

MEDITATION: MY HISTORY AND TRAJECTORY

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Growing up in the late 1950s, Buddhism was an intellectual topic, something my friends and I would sometimes talk about (like existentialism and Ingmar Bergman films) late into the night while stoked on cigarettes and coffee. I did not know anyone in the 1950s who actually meditated.

Back then I wanted very much to be a beatnik and refashioned myself in that image as best as a teenager could. By 1960 I had dropped out of high school and was living in an abandoned wooden freezer in the basement of a gallery called the Gas House (a famous Beat hangout) on Venice Beach in Santa Monica, California. I was sure that I was destined to be an artist and was painting oils at the time.

Beatniks knew at least something about meditation. In that time it was all about Zen Buddhism, with its beautiful stark aesthetic and images of the sitting Buddha. Probably some of my ideas of Buddhism came from seeing temples and Buddha statues in the films of Akira Kurosawa, still my favorite movie director of all time.

And I did try to meditate back then, including an all-day sitting sesshin with Roshi Philip Kapleau of the Rochester Zen Center, at which he would walk around and whack people on the back with a stick. Already the times were drifting into what would become the spiritual backwash of the 1970s. Spirituality of some kind or other was all the buzz.

But it was not until the early 1970s and the advent of the books of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche that my friends and I first understood that Buddhism was not just an intellectual topic, but rather a method and path. And meeting Trungpa in person changed my ideas forever about what dharma was, not an idea, but a way of life, a method to become more aware. Who would have thought?

After Trungpa appeared on the scene, my ideas of carefully-manicured Zen sand gardens, teak floors, and sliding rice-paper screens quickly gave way to the overwhelming visuals of the Tibetan shrines and the cacophony of other-worldly sounds of a full monk-chorus playing instruments like the Jaling (an oboe-like instrument) or the thigh-bone trumpets called Kangling. It was strikingly familiar to my Catholic upbringing, with its colorful vestments and strange church Latin.

Also gone were the dreamy half-hearted attempts to light a candle or incense and just sit for a spell. Trungpa recommended sitting for long, long periods of time, or at least his lieutenants did. Sitting meditation (at least for me) quickly became something more than lava lamps and a little reverie.

From then on meditation was something I had to do (or ought to do) each day. I loved the idea of the dharma and being a meditator (at least theoretically), but on any given bright sunshiny morning, that first flash of thought (remembering) that I had to do my daily meditation practice was too often more like a cloud on the horizon than something I was looking forward to. In this I am not the Lone Ranger. This was (and is) a common problem.

The New-Age 1970s swept through my generation like a spiritual firestorm, probably doing as much damage to true spirituality as good. We are still recovering from it and nothing was more damaged than the whole idea of meditation. The sublime images from the late 1950s and early 1960s of a Zen composure had been overwhelmed by literally hundreds of kinds and styles of "meditation," few of them having any authentic background or tradition. Meditation in the 1970s was whatever you wanted to think it was, and this is generally true even today. I could go on.

Well, I started out to write about something totally different than this brief history of my encounter with meditation, but so be it. What I wanted to say was that once habituated to meditation, the mind wants to do it at every opportunity, including writing this short piece. I no longer feel like myself if I am not engaged in some kind of meditational state for at least a good part of the day. It does not have to be on the cushion, but it does have to be. Maybe I can write more about this topic another day. Right now I have to go and be very still for a while, but also very active.