

Text from the Tradition: Awakening by Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan (text drawn from pp. 38, 40-3, 134-6)

Meditation, Consciousness, and Daily Life

A meditation retreat—whether one hour, one day, or 40 days—allows the seeker a way to loosen the ties of world responsibilities in order to turn within...One's identity is easily lost in all the agitation, grossness, violence, dishonesty, selfishness, and greed so common to our urban society...Many people approach meditation as a means to relieve stress rather than enter into a communion with God. But stress reduction is not illumination; in fact, that approach, while helpful in lowering blood pressure, rarely leads to genuine enlightenment. Rather, the crux of spiritual work is the deep transformation and expansion of consciousness that occurs through awakening. Meditation, in fact, could be defined as the art of modulating consciousness...A retreat provides a venue within which seekers can explore...the dimensions of consciousness that lie within...

Like a pebble thrown into a placid pool of water that creates ever-widening circles, for instance, it is common during meditation for consciousness to expand, encompassing increasingly wider fields of awareness. First, we have a sense that our bodies are surrounded by zones of subtle matter, like a magnetic field. Such an experience dissolves our skinbound organism into a subtle electromagnetic field radiantly extending into space. This gives rise to an experience of being physically dispersed throughout the entire creation...A second mode of consciousness involves a shift away from the all-embracing cosmic consciousness to the space within. From this interior vantage point, the external structures of the world reveal themselves as reflections of...the fundamental reality behind our perception of the physical world...In a third setting of consciousness, we shift from the interior depths to the peaks of transcendence...Physical reality appears far off as if I were an eagle flying over the earth's terrain. From this transcendent perspective the very notion of space itself disappears as consciousness becomes absorbed into infinity...Finally, there is a setting of consciousness that incorporates all previous modes of thinking. This is a state that embraces both the knowledge acquired from one's personal experience of life and the transcendent intelligence independent of external conditions...Once meditators become adept at modulating consciousness in all its perspectives, they enjoy the benefits of an evolved intelligence that sparks their innovative faculties. This expanded awareness allows them to gain insight into the solutions of personal problems that appeared so stubbornly elusive from the vantage point of the personal ego.

In fact, much of the pain caused by our problem stems in part from our own unchanging biases in terms of how we interpret our personal difficulties to ourselves...What spirituality is all about is cultivating an ever-widening perspective...Once you have managed to turn your attention away from your problem as it appears to you, then you are ready to begin practicing the skill of extending your consciousness into various other points of view. One method of doing this is by looking at your life from the point of view of another person...What these practices are leading to is the ability to clarify the thinking process, so that life can be examined from a much deeper place. By placing a buffer between the problem and our individual ego, we can forestall automatic responses, drawing instead from the insights gleaned through seeing our problems through a much wider lens. Freeing yourself from your previously narrow interpretation of your problems will give you a sense of freedom.

Teaching on Text from the Tradition: by Christine Luna Munger

In this text, Khan touches upon a number of my favorite insights related to spirituality and contemplation—the need for establishing disciplines such as taking retreat or daily practice, the capacity for contemplation and awareness gifted to all human beings, the role of the ordinary as a key influence on spiritual development. However, it is a more subtle point found within Khan’s framework that I wish to emphasize among this treasure trove of insights.

Often, when folks consider the contemplative life, we tend to categorize it as a passive activity, and we disassociate it from action. Similarly, we tend to associate the contemplative life with depth, and we forget the role of breadth. As Khan notes, it is actually the widening of the lens of perspective that contributes most to transformation. Our prayer might be deep, but the fruits of our labor in prayer are born-out to the extent that Love permeates the breadth of the scope of our daily living.

In my own work on contemplation and contemplative dialogue, I suggest that one criterion by which we might recognize something as “contemplative” is whether it is expansive, and by definition, to be expansive is to include both the depth and the breadth of the contemplative consideration. In the long-run, the spiritual circuitry is dialogical, and creates an on-going cycle by which the fruits of our prayer—love, compassion, empathy, courage, beauty, truth—permeate the context of our daily life, infusing our decisions, our interactions, our priorities, our reasoning and our acting. Then, the horizon of daily life, fully packaged with its biases, attachments, aversions, disappointments, preferences, and mis-steps, gets fed back into the circuit, and our prayer filters these limitations through a lens of healing and wholeness. Little by little, we both deepen and widen our potential to show up to life and prayer fully awake, enlivened by the Fire of Love.

Often, it is the same pattern that perturbs us over and again in the dialogical cycle. Therefore, if you find yourself feeling disappointed that the source of your growing edge has appeared in your life yet once again, I encourage you to take a moment and reflect on the history of your relationship with that growing edge. Like an image of a spiral, you might notice that ten years ago, the story appeared in such and such a way at the widest point of the spiral; then five years ago, the same story appeared, but at a different point on the spiral. It is the widening expansive energy that provokes the arrival of the next layer of depth. Both are crucial parts of the cycle. And so, over time we can recognize growth.

Questions for Reflection:

- In general, what do you notice in your mind, heart, and senses from the text and teaching?
- What aspect of life helps you to widen your awareness and perspective?
- What aspect of life helps you to deepen your awareness and perspective?