
The character of this book can be gathered from a few sentences in its short preface: “The book offers a clear explanation of the meditation instructions and exercises that are given on retreats”; “[It] was born out of the authors’ twelve-year collaboration in teaching vipassana meditation”; and “These teachings are strongly rooted in the Buddhist tradition, especially as it has developed... in Thailand and Burma.” A very important question, which experience has taught me to ask, is: Does this book really describe all the “exercises” which take place in these retreats, or are there, besides, “nonmeditational” practices, such as sutra chanting, worship periods, and the like involved? Since the book gives no indication of any such things, I must suppose that it provides us with an insight into the full content of the sessions, and judge accordingly.

The book is a handbook for practice. Consequently, simply reading it, as I had to for the sake of this review, is about as exciting as reading a computer manual without having a computer at one’s disposal. But this of course does not tell us anything about its value as a manual, and, while not really able to judge for myself, I am inclined to believe the blurb on the back cover, which says: “It is one of the most useful manuals ever written for those who seek to follow the path of insight meditation.” With more to go on this time, I am also inclined to agree with the same blurb’s characterization of the book as “a skillful blend of pragmatic instruction, psychological insight, and perennial wisdom” — but precisely therein may lie the roots of the misgivings which will be touched on in a minute.

After two short forewords, one by the Dalai Lama (a testimony to the ecumenical spirit wherein the book is written) and one by Robert K. Hall, the book unfolds into sixteen chapters (as many retreat conferences or "teishō" [lectures by the Master]), which lead from meditational practice deeper and deeper into the Buddhist theory, to which the practice is supposed to give access but which undergirds it from the beginning. This happens in three more or less distinct steps: “Understanding Practice” (Part One), “Training the Heart and Mind” (Part Two), and “The Growth of Wisdom” (Part Three). The book thus becomes a manual for meditation that is at the same time an introduction to all the fundamental tenets of Buddhism.
The method of meditation proposed here is called vipassana or insight meditation and is described as "training of mindfulness" (p. 5), "directing attention to our everyday experience and learning to listen to our bodies, hearts and minds" (p. 6), "our practice is to explore the totality of what we are" (p. 19), "simple, bare attention to what is happening...without evaluation, without interpretation" (p. 30). This distinguishes the method rather clearly from other Buddhist meditation methods, as for example Zen meditation, which is usually described as "objectless," or some forms of tantric meditation, characterized in the book as having a more "dramatic quality" (p. xi). The authors, however, rather than paying attention to these differences, appear to suppose that the Buddhist meditation method is basically one, and therefore feel free to refer also, for instance, to Zen experiences and words. But what strikes me most, as a Christian, is the fact that this form of meditation focuses not on sacred objects, events, or symbols, but on the everyday and "very profane" self. This, of course, gives it an enviable immediacy and brings it in the vicinity of psychology and psychiatry. At the same time, however, it provokes in me the question of how far this form of meditation can, or wants to, be seen as "religious" — a question not in the sense of "Does it fit some (or worse, my) definition of religion?" but in the sense of "Can it mobilize religious powers of healing beyond the purely psychological ones?" or again, "Can it be detached from the 'religious atmosphere' (taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, the sangha [Buddhist community]) wherein it is traditionally practiced in Theravada countries, without losing its power?"

With Robert Hall, I admire the "unadorned simplicity" (p. xi) of these teachings, which makes them accessible to many of our contemporaries, but I have the uncomfortable feeling that in them, notwithstanding the ample attention accorded Buddhist teachings, the religious commitment of traditional Buddhism has been toned down to a questionable degree. Thus, for instance, the goal of the exercise is now described in the following words: "We can approach our lives with a sense of spiritual urgency, with a great desire to understand this body and mind before we die" (p. 187) — not quite the expectations motivating the traditional Buddhist practitioner. And I have a similar misgiving when, at the end of the treatment of faith as one of the five spiritual faculties, faith is presented as "trusting the unfolding process of our lives" (p. 129). Can this kind of "psychological faith" inspire people to go the whole length of the path? The authors are undoubtedly right in writing, "If we get quite concentrated but have not balanced the mind by arousing an equal amount of energy, we shall be stuck in a calm but dull state" (p. 42). But my question is, where is that energy supposed to come from?

This same line of thought could induce me to ask further questions, such as, what exactly the talk on the life of the Buddha (chapter 7) is supposed to do for the meditators — whether it is supposed to simply give their practice some historical depth or maybe also impart on their faith some "transcendental" and invigorating aspect. But the small number of lines left for this review makes a switch of attention obligatory.

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What I admire most in the book is its great stress, from the first to the last page, on compassion. It could even be said that the Dalai Lama’s words, "insight and compassion" (p. ix), render the character of the book better than the title, which speaks only of "insight meditation." But the need which the authors feel to constantly put a special stress on compassion belies their often expressed conviction that compassion necessarily flows from insight. Especially important in relation to compassion is chapter 15, "The Path of Service," which is an admirably balanced presentation of the relation between contemplation and action for others. Equally significant is the authors’ genuinely Buddhist stress on suffering and the need to open ourselves to it in chapter 9, "Suffering: The Gateway to Compassion," wherein it is said, for instance: "It is vital that we remain connected to and sensitive to this fact [of the enormous lot of suffering in the world and in ourselves]" (p. 99).

To somebody who is usually more exposed to Mahayana teachings, the book’s emphasis on the precepts (pp. 7-10 and passim) appears as healthy and feels “very Theravada.” For a Christian, on the other hand, it is refreshing to see how the human imperfections and transgressions are approached here as causes of suffering and hindrances on the spiritual path, rather than from the perspective of sin and punishment. However, it seems to me that the authors exclude an important aspect of religious (also Buddhist) experience when they write, rather cavalierly: "In view of karmic law, guilt is an inappropriate feeling and a rather useless burden" (p. 114). Granting that guilt is often religiously misused and therefore some caveats are in order, I still seem to detect here an excessive (and not really Buddhist) concession to some strands of contemporary psychology — a trend which I also recognize in the authors’ condemnation of desire because “it is...a sense that we are somehow incomplete, and it keeps us cut off from the joy of our own natural completeness” (pp. 33-34).

Not being competent to judge the excellence of the book as a manual of practice, I can only say, more or less repeating myself, that I feel it to be the fruit of long years of practice and serious reflection and, as such, it must be worth consulting, preferably alongside some more traditional Theravada literature.

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Dainin Katagiri Rōshi, founder of the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center, passed away in 1989 at the relatively young age of sixty-one. Returning to Silence, published only a year before Katagiri’s death, forms a suitable memorial for its author, explaining in clear terms the Sōtō approach to Zen practice