

My Spiritual Journey with Meditation Victor Ashear

I want to share my meditation journey with you in the hope that you might identify with parts of it even if you are not interested in meditation. I also hope to illustrate that it might take some time to develop familiarity with it if you try meditation. In his meditation book, *A Path with a Heart*, Kornfield states that to benefit from a spiritual path or practice, one has to pick one and stick with it. I am finding this to be true for me. Besides discussing my own journey, I will talk about some of the many benefits of meditation practice, both spiritual and health related.

Ronn's talk in September on "wholeness" and a spiritual life included the idea of "transcendence" or the capacity to extend beyond ourselves and commit to larger causes. Cal, Kael, and others have reminded us this year of what is widely acknowledged, namely, that serving others is a central part of a spiritual life. It was among the core principles common to the major religions of about 2,500 years ago, the so-called "Axial Age" I spoke about a few years ago.

Some of you may recall that about 15 years ago we devoted a year of our worship services to a book on spiritual styles called *Four Spiritualities*. It was based on Carl Jung's personality typology system and the Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory. The idea behind the book was that each of us might have a preferred spiritual path based on our unique personality characteristics. I turned out to be an "NF" or "intuitive-feeling type" and it was suggested that meditation might be a preferred method for me to experience my spirituality. How nice to have a suggestion for spiritual practice compatible with one's personality! But this was not my first introduction to meditation and my earlier attempts to use it as a spiritual path were discouraging, as I will share.

Many years ago while I was a graduate student, I attended a lecture by Jiddu Krishnamurti and I was dazzled. He spoke of transcending the ego and reaching a different level of reality or consciousness. I very much wanted to achieve that. I had abandoned my faith as an Orthodox Jew so I was longing for some way to fill the void. Also as a psychology student I was fascinated by the research done with Buddhist monks and Yogi's demonstrating that when engaged in meditation the brain's wave pattern shifts from what are called beta waves to either alpha or theta. I was also interested in the research illustrating that hypnosis yielded similar changes in brain waves. At the same time I was learning about biofeedback studies that showed receiving feedback on biological variables such as hand temperature, galvanic skin response or sweat level, and brain wave activity, was sufficient to induce this altered state of consciousness and its associated brain wave changes. Many other studies demonstrated the health effects of biofeedback or meditation. For example it can lower blood pressure, it can relieve TMJ (temporomandibular joint disorders), reduce anxiety and depression, and relieve chronic pain and insomnia, among other disorders. Also

while in graduate school I became a fan of Alan Watts and read several of his books on Zen with great interest. I even attended a lecture Watts gave on campus. However when I tried to meditate on my own I was unsuccessful and frustrated. I didn't really understand what Watts, Krishnamurti and others were talking about when they referred to "transcending the ego" but I knew I had not experienced it.

At the same time I read Maslow's books on self-actualization and "peak-experiences" and yearned to experience these states, but alas they too seemed out of reach. Maslow believed, and he had done some research to back this up, that people who have satisfied their needs for acceptance and self-esteem achieve a level of independence and emotional security that enables them to have "peak-experiences" or moments of what might be called "epiphany" or "transcendence." These are similar to experiences William James described in the book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

During those years of my life, I did a bit of experimenting with pot and took mescaline on one occasion hoping to open a spiritual door. With pot I noticed I could hear things in music I had not been able to before but it induced paranoia in me as well. In terms of paranoia, I would imagine the police were coming to get me, and the experience was extremely uncomfortable and not at all spiritual. I had one particularly bad experience with paranoia smoking pot some 40 years ago that was the very last time I touched the stuff or any other street drug.

Janet was raised as a Methodist but her religion was not meaningful to her. We were both agnostics and felt religion would not be too much of an issue in our marriage. That turned out not to be true, but I will save that story for another day. What we agreed to, as a shared spiritual path, was to be ethical. We were married by a leader of the Ethical Humanist movement and attended meetings in Chicago until we moved to Sheridan in 1977. As most of you know, shortly after moving to Sheridan we discovered the UU meetings at Ronn and Linda's and our long and enduring relationship with them and UU followed. One of the things I learned from Ronn is a deeper appreciation of nature as a source of spirituality. Even though I was not nearly the athlete he was, Ronn would invite me to go running with him. During those runs I learned to experience the beauty of natural settings in a way I never had before. Somehow the combination of the monotony of the running pace, and the fatigue, helped to empty my mind of distractions. This became an opportunity to focus on nature's beauty. Ronn would point out sights, smells, and sounds to me that heightened my awareness and appreciation. Prior to this, it was a rare event to lose my sense of separateness and experience the feeling of having blended into the beautiful surroundings. Those shared runs were also a unique opportunity to discuss philosophical and spiritual ideas, and ethical values. When we spoke about the environment, or our shared concern for the wellbeing of others, we were very focused outside of our egos. For the first time I had a spiritual practice, namely running on trails, which allowed me to transcend my ego and merge with the world. It would be

interesting to me to see a study of trail-runners' brain waves and I would expect they are in alpha.

Early in my career as a psychologist I began teaching relaxation therapy to my clients with anxiety and pain disorders and to those suffering insomnia. As I mentioned, the research is unequivocal that relaxation therapy improves all of these conditions. I have seen many clients benefit from relaxation therapy over the course of my career. Meditation and relaxation therapy share some common elements: they both induce alpha brain waves, both slow down breathing, quiet the mind, and help create a synchrony between mind and body. At that time, both my clients and I were able to experience the psychological and physical benefits of relaxation therapy but I was still not able to grasp the spiritual ones.

The Four Spiritualities book I mentioned at the beginning of this talk suggested to me that I ought not give up on the possible spiritual benefits of meditation.

Meditation is a practice that is several thousand years old. It began in ancient India in the seventh century BCE. Yajnavalkya (yage-nav-lak-ya), a major figure of the time, taught that there was "an immortal spark at the core of the person" which is of the same nature as the entire cosmos. Although the practice appears to have begun within the Hindu tradition, it has been adapted in some form in most of the world's religions throughout the ages. The Catholic reciting the rosary or kneeling in a church at the foot of a statue of Jesus may be in a state of meditation. The Orthodox Jew standing and bowing in "silent" prayer reading from the prayer book may be engaged in meditation. The Muslim bowing towards Mecca on his prayer rug is meditating. The Whirling Dervish, or the Sufi or the Bali dancer, or the Shaman is similar. So the content may differ but the process is similar. It doesn't really matter what one believes about the nature of the sacred, one can have a spiritual experience; one can transcend the ego by engaging in some form of mediation or prayer. The point is that meditation is a spiritual practice compatible with just about any belief or nonbelief system.

When I was 17, I rejected Judaism because I could not believe in a personal God. I thought, mistakenly, that I was also rejecting everything my father had taught me about a spiritual life. My father was a powerful role model. He devoted his life to prayer and religious practice with great love and sincerity. He was very active in the life of his synagogue. He also was a very humble and unassuming man. While I still reject the idea of a personal God, I now see his life as a guide to how to be spiritual. The way he prayed is now a template for me in my meditation practice. I understand from him that meditation or prayer is not something done only a few minutes a few times a week, but a daily approach to life.

Many years after I left Judaism behind I learned from reading the psychoanalyst Erich Fromm that the Sabbath was intended as a day of meditation. The word Sabbath is from Hebrew and means "the day of rest." All the prohibitions on the

Sabbath have to do with activities that are related to working. When we are busy with life we are trying to accomplish tasks. On the Sabbath the intention is to be disengaged from life tasks so that one can focus on prayer and fully appreciate the wonders of creation. This knowledge made the spiritual benefits seem more accessible to me because I found a link between the religion of my childhood and meditation, the spiritual practice I was trying to learn. And this also brought me closer to the realization of my father as a spiritual guide.

As I began to develop as a psychologist and psychotherapist I became more focused on what is called “the art of listening.” I discovered from experience what I had been taught, that the more I am able to focus on my client and to really hear what he or she is saying the more I feel I can understand and be able to help. I discovered that this seemingly simple act of deep listening is yet another form of meditation. It is another form of ego transcendence and there is something sacred about it. I have always felt privileged to be permitted to participate in this kind of personal witness. I understood this at some level in my early years of practice but I didn’t appreciate how it all fit together into a coherent spiritual discipline and life journey until the last few years. So here was another link between my professional skill development and meditation. That also helped me to feel hopeful about learning to do traditional sitting meditation as a spiritual practice.

The next chapter in my spiritual journey was when Leila Bruno joined our fellowship about 10 years ago. Soon after joining, Leila gave the first in what became a series of talks about Buddhist Meditation. I was inspired. I asked her if she would be willing to lead a meditation group for our fellowship and she said yes without any hesitation. Although still small, the group has been in continuous operation since then. Leila is, in my view, a gifted meditation teacher. In addition to leading and guiding the meditation practice, she introduced the participants in the group to readings (what some call *dharmas*) that greatly simplified the instructions about how to do this correctly. After several years of practice I can say that finally I am able to “transcend my ego” through basic sitting meditation and have what I believe firmly, is a spiritual experience when I meditate. This is particularly welcome at this stage of my life when my injury rate keeps escalating and my capacity to run trails has decreased considerably!

So what are some of the benefits and lessons I have derived from pursuing meditation practice?

Mindfulness: Sakyong Mipham defined “mindfulness as having 3 qualities, familiarity, remembering, and non-distraction. Familiarity means to come back to the steady place in the mind. Remembering refers to keeping the mind on the intended focus of the meditation, which in the *Shambhala* Buddhist tradition is the breath. Non-distraction is the skill of maintaining a constant focus. This training in mindfulness has proven invaluable because it does move me out of my ordinary sense of self into a more universal state of consciousness.

Compassion: Meditation allows us to look with understanding and kindness towards others and ourselves. According to Sharon Salzberg, “The goal of spiritual practice is to be able to look without illusion at what is natural in life, at what is actually happening for others and for ourselves.” She says the willingness to see is the first step in developing compassion. The next step she says is becoming open to it, to developing a relationship to it. I have learned that when my own needs and issues are met, when I am at peace with myself, I can see more accurately and more readily engage with the needs of others. The Dalai Lama said, “My religion is compassion.” Rabbis and Jewish mystics said that the task set for us on this earth is *Tikkun Olam*, the “repair of the world.” All of the major world religions including UU teach compassion and care for the welfare of others.

Patience: While some who take up the practice of meditation may learn the technique quickly, for the majority it seems it takes time and repeated effort. Beginning meditators are taught to be gentle with themselves when they discover the mind is distracted into thought, when the focus is intended to be on the breathing. Kornfield compared the process to training a puppy dog to sit. The puppy will keep getting up and moving about and needs to be gently brought back to the seated position. So the time and effort involved in learning meditation can lead to a greater capacity for patience. Patience may be required to develop other spiritual practices.

Self-awareness: Sometimes the instruction in meditation is to be aware of patterns of thought or feelings that come up as one is attempting to stay focused on the breath. It is suggested that observing these patterns can teach one about oneself. Does one particular theme come up repeatedly? Karen Armstrong says the practice of mindfulness meditation is, “to help us detach ourselves from the ego by observing the way the mind works.”

Self-transcendence: This is the one that has interested me but eluded me for much of my life. Many experts in the practice of meditation suggest that the more aware we are of our thoughts and feelings the greater the opportunity to work through “stuck places” and this, in turn, frees the mind to move beyond the personal frame of reference into what is sometimes called “universal consciousness.” I find this to be a very freeing and spiritual experience when I am able to achieve it.

If you have the desire to deepen self-awareness, become more patient, mindful, compassionate, and spiritual, consider making mediation part of your spiritual practice. It is also a great way to relive stress and improve well-being. And it is compatible with just about anyone’s beliefs and other spiritual practices.

Finally I would note that meditation practice is congruent with all our 7 UU Principles. Consider Principle 2: “Justice, equity and compassion in human

relations.” As one becomes freer of personal concerns through meditation there is more consciousness available to devote to the needs of others. A full discussion of the correspondence of our 7 UU principles and meditation awaits another service. In the meantime, our meditation group meets here every Sunday eve at 7:00 for about an hour. You would be most welcome to join us.

And may your spiritual journey lead you to peace and fulfillment. Thank you for listening to mine.