



## Meditation as a Radical Form of Inquiry

by Michael Chender

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Through the practice of dialogue and the organizational disciplines that flow from it, we learn a lot about ourselves and others. Yet "the simple but profound capacity to listen," which according to Bill Isaacs is at the

heart of dialogue, is very difficult to achieve on an ongoing basis. We are conditioned to be reactive, to defend ourselves, to put on a polite face and not give an inch on the inside. Try as we might, those habits are very hard to let go of.

Try sitting still for ten minutes and being aware of what's going on around you without getting caught up in particular thoughts about it. Such a seemingly simple thing is difficult to do. You may notice an incessant internal conversation; moment-to-moment you are planning, consoling yourself, chastising yourself, or just chattering aimlessly. We constantly explain the unfolding of experience to ourselves, making sure that everything fits in terms we are comfortable with—deciding with lightning speed what we should accept as supportive, what we should reject as threatening, and what we can safely ignore. This sub-conscious "gossip" colors virtually all of our perceptions and actions, but we are seldom quiet enough to see it. This is the mind we always carry with us, but seldom have the quiet to experience directly.

### **Letting Go of Letting Go**

Unless we can cut through this basic layer of anxious manipulation of experience, which instantly converts everything by our existing reference points, it is hard to develop stable

insight or genuine lasting change. We can have extraordinary momentary experiences of opening and understanding, but our underlying neurotic patterns of manipulating experience prove very resilient. As soon as we think we've gotten rid of one fixation, that in itself creates another—often more subtle and harder to identify. For example, we become convinced that it's "right" to get rid of the idea of "what's right," and miss the irony. An aggressive, pushy person discovers in a direct and moving way the power of dialogue and becomes a subtly aggressive advocate of dialogue. Exchanging one form of fixation for another is endless until we see through mind's basic duplicity.

Buddhism, often misunderstood as a religion, has developed a radical form of inquiry into the possibilities of open and fresh experience—sitting meditation. The Buddha sat under a tree 2500 years ago and resolved not to do anything more until he had understood the nature of his own mind. This simple act has been passed on as the practice of sitting meditation, in which everything is looked at, including the looker, and everything is let go, including even the idea of letting go.

Meditation is a matter of fundamental relaxation rather than mental gymnastics. The practice is therefore a kind of sympathetic magic; the individual takes the posture and attitude of directness and simplicity, learns patience, and lets the complications of mind unwind. Using simple techniques of working with the present moment of experience, he or she cultivates the habit of letting go. The point is not to become without thoughts, which is impossible. Rather, it is to release grabbing after or identifying with thoughts, whether "good" or "bad." This allows a natural awareness and clarity, ordinarily masked by the continual anxiety and business of mind, to come forth.

### **A Tool for Change**

Practiced regularly, this kind of meditation brings an increasingly clear understanding of the arbitrariness of our own thoughts and views, as well as the habitual inevitability of their arising. Through this visceral experience and understanding, we begin to find the delight, rather than the struggle, in ambiguity. Our sense of humor, common sense, and gentleness towards ourselves and

others increase. We develop a greater capacity to see, hear, and act, less driven by anxiety and habit. In this way, the practice of mindfulness and awareness seems a natural complement and support to the tools of social and organizational change based on dialogue and systems thinking.

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