



How I Learned to *Meditate*

Robert Granat

Like everybody else these days, I'd heard about meditation—but never felt drawn to it in the slightest. The word itself didn't sound attractive, or the idea either. Too vague, I saw no point in sitting on my buttocks to contemplate my navel, which I doubted was any wiser than my head. The oriental circus that was touring the occident turned me off, not on, with the exotic get-up mystic knowledge it came decked out in. I had no desire to go someplace else and become somebody else. I was content to stay right here and be who I was. My discontent was simply that I wasn't being it. So how was doing something so foreign supposed to help me become more native?

One morning, as I was dealing the daily stack of junk mail into the wastebasket, my eye was arrested and my hand stopped; an invitation. An invitation to some conference. A "Conference on Buddhism and Christian Meditation." I keep getting invitations all the time—to join this, to contribute to that, to attend conferences. And I throw them out, with a pang of pity, perhaps, for the slaughtered forest they're printed on. Not this time. This time, a light flashed. Inside, outside, I didn't know. Or care. A light that had been dark for a long time suddenly flashed on. It was green. "Go," the light said. I went.

Now, thinking back, I can't explain what happened, I can hardly call it a moment of "miraculous intervention" into my existence. Since my existence itself, from the moment I was conceived against those inconceivable odds, strikes me as one ongoing miraculous intervention. But just as there in the fallopian darkness, all conditions had become ripe for me. Perhaps it was the sight of those sturdy adjectives, Christian and Buddhist, splinting up that wobbly noun, meditation. But this is just an afterthought—and after no thought at all. My decision then was utterly thoughtless. Not even a decision, since there was no alternative to choose.

About the conference itself I needn't say much. Three or four hundred other individuals from diverse traditions and situations, at diverse ages and stages, had also been drawn to this spot. It wasn't hard to see what united their diversity; they meant it. Meant it the same way I did, and for the same reason. Meant it as much as I meant it, and, it seemed to me, in most cases more. One thing for certain: they'd all done more about it. They'd all meditated. I was probably the only person there who hadn't.

I watched them sit themselves down on mats and cross their legs and position their hands, and I did what they did. A bell tinkled softly and the whole room froze. For the next forty minutes there wasn't a sound or a movement. This collective stillness had its effect. Forty minutes of utter silence in a room packed with four hundred breathing bodies inside which lived four hundred human beings who meant it, and something happened. Don't ask me what, but something no less actual for my inability to pin a name on it, something palpable and present, here and now. It wasn't The Answer, not The Because or The Why, The Question, that has been disturbing my existence so long—and, obviously now, had been disturbing at least four hundred other existences too. It was rather that The Question itself began shrinking and shriveling its size and weight, divided by four hundred, left me personal fraction light and easy to carry. For the first time in my life I felt right at home in a crowd. It wasn't like crossing over a frontier and entering my true country at last. It was rather an irrefutable confirmation that this motherland of my subjectivity was not a private fantasy spawned by my personal maladjustment but a communal dream, archetypal, inherent, the birthright of the race itself. I wasn't its only citizen. This was a convocation of exiles!

Meanwhile, down on more primitive levels, this meditation was beginning to hurt. My body, having no notion of what was going on up in its higher centers, and no appreciation of it either, had begun a resentful muttering, which, as the minutes went on without the habitual attention from me, grew steadily louder and angrier, from a mumbling grumbling protest to a howling, mutinous outrage. Never in its life had it been subjected to such neglect. Always its

calls and complaints had brought a swift and loving response from me. But now, suddenly, inexplicably, it was abandoned, getting nothing. Not a yawn or a cough of acknowledgment, not a shift or scratch of relief, not even a sign of sympathy. In the stillness I seemed to see my body in a light I'd never seen it with before, catch the look in its eye, so to speak, as it looked at me. Not looked, glared—the petulant glare of a rather spoiled child towards its doting parent. And no baby anymore either, a big one, almost an adolescent. Up to now I'd regarded my flesh variously and changingly as my servant and as my master, as my prison and as my escape vehicle, as my archenemy and as my very self.

My body, of course, was sharing none of this insight. All it wanted was my attention and by God it was going to get it.



Back began to ache. Skin surfaces broke out in a smallpox of itches. Hands suspended over belly trembled in righteous indignation. Legs crossed in front of me began an ominous tingling, sent out ever-more-urgent SOS's to shift their position. And when I didn't, when for the first time in our life together I didn't, they sank deeper and deeper into an excruciating sleep, into melancholy, nightmares of strangulation.



Around me no body moved a muscle, nobody hawked, scratched, fidgeted, beyond an occasional straightening up from a dorsal wilt. If one other soul had broken ranks, given way, stretched, moaned, uncurled, keeled over, I might well have been number two, since my body was now throwing an anything-goes tantrum, since physical pain had brutally taken all the territory of awareness now, was pushing to the very brink of bearability. Never had I willfully subjected my innocent bones, nerves, fibers, arteries to torture such as this.

And what remained to keep me at it, what held me out against this agony, fought off these heart-rending cries of mercy? Not my spirit, certainly—that had fled the scene. No, it was pride, ego-self pure and simple, just the thing, the obstacle, the impedance meditation was designed to break down. And it was about to do that, any second now, though hardly in the way prescribed. Ego, pride, was about to crack. Defeat, abject surrender, was imminent. Like all of us save the truly heroic, the truly selfless, I was about to cave in under torture, confess everything, sign anything.

I was saved by the bell. At the ultimate instant, the tinkle of brass broke the silence, the agony, and me simultaneously. Four hundred human bodies, mine among them, began to stir. Four hundred human sentiences returned from wherever they'd been.

I sat there, patting and massaging my poor calves, rotating my poor neck, undulating my poor spinal column, I heard a question rising from our midst toward the meditation master, who sat still peacefully self-enfolded, on a low dais.

“But what about the pain, sir? What about this god-awful pain?”

The instructor was a Zen roshi, a Japanese not yet fluent enough in our tongue to say much more than what was essential.

“Pain...ah, yes, pain,” he repeated softly—and flashed a sudden smile. A big searchlight smile of fine white teeth accompanied by smaller twin smiles of narrow black eyes that beamed from a round head of smooth skin. Well, he himself had been meditating for over thirty years now, he said and...

“And...?”

“And still hurt. But before *pain-ful* hurt. Now *wonder-ful* hurt. How you say? No pain, no gain?”

Four hundred faces replicated his smile, or tried. An arm went up and the Roshi nodded down to it.

“Thirty years of sitting meditation--could you tell us, what good has it done for you?”

The Roshi's smile underwent a sudden intensification, and again the four hundred faces grew bright, in reflection, like four hundred moons around a sun.

“Next questions, please,” the roshi said. Do you, as a Buddhist, believe in God?” A thin woman with a piercing white look, a religious probably.

Meanwhile,
down on a more
primitive level,
this meditation
began to hurt!

“Ah...” The roshi’s naked noggin began to bob gently. His bushy black eyebrows, the only hair left on it, lifted into two strokes of sumi-e calligraphy.

“Ah, yes... God...” He’s heard this one before. “I believe in... something.”

Something. The way he said it, Something was afar more precise word than God.

“Could you please explain that a little?”

“No.”

The beaming warmth played on the woman as she melted back into anonymity.

“Next question, please.”

A third question rose from the floor, a question I too might have asked, if I hadn’t been so self-conscious, so new to this kind of situation, this kind of company.

“Sir, I wonder if you could tell us what made you do what you’re doing? I mean, what made you decide to become a monk?”

Once more the teacher’s smile renewed its brightness, as if each question threw fuel on his fire. “I think a lot about dying,” he said.

Suddenly, down here in the four hundred, down here in me, a silent explosion of light. This Buddhist monk with his shaven skull and his strange robes, this exotic flower of a tradition so utterly separate and different from my own, this little man from the opposite side of the planet—I recognized him. He was my brother, he was myself.

His eloquence spoke not merely to me but for me. He knew what I knew but he knew it better. He was what I was but he was it more.

His path was my path but he hadn’t gone ahead of me. We’d both thought a lot about dying—Tolstoy said anyone who thinks at all thinks about his own death—but this man had thought about it a lot harder than I had. In stark contrast to me who yearned to be, this man *was*...

“I wonder if you’d mind commenting a bit on the distinction between the Buddhist notion of enlightenment and the Christian notion of salvation?”

Alight, afire—that’s what he was. While I and most of us smoldered and smoked, spluttered and flickered, this man burned, burned with a bright and steady flame.

I can’t say whether or not the roshi offered any comment on the distinction between the notions Christian and Buddhist. If he did, I missed it. I was too busy ratifying the pact I had just made with myself. To begin meditation practice, starting today. On a trial basis only...for a minimum of thirty years.

