

## MEDITATION III

*Oh, Lord. Why do I do what I would not?*

*St. Paul's lament*

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Giving people the chance to experience contemplative meditation in a safe, controlled environment can be a very useful teaching tool. One such meditation has been used in my E. Phil. classes for years. Originally designed to allow students the opportunity to see their own child-self in action, the approach is relatively straightforward.

During the first of three gatherings, the students are asked to close their eyes and consider the question, "Where am I?"

After five minutes, they are requested to shift their attention to the thought: "Attention." (Students often open their eyes at this junction and ask, "What do you mean?" My response is, "Meditate on it."--it sounds hokie, but it works).

After ten minutes of being "attentive," the students are asked to take two minutes and go back to the question, "Where am I?"

At the end, I ask for comments.

The reactions are always varied. Some find that time zips by; others think the session will never end. Some take a very physical interpretation of the question, "Where am I?" thinking, "I'm in Mr. Fletcher's physics room; no, I'm the middle of campus; no, I'm in the middle of Pasadena; etc." Others are more existential as they ponder, "Where am I in my life?"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Second semester is a very turbulent time in the lives of high school seniors (note from 2019: at least, it was in the 1980's before the "early-action" college admissions process made first quarter grades all important). Within months they will all be leaving the security of their family, friends and high school to

As for the "Attention" part of the exercise, the students are, again, all over the map. Some hear sounds around the building: the clock ticking, the sound of water running, people talking outside the room. Others began to mentally watch themselves: some can feel their heart beating; some sit so still that they completely lose track of their body. A very few even observe their mind at work as it moves from one thought to the next.

Once everyone has had a chance to speak, I make my point: Assuming *thought* has a reality of its own, what you are thinking and how you are thinking is intimately related to *where you are* in the inner worlds. Because people's thinking is so often fractured and disjointed--going in all sorts of directions at once--most of us spend most of our time spread out all over that *inner landscape*. Rarely are we really *here*; mostly we are *there*, and *there*, and *there* . . .

What is nice about this exercise is that the students get to see first-hand exactly what this means. When they enter the meditation, they are mentally buzzing about last period's test, about the big argument they had with mom that morning, about that hot new tune on the pop charts.

The meditation draws all the pieces of the self from *out there* to *right here, right now*. Students get to *feel* the difference between being spread out all over the universe and being to at least some degree one-pointed. *Where they are* when they exit the meditation is a whole other place than *where they were* when they entered it.

The same format is followed during the second gathering, with one big exception. A few minutes into the exercise I begin tapping my pencil on the table in a seemingly mindless way.

The history of this move is a bit exotic. A number of years ago the clock in my room went berserk three minutes after we began one of these meditations. It proceeded

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go off to college. For most, they don't yet know which universities are going to accept them, what it will be like being away from home, whether they'll make new friends easily, whether they'll succeed.

In short, "Where am I in my life," at least for most of the seniors, is a place of enormous transition and uncertainty at this time.

to tick loudly (spell that LOUDLY) and erratically for the rest of the sitting. By the time we stopped, the kids were ready to rip it off the wall and pummel it into silence.

At the time, I had intended to spend the after-meditation period talking about avatars, but the students were so agitated by the clock that it gave me a great opening to discuss the idea of disharmony in one's life. As I had no subsequent way of duplicating the clock phenomenon in years to come, I devised the tapping-pencil routine.

When I do this, most of the students realize in short order that I am tapping my pencil on purpose. What is interesting is how they attempt to cope with it. A few realize that I am not playing with their minds for the amusement of it, that there must be an *educational reason* why I am being so apparently obnoxious. Once they come to that conclusion--once they *understand the situation*--everything changes and they find themselves able to focus the mind on other things (this is very similar to how *understanding* fit into the *North Hollywood High School experience* I mentioned a few chapters ago).

The majority, on the other hand, try to make themselves *not hear the sound*. Of course, the more they try, the more sensitized they become, the louder the tapping gets and the more irritation grows. In short, fighting the experience only makes it loom larger for them.

With the students having just experienced this inner stress, the question *how does one deal with disharmony within the self* rather naturally arises.

There is an unusual quote in the Bible that seems hard to believe on the surface but that may be intimately related to this question. The quote is that of Christ saying, "Resist not evil."

If the East is correct and Christ was an avatar, then some of his teachings were surely directed at *the people* while some were inner teachings directed at the many chelas that undoubtedly came around him. It is possible that this quote is an encapsulation of one of the teachings that he directed toward that latter, select few.

How so?

When a spiritually motivated individual looks into the self in meditation, it is not uncommon for the individual to be mildly unsettled by the basically selfish, heavy thinking that characteristically underlies even the most apparently noble actions animated by the child-self. What is truly *horrifying* is how unmovable the lesser side of the child-

self is when it comes time to make changes for the better (hence, St. Paul's lament, "Oh Lord, why do I do what I would not?").

Geneticists maintain that wants and desires are a consequence of heredity. They believe that people are born with propensities that catapult them mentally in particular directions.<sup>2</sup> Behaviorists maintain that wants and desires are a consequence of one's interaction with family, friends, religion, culture; in general, with one's surrounds. According to them, *experience* is what shapes the self.

Although both genetics and environment have something to do with habitual responses and thought patterns, Eastern metaphysics suggests that humans need not be chained to environmental and genetic predetermination. Humans can think creatively; humans can choose which mental patterns they will animate. The rub comes when the lesser side of the child-self wants to follow a path that entertains one set of often perverse thoughts and actions while the higher-side of the child-self wants to go another way.

An interesting example of a man who undoubtedly encountered this problem was St. Augustine. St. Augustine was a very pious man who, I'm sure, very much wanted to lead a holy life. Unfortunately, he was besieged with raging carnal fantasies. His response? He went out into the desert to cleanse himself. Three days in a cave he spent battling mental apparitions of voluptuous women who appeared all about him, each attempting to seduce him from his path.

Did he succeed in completely vanquishing the problem? Maybe. Maybe not. The *point of interest* here is in his method. By attacking the problem as he did, he focused enormous amounts of attention and energy on *dealing with sex*. In doing so, to the assured glee of the *living thoughtforms* associated with that line of thinking, he made those thoughtforms even larger in his mind than they might otherwise have been. By struggling with the offending *thoughts*, he inadvertently focused energy into them and, in doing so, effectively fed them.

That is where the quote, "*Resist not evil*," fits in. I don't think anyone believes that when Christ made his statement he was telling people to allow evil to run rampant. Instead, if the East's views are accurate, it is probable that he was making a statement based on wisdom rooted in an understanding of the psychology of the child-self.

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<sup>2</sup> There is nothing in the Eastern view we've been examining that would contradict this, assuming one doesn't take the next step and proclaim that the self has no option but to mindlessly accept and conform to those directions.

Any attempt to mentally beat the child's desires into submission only heightens the child's feeling of panic about losing something it has come to depend upon for its survival. Escalating a mental battle to get rid of such patterns only leads to intransigence on the part of the child and an enlivening of the very thoughtforms one is trying to eliminate.<sup>3</sup>

Within the subtlety of meditation, in other words, the more one actively fights to suppress unsavory thoughts, the bigger the thoughtforms get (just as the more my students tried *not* to hear the tapping of my pencil during the meditation, the more sensitized they became to it).

Christ's suggestion? Don't tussle and battle with the offending patterns. Attempt to understand the root-cause of the patterns, then put your attention on something else.<sup>4</sup>

In the case of my students, those who recognized that my purposefully irritating tapping was not being done on a lark--that I was intentionally doing it for what must be an educational purpose--they were the ones who, with that understanding, were able to refocus their attention away from the disturbance and onto other things.

In general, focusing one's attention and energy away from a deviant pattern moves that pattern to slowly, if reluctantly, die of starvation.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Interesting parallel: A noisy human child can be beaten into silence, but what do you find when the beating is ended? The child is silent, but it is also full of inner rage, full of desire to *get back* through disruption whenever possible, full of all the qualities that will undoubtedly make it a very angry adult. What *isn't* gained is a solving of the inner problems that motivated the child to make noise in the first place. If anything, the harsh treatment simply drives those problems deeper into the self.

The personal self is the same. You can temporarily beat it into submission, but sooner or later the perverse side of you is going to rebel and come back with a vengeance.

<sup>4</sup> This is very similar to the yogic practice of pulling attention and energy from one chakra (the lower chakra associated with sex, for instance) and focusing it into another chakra (the heart chakra associated with compassionate action).

<sup>5</sup> It isn't surprising that science might disagree with all this. *Drugs* produce physical dependency; *hormones* produce sexual obsession. Both are chemically based. *Everyone knows that mental addictions are rooted in physical chemistry*, or so they say.

Although chemical and hormonal factors may play a role in the way an individual relate to potentially addictive substances and emotions, the East suggests that there may be more to it. In the late sixties, one of Timothy Leary's cohorts (the man later took the name Ram Das) went to India to find a guru who could tell him what LSD was. Upon reaching a man who might be able to give him his answer, he presented a package of twenty or thirty LSD-spiked sugar cubes--enough to kill ten men-- and asked, "What is this?"

The guru said, "May I see them?" The guru was given the package, at which time he proceeded to ingest the entire bundle before the seeker could stop him. With that, the guru went into meditation.

The Indian stayed in meditation for three days with the man watching him continuously (fearing, I might add, that the guru would die from the massive overdose). At the end of the third day, the guru opened his eyes.

"Well," asked the man, "What is it?"

"It is nothing," said the guru, who then rose and walked on his way.

The last meditation in the series follows the same outline as the first with another big exception. Half-way through, when all is quiet and you can hear a pin drop, I take a deep breath, pray I don't blow it, then CLAP my hands once as loud as I possibly can. Students invariably rise up a couple of inches out of their seats when the bang comes, then look at me indignantly. I counsel them to continue, with the last ten minutes going undisturbed.

The observations to be made ere are several:

By the time the students get to this point in the three-day exercise, they are usually so bored they can hardly stand it. The child-self in most people is all-interest when it comes to new and unusual experiences, but it doesn't generally like doing things it deems unexciting or restrictive. Doing the same old meditation . . . again . . . is usually enough to send most personal selves over the top.<sup>6</sup>

THIS IS WHY the true spiritual teachers don't give their chelas formal meditations to do (whereas plenty of pseudo-spiritual teachers in town are busy exercising control over their followers by handing out meditations willy nilly). Suggesting *possibilities* for meditative disciplines does occur between a chela and his or her master, but the insightful teacher knows that in the long run, each individual needs to take ownership and their own responsibility for their own enlightenment.

Getting back to my students, what this means is that by the time the CLAP comes, the kids are bored to tears and have begun to mentally float.

In this state of defocus, the clap serves to vigorously pull them out of their stupor to *attention* HERE, NOW. It focuses them so fully that they experience what is, under the right conditions, a very useful, very stimulating phenomenon; the galvanizing of the self to *one-pointedness*.

There are all sorts of stories about Zen monks who, while walking peacefully with their teacher, have been struck suddenly and violently by the teacher's staff. Why?

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The moral of the story? The mind may have the potential of exercising more control over the body's chemistry than science realizes. If so, it is the mind that has the power; it is the child's use of the mind that can manifest addictions and obsessions.

<sup>6</sup> This is an interesting commentary on the child-self. The child is willing to start meditation but generally fights discipline once it has become *old hat*. On the perverse *other side of the coin*, it fights the discipline until it becomes a part of its way of life, then embraces the discipline even to the point of looking forward to doing it.

It is believed that when an aspirant is *ready*, after years, maybe lifetimes of effort, a *focusing of the mind beyond the norm* is needed to allow the individual to come into enlightenment. Pain can do just that.

This obviously isn't something that would work for just anyone (I can imagine myself walking around the room, whacking my physics students at appropriate intervals). When most people are attacked, their first reaction is anger. Only a Being who has *become* compassion and harmlessness can possibly turn the focus generated by an explosive, painful experience like this into an extension of his or her life goal--to move into deeper insight.

I don't personally know whether it works or not. It is, nevertheless, a part of the Zen tradition.

Finally, it's interesting to note that *life* is constantly providing metaphoric CLAP after CLAP as it deals us twists and unexpected turns. Why? Because karma is constantly trying to pull us to ATTENTION, to motivate us to think about things, to wake us up. Just as the clap brought each student from *out there* to *right here*, so life tries hard to urge each of us from our little balls of instinctual self to the infinite spaces of awareness that exist within our greater Self.

