

Post-retreat Syndrome

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Watching the causes and conditions in a Buddhist meditative fashion, experience may open to the mystique. Depending also at which part one enters, the mystery can be either resolved or perhaps be without obvious import. An example of the later would be the young Francophile Belgian who, perhaps following a Tibetan Lama's advice, applied to participate in a 10-day Vipassana Meditation course. In Dharamsala, Dharamkot to be precise.

It was 2 or 3 days before the course was due to begin. I was chatting in the chai shop just outside the Vipassana Centre with Irina. We shared tables and space with the young, recently decommissioned Israelis. They are still a hyper-pack of hornets. Located, the centre was on the mountainside, on the Himalayan foothills of India's Himachal Pradesh. Many of the Israelis had long since applied for the course, an imperative rite of passage for them. And more were on the waiting list. Normally, many would not show for the retreat. Talking and drinking chai as we were wont to do, this Belgian, who I first thought to be Israeli, stepped into my field of vision. Smilingly standing next to Irina. He saluted us in Tibetan fashion. Palms together pressing first against the heart and then on top of the head. He wore a 108 beaded *Mala* round his neck. A rosary. I thought the whole performance to be a bit exaggerated. Israelis, however, whether in India or elsewhere, require wide berth. Regardless, it was a non-malevolent occurrence.

When this fellow attempted to use his English, we heard the non-Hebraic, French accent. He wanted to get into the upcoming course. And he got in, against the odds of the waiting list. But with such deficient English, he could not get through the long hours of meditation and by the evening of the second day, he left the course. But it was more complicated than it looks, as Irina assisted him in beating the odds as her friend had inserted him into #16 on the waiting list. He was thought to be suitably committed to

have a place in the course. I also could not help but keep an occasional eye on him for the first 2 days from my meditation cushion in the first row. A little sadness arose in me when I saw that he couldn't do the meditation. He would just hang his head down hour after hour. And then he was gone. Only made it two days.

The Dharamsala centre, which is at most 2 kilometers from the Dalai Lama's residence, is very wet and damp in monsoon. I was allotted a tin-roofed hut. Walled only with plastic sheeting. Within it was so damp and moldy that I was ready to leave myself by the afternoon of the third day. But then the management gave me another room, in a stone house. The last free bed in the centre, and it was just this Belgian's bed. A vacated bed. I immediately switched and went on to have a profoundly insightful ten days. Offloading enormous pressures and stresses...all which I could have sworn to be stored in my neck and shoulders. One level of circle was complete.

Meditation retreats in the Buddhist traditions can and should have transcendental impact on one's mind both during and also after the retreat. Throughout the years that I have been participating in 10-day retreats, supra-logical incidents have certainly occurred. Not so much extra-sensory as hyper-sensory. The story that I just told you was something that seems to be somehow common though it did illustrate the causes and conditions as elucidated in the Buddhist doctrinal structure upon which the Vipassana meditation is riveted. Yes, supra-logical is beyond common. A synonym of 'mystical'? I shant answer. But such each experience is not overly difficult to remember. There is one that covered an extended period of time, and then it capped itself with a resolution. This ending harmonized with its body. The apparent paradoxes transformed. It first drew in a person with whom I had no previous contact. At the beginning of this encounter, two assumptions were made by me. Initially, it appeared obvious that he had never done any kind of meditation, that he was unfamiliar with Eastern religiosity. Secondly, I felt that he did not have any inclination for it. The events showed these as premature presumptions.

After the thirty days of steady practice at the French Vipassana Center, I caught a ride up to Paris. It was in deep January. I was ready to catch the bus that would carry me back over to London. But still in Paris that evening, I registered for a shared-hotel room at a hostel right adjacent to the Gare de Lyon. One of several train stations. When I walked into the room, I saw who was to be my ‘bunk mate’. And he happened to be an American, “William Cytes, the Third” as he later introduced himself.

So we began to talk. He mentioned the usual ... That he was traveling around France for about a month ... Hitting the noted places ... And so on and so on. In turn, I told him that I had been on a farm, three hours south of Paris. I didn’t wish to discuss my practice of meditation to a stranger. It was hesitatingly personal. However, he soon found that what I was saying sounded a bit off. He wondered why a traveler would end up staying on a farm for a whole month. So he asked me what I had been doing that whole month ... on a farm. Something inside me told me tell him. So I did, “I was on a meditation retreat for the month.”

“You mean like Chinese Zen meditation?” he guessed.

“Yes”, I spoke, “Buddhist meditation but not that tradition ... This tradition is from Burma ...”

“Oh, I also do and have done some meditation ... ” slowly he informed.

I noted but didn’t follow his comment ... Then we slowly developed into this conversation ... But it mostly focused on William, the American.

He had, at thirty-five, just completed his BA in Asian Studies, focusing on Chinese/Taiwanese relations. And he had to learn Chinese Mandarin. He was depressed, and it hurt. This Mandarin course that the university required him to take, no, he hadn’t done well. It was no surprise to me when I heard what the curriculum was. In a short course period he had to learn the traditional Chinese characters plus simplified

Mainland characters. Then he had to memorize the Roman *pin-yin* phonetic script. On top of all this, they expected him to learn to speak at a certain level of Mandarin. Most of his time was taken up on learning the three scripts. This was a total misuse of time and energy. Because really one only needs traditional Chinese characters - and one's own English. Especially when the goal is to get a good foundation in conversation... Speaking!

As I have considerable experience in these two fields, over ten years living in Taiwan, I 'walked' and talked him through much of his self-criticism. Indeed it was misplaced. Then he began to tell me about the strained and dysfunctional relations that he had and still has with his family. As he continued, I became intuitively aware that I could say some things to him that could help him. Help him to get out of his entanglements. Those tangles. This of course is after twenty to thirty minutes of both of us listening and questioning. At one point, I spoke, quite spontaneously, "You know, even if you stayed in this room for a thousand consecutive nights, you would never, ever, meet another person like me."

Now that sounds definitely ego-centered. But it seemed to be apropos as to what he was telling me. And indeed, with the course of events in my own life - extremely difficult in the sour of my family relations and my utter lack of striving, in my teenage years, for the educational opportunities and attainments. Then with some silence, he again began. Telling me about his family problems... I interjected, "You might really think about this ten day course of meditation that I just finished ... It might well be fine for you."

But I didn't follow it through. Something made me stop. And though his mind seemed to honestly wonder, he did not pursue it. So our conversation opened the doors but backward. Again we were into a mixture of Chinese and Taiwanese affairs. We again spoke of learning the Chinese. And though difficult, a bit of the digressions to his family. At this point he mentioned something quite emotional. But now, I don't recall

exactly what. After explaining his conventional thoughts, he was done, finished. It was then I decided to talk to him regarding the ten day Vipassana course's overview. It was on that farm three hours south of Paris.

“You know, when joining this ten day Vipassana retreat, your first arrival is on the registration day. You get there around three in the afternoon. And after registering, people just mill around the area. You get to know one another. There are between fifty and a hundred people participating in this program. Suppers are served at five. And that's not long after you get there. There is then an orientation. This begins about seven and lasts an half an hour. Then at eight, all of the people walk over to the meditation hall. Over there, each person is assigned a seat. And right after that, one of the assistant teachers who's with the course instruction tapes, puts the first on. Those new 'students' in the group come to hear the primary teacher's initial instructions for the first time. His name is S.N. Goenka. In Indian etiquette, he is called by his last name with the honorific 'ji' attached: Goenkaji. He has all of the students close their eyes. Then they begin silently observing their in's and their out's of breathing. In and out. In and out. The students are instructed to notice - to observe - into which nostril the breathing is the most predominant. Then to focus one's attention on that nostril. Habitually, addictedly awareness is drawn back to dwelling on "my this", "my that". About one's family. About what one would like. About what one dislikes. Then simply 'let it go'. Return to the observation of the ins and the outs of the breath. This is repeated for three entire days. But with each passing day, Goenka masterly refines the technique.

This instruction period lasts until around nine in the dark evening. Then all of the students are told to go to their rooms and take rest. The next morning - quite early at four before the sun is up - the bell is rung. And the students, after arising and washing, walk over to the meditation hall to begin the same observation. It is the breathing - the in and the out breathing - that they did the night before. This meditation period lasts from half past four until a half before seven. However, anytime in this whole period that

one feels tired, is drowsy, has some pain in the knee or in the back, that person may step outside. Walking around for a few minutes can relieve the tension one might feel. One can then return and begin once again. No permission is needed. All in the course are considered as being mature adults. On the second and third days, it is this way but with refinements that focus the attention on natural sensations that arise below the nostrils and above the upper lip.

On the morning of the fourth day, the object of observation is narrowed down further still. The student observes a small area on the upper lip about the size of a middle finger's fingernail, focusing on any natural sensation that might have arisen any itch, or perhaps vibrations. Or feeling of heat, of coolness. On the afternoon of this same day, the full technique of Vipassana is taught. It is a two hour, this guided meditation period. Goenkaji has the students focus their awareness on the top of the head. They concentrate on the soft spot a new born baby has, in Indian spiritual anatomy, the Brahma Chakara. After being aware of that spot for a period of time, he guides the students to spread their awareness. Aware over the scalp of the head, one must feel every part...Then down over and past the forehead and face...The eyes. The ears. More. ... Feeling every part... Then down to the right shoulder... The arm, the wrist, the hand... Then back up to the other shoulder. ... And down it. ... On throughout the whole, the entire body.... The feeling of every part with one's total awareness.

Then my roommate interrupted me and saying rather abruptly, "I hate to tell you this..." I was sure he was going to stop me as he might have been getting bored. Even possibly worried that I was trying to convert him. But I thought, "To what?" "You see I've been doing this meditation for years". William was not chalang. "I think I started doing it right around the time I was 12." "What..." I asked. It was the last comment that I expected to hear, "What do you mean?". I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

“How did you learn it?” I was quite more than curious.

“Well I don’t quite remember the exact, first time that I did it. But it was one night, I had this vision. Yes, right in my mind. It was of a jumble of colors... Like knotted strings or oddly twisted, tangled bits of chord. Whatever it was, the brightly colored hues were active. Upon seeing this real or in my mind, I intuitively knew that I should observe the sensations on my body. And so I did... Almost the same way that you have just explained. This I did four times a week. After feeling my body all over several times, I would fall off. Be asleep.”

This story that I was listening to was now causing a pulsing energy to vibrate throughout my body. I was astounded to what I was hearing. And with the rush of chills and other ... So odd ... Sensations rushing up and down and in and out all through my body. I was then drawn back into his immediate orbit: “...and in the morning, after waking, I would have another vision of something like white or bright light and I would know that all the tangled stuff in my mind had been disposed of”. However, over the past two years or so, I have not been meditating much because of the problems that I was telling you about”.

Ah! How the complexities of this life overwhelm the natural defenses of the mind.

I have been studying Buddhist texts for some years, and as I had found a way, an entrance for supermundane communication with William, I softly highlighted textual explanations of the Buddha’s Enlightenment. “In the Pali language of the ancient Indian Suttas Enlightenment or Awakening is the end station. The terminus of the Path of Purification. All of those psychological defilements in the mind. The angers, those animosities, these obsessive desires and beneath it all, the confusions. Seeing one thing for another. Not correctly understanding one’s experience. From the gross to the subtle, layer after layer. They can be eradicated. The Buddha discovered a revolutionary mind-body centered technique wherein the mind works purifying itself through equanimously observing the sensations that manifest on the body with each and every cognitive

experience. He called it Vipassana. He also was fond to remind those around him that 'mind matters most'. Vipassana is a special way of freeing the mind from its store of negativities.

"Most people are not very conscious of their tangle of psychological complexes. But in joining a retreat one soon comes to them face to face, vis-à-vis. To face them and to see. They then witness the Vipassana action just melting those complexes of deep rooted hinderences. Identified, they become unwanted.

"But William, in your case, you entered into this path naturally. So curious". William also found this situation in the French pension house a kind of ultimate experience. "This conversation has been more powerful than all of the paintings in all of the museums of the past six weeks". He asked me to again explain how Goenkaji teaches the 'body scanning'. It was getting late. We did it together. We practiced this meditation like ancient fellow-travelers.

This went on until we were both overcome by a long and deep winter's sleep.