



The Art Of Contemplation

by Alan Watts

The individual is an aperture through which the whole energy of the universe is aware of itself, a vortex of vibrations in which it realizes itself as man or beast, flower or star – not alone, but as central to all that surrounds it. These centers are not, as may seem, apart from their surroundings, but stand in mutual relationship to them – center to circumference – in the same way as the magnetic poles. It is thus that each center anywhere implies all other centers elsewhere. The individual is not, therefore, only a center. He is the entire surround centered at this time or this place, which is why the astrologers try to infer the character of an individual from the disposition of the universe encircling him, though it is doubtful whether they know how to read it correctly.

The whole system is symbiotic in principle, for no individual can appear, for however short a time, except in mutual interdependence with the whole. For it could be said, in the rather clumsy language of nouns and verbs which arbitrarily distinguishes things from events, that the individual is something which the whole is doing, and that the whole is something which the individual is doing simultaneously. This relationship is not ordinarily felt or recognized in human consciousness, fascinated as it is by the apparent independence of the individual from the whole – and also frightened by it. The individual feels restricted to the area of his voluntary behavior, since all else seems to be an independent and uncontrollable happening on the part of something quite other than himself. He does not realize that, just as one cannot walk without ground, one cannot experience doing except in relation to happening, or self (center) except in relation to other (surround). Thus nothing other than oneself is quite other, for between self and other, doing and happening, there is, again, the same kind of unity which exists between magnetic poles, or between the crest and the trough of a wave.

The system as a whole appears to be a distribution of solid entities or modes of energy in the midst of emptiness or space. Human consciousness preoccupies itself with these entities, and virtually ignores their spatial background. We consider it "nothing" in the sense of that which has neither importance nor significance, forgetting that without the spatial field, none of these entities could be manifested or distinguished. There is, however, between space and entity the

same polar relationship as between crest and trough, for which reason "nothingness" is not simply the contrary or absence of "being", but rather its ground and origin. We believe so firmly in the maxim "ex nihilo nihil fit" – "nothing can come out of nothing" – that it is almost impossible for us to see that emptiness is the essential prerequisite for every form of being, unless we can conceive that space has some structure concealed from our senses.

While there are indeed such structures or processes as cosmic rays which do not appear to the naked senses, the usefulness and potency of emptiness is, as Lao-tzu said, precisely that it is perfectly empty. "Being and non-being arise mutually." Thus, not to see the unity of self and other is the fear of life, and not to see the unity of being and non-being is the fear of death.

To understand the reciprocity or mutual interdependence of polar opposites – being and nothing, center and surround, self and other, doing and happening – might be called polar vision. I have been speaking of it in the dry terms of logic, in which it may be grasped intellectually. But when polar vision comes in the form of immediate sensation and feeling, it is known as mystical experience or cosmic consciousness, and of this it is better to speak in the mode of poetry and paradox. Thus, to feel polar vision is to feel that what happens to you is your own doing, and that your own doing is happening to you; that death and emptiness is the firm ground upon which life walks; and that oneself, as both center and surround, is the eternal universe. But this feeling, or intuition, does not come in the form of words or ideas, and does not depend on any trick of imagination or self-suggestion. It is more as when one simply sees blue sky or feels that one is alive.

The feeling or, rather, the basis for it, is always present. We are unaware of it only because our consciousness is distracted by another and incompatible feeling of identity which almost all thinking peoples learn from childhood. All too easily, we confuse symbols and signs with what they represent, as in saying, "This is a tree", when that to which we are pointing is quite other than the sound "tree". At a much deeper level, we confuse what we actually are, as center-and-surround or organism-and-environment, with an idea, concept, or image of ourselves from which the interdependence of self and other is absent. This image we call the "I", the ego, the person, or the subject (as distinct from the object). We consider it as the doer of our deeds, the thinker of our thoughts, and the feeler of our feelings. It is a false image for three reasons.

The first is that it is only a concept or symbol, and thus can no more do anything than the word "water" can quench thirst. The second is that it is no more than an impoverished caricature of our whole organism, since there is nothing in it which corresponds to the subconscious processes of our being. The third is that it entirely leaves out the polar unity of the organism with the universe, ignoring the fact that the two are a single process.

Under the impression that this pure abstraction is the vital core and organizing center of our being, we try to exert its "will" when action is difficult or emotions hard to restrain. Thus in "taking a hard look" at something or listening intently, we tighten muscles in the regions of the eyes and ears. We scratch out heads when we are puzzled, and frown when we are trying to pay close attention. We grit our teeth when trying to endure pain, clench our fists when trying to "hold on to ourselves", and tighten our stomach muscles when attempting to restrain anxiety. All these actions are futile, and do nothing to attain the desired objectives. But they are chronic and habitual, and build up a generalized state of bodily tension, often centered above and between the eyes, which serves as the [physical] referent, the felt experience, corresponding to the symbol-image of the person or ego – thus marrying an illusion to a futility.

The question – what, then, can be done to overcome this false sense of identity and to replace it with polar vision and cosmic consciousness? – is impossible to answer in its own terms. All that needs to be experienced for cosmic consciousness is already present, and anything in excess of this would be obstructive and redundant – like red ink on a rose. Otherwise, it is simply necessary to see that our usual "I" is a false and impotent image. But just as this phantom cannot actually will or do anything, it cannot get rid of itself. No tensing of muscles or, for that matter, deliberate relaxing of muscles, no repetitions of formulae, no self-suggestion, no exercises of imagination, no psychophysical regimens of any kind will do anything but add strength to the phantom. For, every littlest movement to change or to try not to change the way you actually feel now will be just one more of those futile muscular tensions (like trying to lift an airliner off the ground by straining at your seat-belt) which give semblance to the reality of the separated ego. You, considered as that ego, cannot get polar vision or cosmic consciousness. It might arise all of itself, as if by divine grace, but there is nothing, just nothing you can do or not do to bring it about. Yogis and Zen followers sometimes come to this point after long and heroic efforts.

At this point there is nothing to do except what is happening of itself. All that remains is the simple awareness of what is going on – trees outside, street sounds, clock ticking, sunlight on carpet, breathing, body feelings, talking to yourself in your head. Usual cosmic jazz. That's what there is, and every bit of it, including memories and recollections, is happening now. It comes out of nothing as sounds come out of silence, for it should be obvious that the universe has always started from now and left traces behind, like a pen as it writes, though the written record, the seeming past, is still and only now.

You, as ego, cannot change what you are feeling, and you cannot, effectively, try not to change it. There is simply and only what is happening, including those particular thoughts, images, and tensions which you customarily attributed to the phantom thinker and doer. They persist like echoes, but as it is seen that they are just static in the nervous system and not the

work of any central ego, they lose interest, subside, and go away of themselves. Hoping that they will go away is just more static.

If you have understood all this, you are simply aware of what is happening now, and we might call this state meditation or, better, contemplation. But it is not that you are something which is just watching what happens. "What happens" is just using your organism to watch itself. It is the universe centering as a particular being, though it is not necessary to use or insist on this concept, for what is important here is not the idea but the feeling of it. The words are only a special use of noises in the air, marks on paper, or vibrations in the brain.

If this becomes clear, the effort to transform one's own mind should collapse, and along with it the whole illusion that one is a separate center of consciousness to which experience happens and for which these happenings are problematic. This collapse would then become the state of contemplation, the realization that all is One. I may understand this point theoretically, but still there seems to be no change, for which reason I look for some process whereby I can move from theoretical to immediate or intuitive understanding – not recognizing that this is still a subtle form of the absurd attempt to transform the transformer, arising from the illusory distinction of thinker and thought, experiencer and experience.

So long as this subtle confusion remains, one can be beguiled into various ways of trying to meditate, and a competent guru will suggest techniques so clever that their absurdity will be difficult to discover without resolute attempts to follow them through. Furthermore, the aspirations and minor successes of other seekers will compound a collective illusion, and even a mutual one-upmanship contest, of believing that this or that method or guru is, at last, the one that really works. Yet the intention of the guru himself is simply to exhaust the energy of the illusion by bringing his disciples again and again to experiences of the absurdity of trying to transform the mind with the mind. As the Zen patriarch Seng-ts'an put it:

The wise person does not strive

The ignorant man ties himself up...

If you work on your mind with your mind

How can you avoid an immense confusion?

But once it has been explained, you may naturally ask whether it is really necessary to go through all this rigorous folly to dissipate the illusion. You will wonder whether knowing, theoretically, in advance that these disciplines are absurd, you will no longer have the motivation to follow them through. Yet shouldn't it be clear that the very question "is it necessary in order to dissipate?" arises directly from the illusion itself? If it isn't clear, you will have the itch to go through the discipline, and try to "get" some attainment and rise to some higher rank of spiritual superiority. But if it is clear, you may feel completely nonplussed and

confounded, as if – as they say in Zen – you were a mosquito trying to bite an iron bull. However, this feeling is precisely the sensation that there is no separate self which can either do or not do anything about the problem. Thus it may appear, further, that if there is no distinct ego to be nonplussed, the stream of experience can simply flow on unobstructedly by itself. Hence the verse:

Blue mountains are of themselves blue mountains;
White clouds are of themselves white clouds.

This unobstructed flow is the Tao, the way or course of nature, and is also what is meant by the state of non-attachment – a spontaneous, unforced, and unblocked flowing of life. Yet the prospect of such flowing as a way of life gives us intense moral anxiety, for at once there are qualms about unleashing the tigers and demons within us if no control is exercised. But such qualms are, again, symptoms of the same old illusion. What if there has been no controlling self all along? Consider, too, whether the human condition could be much more depraved than it is already, and mark the horrendous behavior of people who believe in will-power and control over their minds and their circumstances... Hitler was an ascetic; Rasputin had incredible mastery of his mind and body; and many of the samurai exploited Zen training for the improvement of military skills, though there were a few, like Miyamoto Musashi, who finally realized the futility of the enterprise. The Tao flows without obstruction whether we know it or not, for the not knowing is no more than a variant pattern of the flow. As another Zen verse puts it:

If you understand, things are just as they are;
If you do not understand, things are just as they are.

Now, it is widely believed that those who are free from the illusion of separateness are automatically endowed with extraordinary powers, and this is true in the obvious sense that all the wonders of nature are no other than oneself. Beyond this, the gifts of psionic powers (siddhi) may or may not be manifested, just as there may or may not be good weather. In any milieu where the liberated guru is highly revered, people will faith-heal themselves of sickness in his presence, and attribute the cure to his magic. But meditation may be regarded as a state in which the fruits of nature and the potentialities of the human organism may develop more richly, though this will never happen if their growth is forced. So long, then, as we are concerned with powers, we are still aiming at increased control of nature and aggravating our own frustrations. I am speaking, needless to say, of a control of nature supposedly imposed from the outside. It is really incorrect to think of nature as controlled, self-controlled, or uncontrolled, for the idea of control always involves a duality in which one element commands and the other obeys, or refuses to obey. The pattern or order of nature depends on no such

division, since cause and effect, action and reaction, are simply two aspects or poles of a single process, or two ways of looking at it. No cause is separate from its effect, except for purposes of description in a dualistic language.

As a rule, the mystics and gurus who are no longer seeking any attainment go on with what appears to be the formal practices of meditation. The various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are usually depicted in the position of meditating in the padmasana or lotus-posture like any novice, but this is actually a ritual which is done for its own sake – as one might play the flute, or dance, or invite friends to a formal dinner. It is almost ridiculous to ask, "Why meditate?" as if it were going out of one's way to do something bizarre, like lying on a bed of nails. Why look at the stars or watch clouds? Why go sailing to no fixed destination? Nothing is really explained by its cause or motivation, for we find only causes behind causes until we can pursue them no longer. It is like a child asking, "Why? Why? Why?..." until its father, like a Zen master, says, "O shut up and suck your lollipop!"

Thus contemplation as a particular "exercise" done in a formal way, is simply the ritual enjoyment of that basic awareness of what is happening now, which goes on always from moment to moment. In the same way, dancing as dancing is the ritual form of dancing while cooking, or dancing with the pen while writing. It is therefore quite against the spirit of such contemplation to undertake it in a mood of grim seriousness, as is sometimes the way in monasteries and religious communities which are really schools for adolescents without true vocation to the contemplative life, where young people are drilled in ritual like conscripted soldiers. Children must under no circumstances be forced to participate in such exercises, just as we would not dream of requiring them to engage in sexual intercourse. In such ritual, it is equally absurd to treat ourselves as children, and to browbeat ourselves into arduous practice with the thought that it will be good for us. The good of contemplation is contemplation – not some future result that it may bring.

While there are traditional forms of the contemplative ritual, there are no fixed ways in which it must be done. It has, however, been found appropriate to sit like a Buddha with the legs crossed, or in lotus-posture, with the back easily erect and the breath coming and going on its own – as if it were falling out and falling in, not as being pushed out or pulled in.

In the same spirit, one does not listen – but simply hears all sounds that are emerging from silence without making any effort to place or identify them. Similarly, one does not look, but only sees light, color, and form playing with the eyes as they, too, emerge moment by moment from the void. Thoughts, likewise, are treated in the same way as sounds, and, if they arise, are merely watched without comment as they come and go, "hearing" them in the same way as one would hear the chattering of birds on the roof.

When the breath subsides into a slow rhythm, it is a special delight to let the voice float a tone upon it, with the sound OM, or the mantram OM AH HUM, and to hear the tone reverberating – perhaps to the accompaniment of a gong which is allowed to hum until its sound fades into all other sounds. There are many suitable forms of such chanting ritual, employing not only prolonged single tones, but also rhythmic phrases repeated again and again, as for instance the familiar lilting mantram HARI KRISHNA, HARI KRISHNA, KRISHNA KRISHNA, HARI HARI; HARI RAMA, HARI RAMA, RAMA RAMA, HARI HARI. What is important here is not the meaning of the words but their actual sound and the movement of the breath and lips, giving direct experience of the basic energy of life as it comes from the void.

It is possible that in the course of contemplation there may arise visions or ecstatic states of consciousness, and it is a natural temptation to think of these as the goals of contemplation. However, to attempt to prolong these states, or to regain them when they subside, is like straining the facial muscles to see clearly, and is an effort to interrupt the natural flow of what is happening now. There may also arise a curious sensitivity to the unspoken thoughts and intentions of others, or astonishing dexterity of intellect or fidelity of memory, but these are not to be taken as signs of "progress" in contemplation, because contemplation ceases as soon as there is any seeking for results. Such temptations as these beset ritual contemplation in the same way as playing a musical instrument may be used for ends extraneous to the enjoyment of music, as in competing with oneself or with others for musical status.

Too much concern for ritual contemplation may also lead to a one-sidedly passive form of life and to the impression of falling away from the eternal now while engaged in other and more strenuous activities. Now, the habitual use of muscular tension as the referent for the ego in looking, listening, and willing carries over into the use of natural physical exertion in running, lifting, and hauling so as to make such actions seem entirely different from those which happen "of themselves", spontaneously. Curiously, this sets up, say, in the effort to run, a redundant effort to make the effort, giving the impression that the exertion of running is a direct demonstration of the activity and potency of the ego-image. We have learned, mostly as children, to put on an act of strenuousness while doing strenuous things. Yet, efforts to make efforts, being redundant, work against the natural use of muscular energy in such a way that they are self-imposed obstacles, or efforts against effort. It is as if, in pulling, the triceps were to work against the biceps. When this redundant use of effort falls away, it becomes obvious that decisions to do this or that, and the consequent physical actions, happen of themselves like everything else.

For free action is certainly not caused by a purely abstract "I". It emerges from the total intelligence of the organism, in the same way as the growth of the brain and the digestion of

food, and it will employ conscious reasoning in situations where reasoning is an appropriate tool. This would perhaps be called biologically or physically "determined" action by those who separate the organism from the rest of the universe, and see it "obeying" or "responding" to "drives" which have first been defined as external to itself. But the individual-and-universe has no external or extraneous determinant. The individual may be seen as constrained by natural processes only when viewed out of context as something in but not of its whole environment. Laws and artificial restraints become necessary when, through the illusion of separateness, the individual loses touch with his organic intelligence and feels at odds with his environment. Obviously, the operation of organic intelligence is not to be confused with the false spontaneity of actions deliberately calculated to be at variance with natural order or human law. Social conventions still govern those who go out of their way to oppose them.

In past times, all matters concerning the practice of contemplation were considered esoteric, or what amounts in the West to the same thing, heretical – though not every heresy was of this order, and the contemplative way became heresy only as people tried to describe its content. For, speaking in religious language, it would be plain to the contemplative that only God exists, and that there is nothing other than God. For obvious reasons, this is a doctrine greatly feared by both ecclesiastical and secular rulers. On the one hand, when it is necessary that the people be exploited and oppressed, it is important to imbue them with a servile mentality. On the other hand, when people are vulgar and greedy, the mere idea that "all is God" or that good and evil are polar is used to justify every wanton excess. It is for this reason that governments forbid the ingestion of hemp flowers and other psychedelic substances, lest immature and half-civilized individuals profane the mysteries. One does not wish noble wines to be used for drunken brawls.

The fiction of the isolated ego, or person, as the real individual has therefore been implanted to stimulate the feeling of creatureliness and the fear of God. It is likewise advantageous to rulers that the people be blind to the polarity of life and death, and so fear death if they fear not God. But when those who implant this fiction are also its dupes, they seek for themselves as persons the powers which they already enjoy as God, but have forgotten. In this endeavor, they resort to such crude wisdom as may be expressed in linear signs, words, and numbers for the government of a non-linear and immeasurably subtle world. And as the person is a linear version of man, confused with the real man, so the linear understanding of the world – with which linear wisdom must deal – is confused with the real world. Only by violence, then, can the real and living world be straightened out, squared away, evened off, boxed into clear-cut categories, and so conformed to the crudities of linear wisdom. Consequently, all the balances and interdependencies of nature are thrown into confusion – to the bewilderment of birds, beasts, and plants, and the befuddlement of man's own non-linear body and brain. In

such an emergency it is necessary to take the risks of exposing the illusion of the person and all its works, and to allow what has become esoteric to become generally known.

It is thus that, in contemplation, man discovers himself as inseparable from the cosmos as a whole in both its positive and negative aspects, its appearances and disappearances. Astronomy and physics are therefore theoretical adumbrations of the vastness of our dimensions, for it is not simply that we are subordinate parts of the system, but that the entire system is our self in its full and only true sense. Ordinarily, we may glimpse this truth in a shallowly intellectual way, and consider it as a lofty idea that has little relation to practical affairs and basic emotions. But in contemplation, this view is as real and self-evident as breathing, and enables the problems of mundane life to be seen in their true perspective – *subspecie æternitatis* – balancing and correcting the usual myopia of exclusive preoccupation with nasty little games and schemes.

Nature, that is, our own true nature, is bringing these preoccupations to a stop by coming forth with the technical power to pursue them on a colossal scale, hitherto unknown. Pursued and magnified with such power, they come swiftly to absurdity and catastrophe – so that their innate contradictions become obvious to all. For we have been trying to harness technology to the impossible game of having positive without negative, defying the principles of that very electricity upon which technology so largely depends. This objective is as illusory as the ego which seeks it.

Thus a time when the objective seems clearly unattainable is a time ripe for the unmasking of that ego – itself the persona-mask which conceals the splendor of our Original Face. When spring comes, the buds break out of their husks, the little birds cast off their shells, and young plants burst from their seed-casings... When there is a crack in the Cosmic Egg, Buddha is about to be born.