of how common relational practices are across the contemplative landscape. In fact, a case could be made that in the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Islam, and Christianity) *all* practices are more concerned with relationship than with focused concentration or emotional regulation. Whether that is true or not, in order to address the sensibilities of a huge number of people around the globe (as well as in

our own communities), as contemplative practitioners, researchers, and teachers we need to become more aware of the many ways contemplative practices are and may be focused on relationality. So, to give you a taste of what relational practices look like and how they might function within contemplative traditions, I want to do two things in this article:

1. describe how one contemplative tradition (Christianity) is fundamentally concerned with the experience of relationship (rather than emotion regulation or mental concentration) and
2. describe three practices from this contemplative tradition that emphasize relationality by engaging – each in its own way – a sense of divine presence.

Christian contemplative practices are grounded in experiences of relationship

The traditions of contemplative Christianity are grounded in a particular assumption: true wellbeing comes to the world primarily through the experience of loving, compassion-filled relationships. Let me explain that.

First, this tradition sees what most of us see all too often: the world is full of injustice,



strife, oppression, and hatred. And the tradition interprets this situation a particular way. It says: this suffering is not a matter of wrong perceptions or incomplete understanding; the universe is *in reality*, broken. It is as if the universe were a clay pot (to use a common metaphor in the tradition), an earthen vessel that has cracked in the firing of it or in its use. Its original form is good and true, but there is a brokenness that needs to be repaired, restored, healed, brought back to its original image.

Furthermore, this brokenness is fundamentally one of damaged relationships – all relationships.

- between individuals,
 - in the systems and structures in cultures and organizations,
 - in the natural environment;
 - and even in our relationships with ourselves, in how we relate to our interior subjective experiences and our behaviors in the world.
 - the brokenness perpetuated through and in broken social systems, webs of relationship.
- Each generation is shaped to some extent by this brokenness.

But that isn't the end of the story. The tradition responds to this perceived problem with a stance of trust that there is more to reality than this broken vessel. Christian contemplatives insist that this broken world is held within an underlying reality of a *relationship* – a relationship that consists of pure love, boundless, endless compassion.

This force of loving relationship continues to sustain the world in spite of its brokenness. It envelops and fills the universe. It is constantly flowing in the direction of goodness, drawing the entire universe with it. Its purpose, its very nature, is to continually offer healing and restoration to the brokenness.

The contemplatives have always struggled to describe this underlying force or container or presence of Love, Pure Love, Boundless Compassion. Of course they call it God. Some even call it God-beyond-god. But that didn't say much, since this loving presence is ultimately mysterious, ineffable, indescribable. So how to talk about it?

Within the few hundred years of Christianity, Christian contemplatives began speaking of this Loving Presence poetically, metaphorically, in an effort to convey something of its

indescribable nature. The metaphor they used was that of choreography, dance (*perichoresis*); the nature of God is a multidimensional dance of Pure Love -- a communal love dance. This became formalized in the metaphor of tri-unity, Trinity.

Notice that this image of a three-dimensional dance is neither dualistic nor non-dualistic. Rather it offers a third way. We might call this third way “relational non-duality” -- a metaphor for a loving, non-dual relationship. Even *within itself* the endless force of pure love (God-beyond-God) in the universe is neither a static one-ness nor a counteractive duality, but an interwoven, interdependent relationship.

If the healing heart of the universe is a boundless, non-dual dance of love, what is the role of the contemplative? It is to join in the dance. It is to collaborate with this Love, to join in its restorative, healing movements. In other words, it's to Live in the image of Pure Love (non-dual relational love; God-beyond-God).

But what does that “non-dual relationship,” the dance of Pure Love, look like in real life? Christian contemplatives looked to the descriptions of the life of Jesus of Nazareth to



see how to live the dance of loving, compassionate relationship. The written descriptions of Jesus's life do not contain instruction on how to practice. Instead, they contain stories of living, parables that illustrate a way of being in loving relationship to the world. The contemplatives say to look first to the model life of Jesus if you want to know how to live in ways that cultivate the wellbeing of the world. It is only later that the traditions of Christianity develop practices and teachings on practices.

What about contemplative practices?

In the Christian contemplative traditions, practices are meant to help practitioners live in such a way that they recreate Jesus's Loving Presence in the world. They are meant to foster loving, non-dual relationships that are expressed in active compassion for the restoration of the relationships in all arenas of existence – intrapersonal, interpersonal, systemic, communal, cultural, and environmental.

The practices are full of loving relationality from beginning to end.

1. They rise out of and take place within the relational life of community.
2. Loving acts of restoration – acts of compassion -- prepare the practitioner for

contemplative practices. And, in turn, if contemplative practices don't help form compassionate behavior they aren't legitimate. Loving relationship (with God, self, and others – now and forever) is the point of the practices. The contemplative person practices in order to foster loving, compassionate relationships in the world.

3. In this life, contemplative practices may lead to joyous freedom – and also to suffering

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(interior and exterior). In fact, suffering can be the opening to, the opportunity for, joy. The model for life, after all, is of a person feeling abandoned by God, dying on a cross out of a liberative love for the world. This means that the experience of suffering does not conform to simple “negative/positive” dualities. So, Christian contemplatives can often be portrayed as cranky -- suffering all sorts of internal and external pain -- yet united to Christ in the image of God, who suffers and rejoices along with the world.

4. As a result, experiencing relational love and acting in relational love takes priority over efforts to eliminate the internal experience of suffering. So, for instance, “emotion regulation” and “mental concentration” (remember these?) are *ultimately* valued only for how well they help form lives of compassionate love, not for their ability to temper the

experience of suffering. When the experience of suffering comes, the *ultimate* anchor and stillpoint is sought in the lived experience of loving relationship with GOD-beyond-god directly and through relationships in the world, rather than in experiences of emotional or mental stability. In other words, wellbeing is defined as the cultivation of compassionate relationships (mirroring the nature of GOD-beyond-god), rather than, say, experiencing peace and happiness (though hopefully these flow from compassionate relationships).



Contemplative practices that are grounded in “relationship”

As I have suggested, most (if not all) Christian contemplative practices are grounded in a sense of relationship. To illustrate that, I offer a brief look at three practices: The Jesus Prayer, Centering Prayer, and “Ignatian Contemplation to Attain Love.”

The Jesus Prayer

The Jesus prayer is perhaps the oldest, formal Christian contemplative practice still in widespread use. It seems to have originated in the 5th and 6th centuries of Christianity.

The basic practice is this:

1. Repeat a phrase unceasingly throughout your day, thousands and thousands of times. “Jesus Christ, son of God, have compassion^s on me.”
2. The instruction is to repeat it first with your mouth, then eventually only with your mind or thoughts. And finally, you repeat it with your heart, that is, with the totality of your



being. The idea is that this covers the physical, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of the person. When the prayer reaches the spiritual level, the heart, your entire being is repeating it without you even thinking about it -- like a spiritual ear worm; the prayer is “praying you.”

There are a few important things to highlight about practitioner’s view of this prayer:

1. It isn’t the process of mantric repetition that gives the prayer its power. Rather, the power is in the *relationship* with Jesus that comes through Jesus’s name. So, in the Jesus Prayer tradition, the word translated as “mindfulness” means to call to mind divine Presence.
2. Attention is focused not on the saying of the words, but on what they mean -- that is, on what their meaning conveys of intimate *relationship* with Jesus.
3. When the prayer is “praying itself,” your life will take on what the prayer asks for: the active compassion of Christ. That you will feel God’s compassionate *relationship* within you -- and you will act in ways that cultivate compassionate *relationships* in the world.

Notice that both the processes and the goal of the prayer are fundamentally about establishing relationships.

Centering Prayer

Centering Prayer was formed in the 1970’s as an updating of a practice described in a 14th century mystical writing called *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Rather than focusing on a word or on feelings of intimacy with Jesus as in the Jesus Prayer, Centering Prayer is meant to release a person from thoughts, feelings, and images that may interfere with intimacy with God.

Guidelines for the practice are very spare⁶:

1. Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to be completely available to God within you.

2. Be still for 20 minutes.
3. If you notice yourself engaged in thoughts or feelings, say your sacred word as a reminder of your intention to be available to God, to consent to God.
4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

Here are some things to highlight in relation to this practice:

1. The sacred word is not to be repeated as a mantra. It is only a reminder of your intention to release yourself, open yourself, to be fully in *relationship* with God. When you become aware that your attention is focused on something, repeat the word to return to your intention.

2. Practitioners trust that the prayer's power lies in the fact that God is holding them. All

you have to do is turn to your intention to be open, to surrender, to let go to this intimate *relationship*.

God does the rest.

3. The idea is that God is the main actor in the practice. God heals and frees all the broken and bound parts of us. So Fr. Thomas Keating (one of the creators of the practice) calls this "Divine Therapy"; it is the *relationship* with God that heals.

4. The fruits of the prayer are a life that more fully carries God's *relationship* of



loving compassion – the practitioner will feel God’s compassion and act compassionately. But that happens very gradually over time. Within the prayer time itself there may be nothing – no emotions, images, or thoughts. In fact, if those appear, they are to be surrendered. So, the experience is like entering a cloud of unknowing.

Notice that in this practice the context and goal is relationship with divine Presence. There is a trust that this loving Presence does and will hold the one who is praying – and the process and purpose is to surrender to that relationship.

Ignatian “Contemplation to Attain Love.”

Unlike Centering Prayer, Ignatian contemplation is filled with images, feelings, and thoughts. Ignatius of Loyola developed this practice in 16th century Spain. He founded a religious order of “contemplatives in action” --- the Jesuits – to live out compassion in the world rather than in monasteries.

Ignatius designed a month-long intensive series of what he called “spiritual exercises.” The heart of these exercises involves imagining yourself living Jesus’s life along with him,



talking with him, sharing his experiences. This is meant to infuse your experience, your life, with the way of Jesus, with active loving compassion in the unique form your life gives it.

The very last exercise in the “Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius” is the “Contemplation to Attain Love.”

Key elements of this practice are:

1. I am to recall that love is a mutual relationship of communicating needs and of giving.
2. I am to compose a scene in my imagination in which I am standing in the presence of God, the saints, and the angels. I talk with them about all the good God has given to me and the universe. And then I offer it all back to God. The only thing I keep is God’s relationship of love and grace.
3. I have a conversation with God about how I am to apply this experience of love in my life. And I conclude with a prayer directed to God.

Some things to notice about this practice:



1. It is filled with *relationships* – with saints, angels, God – and they take the form of conversations.
2. The more the pray-er engages and explores images and feelings, the more the experience of *relationship* with God increases. In fact, in this practice, I compose a scene in my imagination, but then the imagined scene begins to carry my experience without my own effort; the images and feelings draw me more and more deeply into an experience of intimacy with divine Presence. This contrasts with the tradition represented by Centering Prayer. In that approach, as images, thoughts, and feelings decrease, the experience of God's presence increases.

Relationality in your practice?

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, most (and perhaps all) contemplative traditions contain practices that in some way draw on the relational aspects of our humanness. We can see that in the three Christian practices I outlined here: all use emotion regulation or mental concentration in some ways, but at their core they are most interested in engaging and cultivating compassionate relationships – with divine Presence, within oneself, with others, and within the world.

As you engage in your own practice, I encourage you to consider how it may be tapping your deep human capacity for forming relationships.

¹ For an exploration of how such capacities function see Shauna L. Shapiro, Linda E. Carlson, John A. Astin, Benedict Freedman. "Mechanisms of Mindfulness," *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, March 2006, 373-86.

² [The Shamatha Project \(http://mindbrain.ucdavis.edu/people/jeremy/shamatha-project\)](http://mindbrain.ucdavis.edu/people/jeremy/shamatha-project) and the work of [Richard Davidson's lab at the University of Wisconsin, Madison \(http://psyphz.psych.wisc.edu/\)](http://psyphz.psych.wisc.edu/), offer two significant examples of studies concerned with these two aspects of wellbeing.

³ For an excellent overview of Attachment Theory, see David J. Wallin, *Attachment in Psychotherapy* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2007), 59-112.

⁴ Michael Spezio and Andrew Dreitcer, unpublished paper, "Agent-Relational Contemplative Studies of Practices in Christian Communities." June, 2012, 1.

⁵ Usually the Greek word for “compassion” is translated as “mercy”; both are accurate.

⁶ For this four-step version of the prayer, see <http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/site/DocServer/MethodCP2008.pdf?docID=121> and Thomas Keating, *Manifesting God* (New York: Lantern Books, 2005), 133–36.

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Dr. Andrew Dreitcer is Director of Spiritual Formation at Claremont School of Theology and co-director of the [Center for Engaged Compassion](#). His current research and teaching interests lie in the exploration of the nature and experience of contemplative practices across religious traditions, the relationship between spiritual practices and neuroscientific understandings (<http://neurospirituality.blogspot.com>), the ways in which contemplative practices form compassionate actions and attitudes of living, and Christianity as a spiritual path of engaged compassion. Dr. Dreitcer has been the co-founding director of a seminary program in spiritual direction and served 15 years as a Presbyterian pastor. A year spent at the ecumenical monastic community of Taizé significantly shaped his own spiritual life and his perspective on both the role of spiritual formation in theological studies and the value of contemplative studies in academia.



Compassion and Joy

from Christian and Buddhist Perspectives

A Benefit Workshop for the Wellspring Institute **Sunday, January 13, 2013**

On Sunday, January 13, 2013, Andrew Dreitcer, Ph.D. Associate Professor at Claremont School of Theology, and James Baraz, co-founder of [Spirit Rock Meditation Center](#) and author of *Awakening Joy*, will co-lead a four hour workshop – [Compassion and Joy from Christian and Buddhist Perspectives](#) – in San Rafael, CA.

This is a benefit for the nonprofit [Wellspring Institute](#), which publishes the [Wise Brain Bulletin](#), offers all the great resources at [WiseBrain.org](#), and hosts the [Skillful Means wiki](#) (methods for psychological and spiritual growth).

Hosted by [Rick Hanson, Ph.D.](#), the workshop will include presentations, discussion, and internal experiential practices. Topics include:

- The common ground of two profound wisdom traditions
- Opening the heart without getting drained
- How happiness and love increase inner strength, health, and effectiveness
- Connecting personal spirituality with worldly action

The workshop will happen at the beautiful Showcase Theatre in the Marin Civic Center in San Rafael, just 20 minutes north of the Golden Gate Bridge, from 9:30 am – 1:30 pm. Registration is \$50.

Tickets are available via the Showcase Theatre box office.

To purchase tickets go to:

<http://tickets.marincenter.org/eventperformances.asp?evt=55>

Contact Michelle Keane at michelle@rickhanson.net with any questions. Scholarships are available – go to <http://www.wisebrain.org/compassion-and-joy-workshop> to apply

Compassion:

The Natural Expression of a Joyful Heart

Adapted from *Awakening Joy: Ten Steps That Will Put You on the Road to Real Happiness* by James Baraz and Shoshana Alexander (Bantam, 2010)

In a commencement speech delivered in 1957, Albert Schweitzer said, “I don’t know what your destiny will be, but one thing I do know: The only ones among you who will be truly happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.” Over the years I’ve discovered this myself, first as a schoolteacher, then later as I came into contact with various spiritual practices. Throughout my search for my own happiness, a recognition I had as a young man—that everyone wants to be happy—has stayed with me. While we may find happiness and contentment for ourselves, we don’t have to look very hard to see there’s suffering in the world all around us. Rather than shielding ourselves from this all-pervasive reality, I’ve learned that responding to it with compassion and caring action leads to a deep level of well-being and a joyful, fulfilled life.

When we’re motivated by a true spirit of generosity, we benefit as much as those on the receiving end. Jesuit priest Anthony de Mello says it this way: “Charity is really self-interest masquerading under the form of altruism. I give myself the pleasure of pleasing others.” In the same vein, the Dalai Lama playfully speaks of working to benefit others as “selfish altruism.”

The altruistic urge to serve others has been held up as an ideal throughout human history. We call those who act on it “heroes,” “saints,” “paragons of virtue,” “humanitarians.” We say they are courageous, great-hearted, compassionate, and noble. I saw these qualities in my childhood heroes, Fiorello LaGuardia, Lou Gehrig, and Gandhi. LaGuardia was a mayor of

New York in the early 1940s, when I wasn't yet born, but I learned about him when I was a kid. One of my favorite stories was of a time when he was officiating in misdemeanor court in New York City. A man who had stolen bread to feed his family came before him charged as a thief. LaGuardia fined the man ten dollars, then turned to the courtroom and said, "I'm fining everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a city where a man has to steal bread in order to eat." The defendant left with \$47.50 in his pocket. LaGuardia's spirit so inspired me I knew *that's* the kind of person I wanted to be.

We have seen this same spirit in heroes like Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Mother Teresa. We saw it in the firefighters at the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center on 9/11. The acts of such individuals can move us to tears and also inspire us to act on behalf of others.

In Buddhist teachings there is a term that encompasses all these qualities and folds them into a spiritual aspiration I find deeply meaningful—*Bodhisattva*.

This word in ancient Sanskrit means a being who is headed for enlightenment, and specifically refers to those who aspire to that lofty goal for the purpose of liberating all



beings from suffering. The term is now commonly used to describe one who selflessly works to relieve suffering whenever possible.

The idea of liberating all beings from suffering sounds like a stretch. But working to benefit others is something any of us can do. So I like to call those of us who are inspired by this vision of relieving suffering and increasing happiness “Bodhisattvas-in-Training.” We do the best we can and in the process learn how rewarding and beneficial it is to express our caring heart.

The quality of heart that moves and supports the Bodhisattva is compassion. In English the word means “to suffer with,” but a beautiful and perhaps more meaningful definition of compassion in Buddhist teachings is “the quivering of the heart in response to suffering.” It is the sincere wish that others be free of suffering. At its core, compassion is a recognition

that we are all interconnected, that your suffering is my suffering, that when I see you in pain, my heart trembles.

Compassion is not the same as pity, although they are sometimes spoken of interchangeably.

Pity carries a subtle quality of distancing and aversion: *Too bad about you. (I'm glad it's not me!)* Though pity may lead us to respond to another's suffering with a good intention to help, the heart is holding back, not opening to the joy that is potential in the response.

Compassion is a profound softening of the heart when it encounters suffering. When our hearts are moved this way,



Perspectives on Self-Care

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this Bulletin), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.

the wall of protection that might separate us from another dissolves.

There is something sweet in the tenderness we feel when we reach out in compassion. To feel that tender is to feel alive. The deep caring that suffering evokes in us, the greatness of heart, is actually an uplifting state. It feels good to care. This capacity to

care about others and about life is the essence of the compassionate heart.

Compassion practice does not have to be limited to formal meditation. Throughout your day whenever you see someone having a hard time, you can tap in to that place of caring inside you and send out thoughts of compassion.

Thich Nhat Hahn, Buddhist teacher and activist, makes the point that compassion does not stop with letting our hearts feel the suffering of others. “Compassion is a verb,” he stresses. Compassion and action go hand in hand. In MRI scans of monks meditating on compassion, neuroscience researcher Richard Davidson discovered that the areas of the brain responsible for planning action also lit up. In *Train Your Mind, Change Your Brain*, Sharon Begley quotes Davidson conveying his report to the Dalai Lama: “This was a novel and unexpected finding . . . There’s no physical activity; they’re [the meditating monks] sitting still. One interpretation of this is that it may reflect the generation of a disposition to act in the face of suffering. It gives real meaning to the phrase ‘moved by compassion.’”

Not only are we wired for compassion, we appear to be wired for compassionate *action*. When we see suffering and feel compassion, it is natural to want to do something in response. In his book *Field Notes on the Compassionate Life*, Marc Barasch quotes a young boy who understands exactly how this works. This eight-year-old was asked, “If you knew how someone else felt, would you be more likely to help them than if you didn’t?” He replied, “Oh yes. What you do is, you forget everything else that’s in your head, and then you make your mind into their mind. Then you know how they’re feeling, so you know how to help them.”

When we don't know what to say in response to the suffering of another, sometimes just being present is enough. The writer Leo Buscaglia told of a time he was asked to be a judge for a "most compassionate child" contest. The winner was a four-year-old boy whose mother told the following story. Her son noticed that his next-door neighbor—an elderly man whose wife had just died—was sitting outside in his yard crying. The boy went over and climbed into the man's lap. When he returned home, the mother asked, "What did you say to him?" Her child replied, "Nothing. I just helped him cry."

Offering our compassionate presence not only helps another but deeply nourishes us as we do it. And we don't need to know how to do anything other than be present.

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James Baraz has been teaching meditation since 1978 and the [Awakening Joy](#) course since 2003. He leads retreats, workshops and classes in the U.S. and abroad and is a founding teacher of Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California.

James is co-author with Shoshana Alexander of [Awakening Joy](#), a new book based on the course. In addition, James is on the International Advisory Board of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. He lives with his wife in the Bay Area, has two sons and three grandchildren.



Skillful Means

The [Skillful Means](#) wiki, sponsored by the Wellspring Institute, is designed to be a comprehensive resource for people interested in personal growth, overcoming inner obstacles, being helpful to others, and expanding consciousness. It includes instructions in everything from common psychological tools for dealing with negative self talk, to physical exercises for opening the body and clearing the mind, to meditation techniques for clarifying inner experience and connecting to deeper aspects of awareness, and much more.

Self Inquiry

(in England, “self-enquiry,” in the original Sanskrit, atma-vichara)

Purpose / Effects

This is a meditation technique to get enlightened, i.e. “self realization.” By realizing who you are, the bonds of suffering are broken. Besides this goal, self-inquiry delivers many of the same benefits as other meditation techniques, such as relaxation, enhanced experience of life, greater openness to change, greater creativity, a sense of joy and fulfillment, and so forth.

Method

Summary

Focus your attention on the feeling of being “me,” to the exclusion of all other thoughts.

Long Version

1. Sit in any comfortable meditation posture.
2. Allow your mind and body to settle.

3. Now, let go of any thinking whatsoever.
4. Place your attention on the inner feeling of being “me.”
5. If a thought does arise (and it is probable that thoughts will arise on their own), ask yourself to whom this thought is occurring. This returns your attention to the feeling of being “me.”

Continue this for as long as you like.

This technique can also be done when going about any other activity.

History

Self inquiry or *atma-vichara* is an ancient Indian meditation technique. A version of it can be found, for example, in the Katha Upanishad, where it says:

*The primeval one who is hard to perceive,
wrapped in mystery, hidden in the cave,
residing within the impenetrable depth—
Regarding him as god, an insight
gained by inner contemplation,
both sorrow and joy the wise abandon. (K.U. 2.12)*

Here the “primeval one” is the Self, which is to be contemplated. The “cave” is the body, in which the feeling of the self arises.

Self inquiry was popularized in the 20th century by the great Indian saint Ramana Maharshi, who made it the centerpiece of his teaching.

Caution

Many people misunderstand the self-inquiry technique to mean that the person should sit and ask themselves the question, “Who am I?” over and over. This is

an incorrect understanding of the technique. The questions “Who am I” or “To whom is this thought occurring?” are only used when a thought arises, in order to direct attention back to the feeling of being “me.” At other times the mind is held in silence.

Notes

The Sanskrit term atma-vichara can also be translated as “self investigation” or “self reflection.” Due to Ramana Maharshi, the translation “self inquiry” has become standard.

Some notes on the technique, from Wikipedia:

This practice of Self-attention or awareness of the ‘I’-thought is a gentle technique, which bypasses the usual repressive methods of controlling the mind. It is not an exercise in concentration, nor does it aim at suppressing thoughts; it merely invokes awareness of the source from which the mind springs. The method and goal of self-enquiry is to abide in the source of the mind and to be aware of what one really is by withdrawing attention and interest from what one is not. In the early stages effort in the form of transferring attention from the thoughts to the thinker is essential, but once awareness of the ‘I’-feeling has been firmly established, further effort is counter-productive. From then on it is more a process of being than doing, of effortless being rather than an effort to be.

See Also

[Do Nothing Meditation](#) - a similar technique

[What Is Meditation?](#)

[Meditation Posture](#)

External Links

[Self Enquiry at Wikipedia](#)

Fare Well

May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.