

## Natural Meditation

At present, meditation is widely practiced. This is so for those who identify themselves as religious and spiritual, as spiritual but not religious, or as neither. Much attention has been given to meditation by neurology, psychiatry, education, social workers and rehabilitation counselors serving, for example, in hospitals or prisons. This diversity of interest and advocacy for meditation suggests that, in itself, meditation is a natural resource for personal healing and self growth. This means it is a primary rather than a secondary function of human being, something more of nature than of culture.

The fundamental resource and process of meditation is self-awareness. Self-awareness is not the same as self-consciousness or self-concern, both of which may be associated with anxiety. Self-awareness is the natural, given, and thus spontaneous activity of consciousness. It is not something we do, but something which becomes full and obvious merely by waking up in the morning. Waking up is the same as becoming self-aware. Waking up requires no effort and is not the product of any strategy which we would apply when not awake. And being awake is the prior condition of all actions of consciousness, thought, feeling, speech and physical behavior.

We may understand more clearly the fundamental and all comprehensive value of self-awareness in terms of the way language gives expression to it. We express the simple and direct observation of self-awareness with the words, "I am." This is not to say, "I am Ruth." Or "I am Sam." It is not to say I am tall or short, young or old, feeling fine or feeling not so fine. But, certainly, this "I am." would precede any descriptive quality we would name regarding our character or condition. Thus it is clear that "I am." arises as a direct expression of the reality of personal wakefulness and presence without, at the same time, stating any specific characteristics. Any such statement may follow in the self-description of any human being without being final or necessary. We might say, then, that "I am." is a living, natural condition of all possibilities for personal description. In itself, then, it is both utterly personal and the basis of all self-knowledge, but since it is true for all self-aware persons, it is also universal, essentially the same in all.

These reflections on the natural utterance of self-awareness, "I am." are helpful because they indicate the universal, natural basis of meditation. In essence, being awake is meditation. However, in ordinary circumstances of thinking, action, and social contact, self-awareness is specified or identified in myriad ways. Much of our thinking consists in imagination of sequences of action, the formation of self-image in a great array of circumstances, life review through memory, and anticipation of futures which may or may not be attainable or satisfying. In all of these ways I specify who I am and each way is grounded in this pervasive and constant fact that I am. So in order to specify meditation as such, as a way of being in distinction from other ways of self-identification, we will need to bring attention to what is most basic in our understanding of wakeful presence.

The truthful summary of our understanding of all activities of self-identification is the simple expression "I am." These words articulate the given and spontaneous fact of self-awareness. We will find that these simple words are invariable true in all waking activity, and thus will be valuable for meditation. Meditation requires such an uncomplicated, basic and dependable resource which will clearly distinguish meditation from other wakeful activities of mind and body.

In accord with the meaning of "I am." we can understand that meditation is not concerned with unfolding identity in the past or future. It is also not concerned with changing our present experience of emotion or bodily states. "I am." is not time-conditioned, since the reality which supports it is invariant in time throughout waking activity. This is to say that the value of time which characterizes "I am." is always and only the present, now. In this way we can understand that meditation is not about approving or disapproving of ourselves, or our situation, and it is not concerned with making changes to modify, improve, ignore or affirm whatever is true about our actual state in meditation. In meditation we do not cling to what we otherwise would feel is good and right, nor do we reject what we would otherwise feel is bad and wrong. The virtue of giving priority of attention to "I am." in the process of meditation is that this truth of our wakeful being is, in itself, unqualified by any other characteristic of our present, future or past life.

It will be helpful to stabilize attention in meditation as it rests with the continuous trust of "I am." by incorporating in awareness a dependable, natural and spontaneous function of the body. By coordinating mind and body during meditation, we provide a stable, obvious and lively field which integrates our whole presence. That which is most obvious, available and life-essential is breath. We easily observe that breath is not dependent on thought, is not governed and sustained by intention, and is indifferent to who we are, and how we affirm or limit ourselves. Breath, we could say, is the body's "I am." And the rhythm of breath, in and out, is easily coordinated in meaning and sequence with the thoughts "I am." For instance, when we breathe in, we may think "I." Air is flowing in and being concentrated in the body to enhance our sense of a unique, concentrated personhood. And when we breathe out, we may think, "am." To breathe out releases air into an unbounded environment, a world of all beings and all possibilities. "Amness" includes everything.

Let us consider, then, that this is the description of a way to practice meditation. Of course, we would sit comfortably, and, if we are not comfortable sitting, we could lie down. Our concern is to be comfortable in posture, to have the body well supported so as not to generate strain, pain or fatigue. Then we close our eyes. When we close our eyes, attention turns inward. No longer do we attend to the environment which so much entices to memory, action or accomplishment. Then we give some few minutes to an easy survey of sensations of body and emotion. Whatever we sense in this way we accept, being free of any intention to change, improve or eliminate any sensation. Next we bring our attention gently to breath. We observe the easy, natural, spontaneous movement of the body in breathing and feel the flow of air in and

out. When we have settled our attention comfortably in the natural flow of breath, we coordinate mind and body by thinking in a smooth, gentle way the word “I” with the in-breath, and the word “am” with the out-breath.

Naturally, in this process of meditation thoughts and sensations will arise and may absorb our attention. This is natural and does not in any way indicate failure in our intention or skill in meditation practice. It should be clear that our purpose in meditation is not to empty the mind of thoughts, or to regiment the process by precisely controlling the rhythm of breath and thought. However, when we notice that attention has moved from breath and the coordination of “I” and “am” with its cycle, we gently return attention to the elements of practice – the faithful breath and the simple and true words.

We will be very helpful to ourselves in this innocent way of meditation practice if we are assured that we have nothing to perfect, nothing to defend against, no goal to achieve. We are merely with the process in the present, being free of any desire or anxiety about what or how it all is happening, how it will develop, or what the result will be. The essential elements of the practice sustain a sense of groundedness and trust in ourselves. We merely provide gentle support for a natural priority of awareness. This natural priority is for attention to breath in coordination with the gentle and quiet mental recognition of the word “I” as we breathe in, and of the word “am” as we breathe out. If we become aware that attention has shifted from this priority of recognizing the integration of mind and body in the practice, we gently bring attention back to this integration. When we have completed our time in meditation, we will go back into activity more smoothly if we let the practice go, and sit with eyes closed for three to five minutes before getting up.

It will be good to meditate innocently and comfortably in this way for twenty to thirty minutes morning and evening. Regularity in meditation practice, just as regularity in exercise, will support greater benefit through release of stress and promotion of overall well-being in mental and physical activity. Good advice, also, is to meditate at night if the body is restless and we feel fatigued but wakeful. In this way we will receive deep rest and increase the opportunity for sleep. Participation in a weekly meditation support group with others who share this way of meditation and our specific need which the practice is to serve, will very much enhance and clarify our understanding and ease in practice.

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