

Chapter Thirty-four

—MEDITATION—

Meditation is less a matter of suppressing thoughts than of breaking our identification with them, so that we can recognize the condition in which thoughts themselves arise.”

Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*



SL **Absolute Silence**

So good to surround yourself with as much quietude as possible, even as you did a few days ago. I have developed in myself a deep love of quietude. Rarely is even the quietest environment silent, of course.

I heard natural silence only once, many years ago while sitting on the rim of a mile-deep gorge of the Grand Canyon in the mid-afternoon heat. Absolute silence. No wind, no insects, no cars or airplanes, no voices. Just vast silence, profound, and, yes, awesome. I have never forgotten it.

Meanwhile, here in the mountains, the stream (which has returned after a summer in which the drought reduced it to a mere trickle) continues flowing. The susurrations of that stream-sound envelop everything, like air. It creates a quiet, vast, peaceful atmosphere of its own. It seems to stop time. More accurately, that sustained sound keeps us embedded in the eternal present. Quietude. I love it.

And in remaining aware of it, I am responding to it with an inner peacefulness of my own. Really helps, especially after any sort of stressful time.

SL **Sitting**

. . . . For many months now, Sonia and I have been doing something shortly after we wake up. We sit down in the living room, she on the couch, me in a large chair. We close our eyes, and simply sit there for a half-hour or so.

We watch our thoughts as they come and go. The moment we catch ourselves drifting along in the current of the thoughts, rather like a stick being carried by a river, we gently bring ourselves back. We recognize that we don't think thoughts. Thoughts think us.

And so we return to that within us that can *observe* the thoughts. As the witness of the thoughts, we break our identification with the hypnotic drone of our mind, and become pure witnessing consciousness. That pure consciousness has no words, images, or judgments. It is awareness without qualities. It simply sees. When centered in the witness, observing the passing stream, we feel calm, peaceful, undistracted. In relocating attention away from the thought-stream to the witness of that stream, we instantly return from the past-future content of thoughts, and re-enter the present without memories (past) or plans (future).

By observing the thoughts — by observing the workings of the brain, which endlessly produces thoughts — we move our attention away from mind-activity and bring ourselves back to the present. By recognizing the thoughts and returning to the present moment, we sever our identification with them, and dispel them. Thoughts disappear. And for at least a brief moment, we are here and now — and

that feeling is one of tranquility, peacefulness, quietude, liberation. The Zen people call it no-mind. Each time thoughts emerge (and they do), we acknowledge them, thereby detaching from them, and return to the present.

It's a good feeling, and stays with us as we re-enter relative time with its duties, activities, and fluctuating opposites. For brief moments while we sit, we touch the absolute — timeless, relaxed, open, aware, with a quiet mind (brief moments of quietude eventually extend; periods of quietude become longer and deeper). Sometimes, especially during stressful periods, this is the best way in the world to find inner peace.

True, various substances can bring immediate escape from stress, and/or much-needed oblivion. This sitting activity is different. It brings a kind of calm that is subtle, yes, but it also transcends mind-churnings and deepens love, compassion, self-respect, and courage, especially if practiced each day over a long period of time.

SL From Silence All Joys Are Born

So sorry that when you visited your husband's cousins they didn't give you a moment to relax, take a breath, look at the view, walk serenely by the ocean. In their ways, of course, they dominated everything with their narcissistic needs to be seen and heard, without a single thought of you and your wish to spend time quietly with the ocean.

Listening to anyone for seven hours is an impossible chore, especially someone whose conversation is not particularly engaging or uplifting or inspiring or nourishing. Some people do that. They steal energy. They talk and talk, demanding attention, snatching attention and time, draining vitality. By the time you leave, you

are exhausted. It's an awful experience, made doubly worse when you have the ocean and nature's beauty and quietude calling you.

But out of this depleting experience, you recognized once again your need for solitude, quietude, natural harmony, the undisturbed bliss that exists in outer and inner silence. This is where creativity takes place. This is where inner wholeness gives rise to your most intense thoughts, your most delicate reflections on yourself and others, your most subtle visions. As Osho was fond of saying, "Silence is the answer." It is ultimately the answer to everything.

Existence (form) begins in silence (Emptiness). When we become silent within ourselves, undisturbed by other people's demands or even by the normal tasks and interactions of daily life, we expand within to the point of egoic disappearance. We become one within our self-nature, one with our surroundings, one with nature, one with all of existence if we take it far enough. Silence is a golden treasure. And for someone such as yourself and certain other sensitive souls, it is an absolute necessity.

(This, as you know, is why Sonia and I live in the forest by the stream; and why we visit the Pacific every once in a while. Really important to experience external quietude and inner tranquility. These are the truly vitalizing elements that enable us to know the love-essence within ourselves and others.). . . .

SL Full Spectrum Consciousness: Body, Mind, Ego, At-One-With

You asked a great question — How does a person stop thinking long enough to find silence?

Short answer: You don't. And you don't need to worry about it, either.

The brain thinks. That's what it does. It is as automatic as breathing. It thinks, not only when you want it to, but when you don't want it to. The brain-mind is a thinking machine, and it goes on endlessly, even in sleep. So, it is pointless to try to stop thoughts by going at it directly. In fact, the direct effort to stop thinking only creates a stronger ego, and more thoughts. So don't worry about taking a direct approach. Let's explore the question a little further.

The point Osho, Vimala Thankar and many others want to make is this: You can't stop the mind-machine from thinking, but you can learn how to drop your identification with the contents of your mind, its thoughts, images, and emotions. Most people think they are their thoughts and their thoughts constitute their identity. Descartes' famous line, "I think, therefore I am," defined human beings exclusively in terms of mind. [Entirely forgetting, of course, that before mind exists, *you* have to exist: *I am, therefore I think* —(and love and hate and laugh and pee and dance and cry and make love and take walks in the country).]

Others, notably some scientists (not all, by any means), define our identity exclusively in terms of matter. We are our body. When we die, the brain dies, and when the brain dies everything dies. So-called "consciousness" is nothing more than an epiphenomenon (manifestation, or by-product) of the brain's synapses. There is only body, and everything else is the product of it. When the body goes, the synapses go, and so does consciousness.

Most people, especially and particularly those who have not looked into these matters, believe they *are* their body-mind. They are physical beings who have a past (history, ego) and who think thoughts. Their body is unique, personal, and separate from everything else. Their mind is unique, personal, and separate from everything else. This physical/mental egoic entity is "I am." It is a subject separate from everything else, and everything else is regarded as the object.

Ken Wilber points out how “Boundary lines, of any type, are never found in the real world itself, but only in the imagination of mapmakers.” In other words, “The boundary between self and no-self is the first one we draw and the last one we erase. Of all the boundaries we construct, this one is the primary boundary.” We identify with that boundary and thereby cut ourselves off from others and from existence itself.

Even though-boundaries in general and this self-other boundary in particular is illusory. The subject-object split pervades our thinking. It constitutes the fundamental worldview that permeates Western philosophy as well as all religions descended from Abraham, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This dualistic thinking has caused serious problems down through history. Very few individuals have evolved beyond the subject-object split. (What to say of tribes, states, nations? — nothing but wars based on beliefs in “holy” books: My book, my God, my creation. Submit, convert to my book and my God, or die.)

So who are we? What are we? Am I my body? Am I my mind? Am I my history? Are my history and my thoughts me? When I look for my ego, I cannot find it. Is it an illusion? What is ego, anyway? What constitutes identity? What the heck are we talking about?

Many brilliant philosopher-sages in the East trip up on a certain point.

They had little or no knowledge of depth psychology, that is, of the levels of consciousness *below* waking consciousness, the so-called “unconscious” mind, and the developmental stages that every human being must pass through before attaining egoic identity. In ancient times they had no idea of pre-egoic states of being, and the very concept of *evolutionary developmental stages* had not yet appeared. Therefore they started with the ego, and leaped up to Higher Consciousness from there (and did a great job. Western seers have slipped up on

this end, for the most part ignoring the spectrum from the mental-egoic state *ascending into* Higher Consciousness.)

Eastern philosopher-mystics clearly perceived the many problems the ego with its boundary-sense of separation causes. Seeing the horrors egoic man inflicts upon himself and others, they defined ego as a kind of disease. Ego keeps us imprisoned in our separate cells, isolated from existence, at odds with other individuals (and eventually with ego-identified nation-states as well). In their eyes, ego served and still serves only as a barrier to Higher Consciousness. Ego, with its mind and its knowledge and its thoughts and its illusory, self-created “boundaries,” is the bad guy. It is to be demolished. In order to experience God or Brahma or Tao, whatever we wish to call it, we must escape the clutches of the ego and return to primal innocence. We must back away from ego and retreat from language. We must “return to Eden” and become mentally pure, without thoughts, without knowledge. Only then might we enter that level of Unity Consciousness Jesus called “the Kingdom of Heaven within.”

But that is precisely where the slip-up occurs — *We can't go backwards. We can't regress to a blissfully unconscious fusion state with nature, even if we want to. We've already evolved several stages beyond that. We must go forward — and upward.* (If we don't, well — you see what's happening in the world today). . . .

Psychologically speaking, developing a strong mental ego is a good and necessary thing, not a bad thing. It helps us distinguish clearly between subject and object, thereby liberating us from *narcissism* (thinking that everything and everybody are only extensions of ourselves and our egos, the way two-year-olds think). Mental-egoic development enables us to take *others* and their feelings into consideration, not just our own; it enables us to feel empathy and compassion for ourselves and others. It gives us an aesthetic dimension. It enables us to take action in the world; it helps us sort out complex information; it enables the mind to grow into its analytical powers — and sail beyond.

A strong, healthy ego and a strong, healthy mind are not diseases; they are not to be condemned as enemies or barriers. They are not to be destroyed. To the contrary, the mental-egoic stage is to be included and honored as a vital component of psycho-spiritual evolutionary development. A strong ego can serve as a springboard into Higher Consciousness. It's the middle-point between dirt and pure Spirit. If we only destroy ego and “return to innocence,” we regress back to the immaturity of ignorant and profoundly selfish narcissism. However, *with* the mental-egoic stage of development, we can choose to move forward and upward, into ever-higher levels of awareness, compassion, and all-embracing universal love — the Higher Consciousness Eastern masters have been talking about for millennia.

In that state of Unity Consciousness, ego is indeed transcended; the self-sense dissolves; one no longer sees oneself as being separate from other people, nations, or nature. One recognizes the illusion of separation and their artificial divisive boundaries, and lovingly embraces the whole of existence, from matter, to bacteria, to plants and animals, to human beings. One recognizes — not as a thought, but as a living, breathing, profoundly felt sense — that One is All and All are One (remember Sosan?).

(That does not mean “back to nature.” The slip-up I mentioned lies in *equating the ignorant, pre-mental, pre-egoic state of ignorant almost totally unconscious babyhood bliss with post-rational, transpersonal, transcendental consciousness* — a categorical error that has afflicted everybody from Carl Jung to New Age nature worshippers. To move forward and upward in our evolutionary development, we cannot and must not keep trying to regress to a fusion-state with nature. We must honor nature and continue to evolve upward, through *numerous* mental-egoic states, then soar on up beyond ego, into transmental, translanguistic, transpersonal Unity Consciousness — the consciousness Jesus, Buddha, Osho, Krishnamurti and dozens of others knew and talked about. This is not rejecting ego and sliding back to unconscious fusion with nature. This is using ego as a healthy springboard to sail upward into Unity Consciousness.)

In modern times, hundreds of cross-cultural studies from America and Europe to Japan and China to Africa and South America have been made that clearly and unambiguously delineate, clarify, and document all levels of consciousness — from infantile pre-egoic, to mental-egoic, to the many levels of Higher Consciousness that mystics have been talking about for centuries (e.g. for concrete documentation and extensive discussions, see Ken Wilber's *Integral Psychology* and *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*.)

I opt for full-spectrum Unity Consciousness: Body, Mind, Ego, At-One-With. . . .

SL Transcending Identification With the Egoic Body-Mind

I don't think I did justice to the question of mind and consciousness in my last letter. After all, you were asking about meditation. I talked about several complex aspects of the larger brain-mind picture, but perhaps did not address the question of meditation as directly as I might have. Let me add a few thoughts —

Spiritual seekers have experimented with fasting, austerities, and psychotropic plants for thousands of years. But over time, the most effective way of transforming consciousness on a *permanent* basis has proven to be self-examination and self-awareness. It's been called by many names, including meditation, but the gist of it is simply stated: There is a difference between mind and consciousness.

Consciousness is the all-inclusive, unmoving, unchanging, impersonal *field of awareness* in which the mind's thoughts and perceptions arise and pass away. Meditation, in the sense that I use the word, is a process of interior observation, in which one detaches one's awareness from the contents generated by one's mental-egoic mind.

By means of self-observation, one *dis*-identifies with the body-mind and its thoughts, images and sensations, and shifts identity to the empty, impersonal field of consciousness in which thoughts and sensations arise. From that perspective one then simply observes the body-mind and its workings.

As Sam Harris put it, meditation refers to “any means whereby our sense of 'self' — of subject/object dualism in perception and cognition — can be made to vanish, while consciousness remains vividly aware of the continuum of experience.

“Inevitably the primary obstacle to meditation is thinking. This leads many people to assume that the goal of meditation is to produce a thought-free state. . .but meditation is less a matter of suppressing thoughts than of *breaking our identification* with them, so that we can recognize the condition in which thoughts themselves arise.” (*The End of Faith*).

So why might we want to do this? Because the failure to *recognize* our thoughts *as thoughts* creates a powerful identification with mind, and that identification — “I am my thoughts” — is the foundation upon which all of our personal, religious, and political states of suffering are erected. The sense of separation ultimately creates only conflict.

Said Wilber, “We have identified ourselves with our body, mind, and personality, imagining these objects to constitute our real ‘self,’ and we then spend our entire lives trying to defend, protect, and prolong what is just an illusion. We are the victims of an epidemic case of mistaken identity, with our Supreme Identity quietly but surely awaiting discovery. . . .”

Meditation, simply sitting and observing our thoughts and feelings as they arise, looking at them as might “a watcher on the hill” (Osho's image), enables us to loosen our profound identification with and attachment to our mental-egoic processes. It helps us detach from the endless, on-going mind-chatter we mentioned above. It helps us step out of the dream-cloud of thinking and feeling and reacting

that we normally inhabit.

Have you ever noticed? Most of our waking hours are spent walking around inside a dream-sleep cloud with open eyes. We're almost never here and never now. We're nearly always someplace else in our mind, dreaming about doing something in the past or future. Enlightened masters from Buddha to Jesus to Gurdjieff to Osho to Wilber have forever been trying *to wake us up*. Meditation has proven itself over the course of millennia. As Sam Harris succinctly put it, “Conscious self-observation will break the spell of thought, and the duality of subject and object will vanish.”

Ken Wilber recently said, “Basically, you're looking at your own mind. You're taking time, relaxing, settling into yourself — you don't necessarily have to be introspecting. You can just be resting with everything that's arising [in your mind and around you] and [watching] and letting it all arise and self-liberate in its own space. . . . It's a way to help you dis-identify with finite objects and rest in the ground of being which is your very nature, your very Self.” (*What is Enlightenment?*, Issue 32, March-May, 2006, p. 54.)

In other words, we do not descend to levels below ego. We transcend ego and in so doing dissolve that subject-object separation. Eventually we recognize how we are an integral part of one undivided cosmic whole. Everything is everything else! How can we possibly hurt another? There is no “other”! Love floods the heart. Compassion fills the eyes.

Once we learn how to be aware like this in daily life, even from moment to moment, we live in a state of Unity Consciousness. We use knowledge for relative, practical matters — shopping, driving, making appointments. And we observe the workings (and mis-workings!) of our mind from a calm, detached perspective, bringing Higher Consciousness into our immediate context.

I am not my thoughts. I am that which observes my thoughts. Anything I can

observe in my mind is not me. The observer can never be observed. The known is not the knower. I am not that which I am observing. I am that which witnesses the thoughts, images and feelings observed. And that which observes is at-one-with existence.

A new kind and quality of self-awareness begins to awaken. We become more and more conscious. Hmmmm, one may think, look at what I almost said. Maybe I should say it with more kindness in my heart. Look what I am thinking about doing — do I *have* to do it? Do I have a choice?

We embrace our failings with compassion, thereby giving ourselves more room, more space within, in which to change and grow. We become more sensitive to others. We start choosing to act in terms of our highest Self, gradually dispelling the hypnotic hold our mental-egoic identity has upon us. We come to respect and feel better about ourselves, because we are no longer slaves to irrational impulses. We may still have them, but we become *aware* of them, and do not necessarily act upon them. That is, *we become progressively more liberated from compulsion. We now have choices. We become capable of acting in accord with our highest values.*

It is important to note that this time-honored process is not religion, although many organized religions incorporate it into their methodologies. As Harris noted, “This experience has been at the core of human spirituality for millennia. There is nothing we need believe to actualize it. We need only look closely enough at what we are calling 'I.' (No gods, goddesses, angels, miracles, infallible sacred texts, no beliefs — just presence and attention and detached awareness.)”

Now we see that there is no need to attempt to silence thoughts directly. Because of the nature of the mind, we can't do that anyway, even if we want to. Just sitting with eyes closed and watching without judging, observing thoughts as they appear out of nothing and dance a while and disappear back into nothing — just this and nothing more is needed. As the identification with our mental-egoic personality begins to

loosen, and we begin to sense the reality of the vast, silent, transcendental *context* in which we exist, our thoughts will gradually slow themselves and perhaps even disappear for moments at a time. We come to recognize the space between thoughts, like the space between musical notes, or gaps in traffic. Eventually, awareness can become ours day in and day out.

I do it through listening. When I sit and consciously listen — to the stream outside, to the fire crackling in the woodstove, to rain on the roof, to the music inside my head when I'm playing piano — my “self” disappears. Thoughts vanish. If I catch my mind drifting off into dreams, word-streams and visual images (which does happen, and is perfectly natural, not to be condemned) I gently bring myself back to listening. Sometimes it helps to listen *and* to focus attention on breathing. Watching is in the moment. Listening is in-the-moment. Breathing is in-the-moment. When you are located in-the-moment, there is no time and no mental-egoic you. You're just a transpersonal witnessing presence, radiant with inner light. This is where the silence is.

So, whether watching the thought-stream, or consciously listening, or focusing attention on breathing, I gradually detach from the perennial mind-flow, relax into the contextual ground of being Ken mentioned, and find myself merged with the whole of reality within/without.

This process liberates me from egoic demands; it awakens love of myself and others; it helps me cool out from anxiety; it disperses the noise of my ego and my mind; it helps me recognize a much greater reality than my knowledge, my personal likes and dislikes, my sense of mortality.

This state of being is available to anyone who chooses to embark upon the journey of psycho-spiritual transformation. And it never reaches an end-point. Each expansion opens new vistas looking out to higher peaks. No end to it! There is no limit to the depths and heights of love and compassion we can feel, because there is no end to consciousness. As somebody once said, “Tranquility knows no

boundaries.”

As you can see, this awakened transpersonal quality of being has profound implications for ethical conduct on personal, interpersonal, national, and international levels.

More about love in action on another occasion.