

*Insight meditation teachers confirm different rates of progress in meditation
between Eastern and Western practitioners.*

SPEEDY WESTERN MINDS SLOW SLOWLY



by
ROGER WALSH

For some years now there have been rumors circulating among Western insight (Vipassana) meditation students that Eastern practitioners tend to make more rapid and deeper progress. For some time it remained unclear whether this assertion was true. However, within the last year differences have been confirmed by some of the most eminent teachers of this discipline.

During 1979 and 1980, eminent teachers from Burma (Mahasi Sayadaw and accompanying senior monks), Thailand (Achaan Cha), and India (Dipama) visited the United States for the first time. Some of them had previously taught Westerners in their native countries, and all of them engaged in intensive teaching and conducted personal interviews with Western practitioners during their visits. They agreed that Westerners did tend to make slower progress than students from their own cultures.

Thus, for example, in Mahasi Sayadaw's monastery in Burma some twenty percent of the meditators are reputed to reach the first stage of enlightenment (stream entry or *Sotapanna*), during the course of their first three month retreat. In this country, however, such an attainment is a very rare occurrence at any time.

When pressed for reasons for this difference, the teachers suggested five, possibly six, major areas: teachers, faith, concentration, effort (and the ability to tolerate hardship), and the tendency to do self-psychotherapy rather than meditation.

Teachers

In Burma and Thailand, with their long history of insight meditation, there are a number of teachers who have developed very deep levels of practice and have been teaching for many years. Presumably they have, therefore, a considerable fund of experience on which to draw in teaching and might be better able to facilitate advanced practice.

On the other hand, some of the Western teachers function extremely well as gnostic intermediaries. That is, they have practiced deeply enough to transmit the teaching directly from their own experience into Western language and cultural forms, thus reducing the need for other students to penetrate cultural and linguistic barriers. Having had a little personal exposure to these barriers and to teachers from both cultures, I would say that this is no small gift.

Faith

A lack of faith in the meditative process was a factor that struck the Burmese monks. In Burma people are usually exposed to Buddhist and meditative ideas, beliefs, and practices throughout their lives, whereas in the West these are relatively novel phenomena and apparently meet with greater skepticism and doubt, even by meditators.

In the West we have usually thought of faith in negative terms, equating it with blind, unquestioning acceptance. However, in the Buddhist tradition faith is viewed as a useful tool in consciously facilitating the practice. What is advocated is a "middle way," combining openminded questioning with a willingness to set doubts aside temporarily in order to undertake the practice as fully as possible, at least for a trial period.

Doubt and faith are regarded as oppositional, and doubt is listed as one of the "five hindrances"; i.e., mental factors that impede progress (Goldstein, 1976).

It is interesting to speculate to what extent "lack of faith" or excessive doubt reflects cultural differences. We in the West are so inundated by advertising and exaggerated claims of one type or another that cynicism, skepticism, and doubt seem understandable defenses. Yet they may be disadvantageous when they become conditioned cognitive styles of which we are unable to let go.

Concentration

In addition to a lack of faith, the Burmese monks also remarked on the difficulty that Westerners had in developing concentration during their meditative practices. On hearing this, Dan Goleman, one of the foremost writers on Vipassana meditation, commented that "our culture is designed to cultivate faithlessness and lack of concentration." This comment makes considerable sense if we compare the sensory input in Western and Asian cultures.

My sense is that our highly mechanized and media saturated Western cultures are characterized by stimulations of higher intensity, variety, and rapidity. Our media, entertainment, and advertising capture and hold our attention with strong emotional appeals that could result in heightened arousal, agitation, and distractibility, with consequent reduced concentration.

Effort

This next dimension actually comprises two categories: effort and the willingness to undergo hardship, but it can be discussed simply as effort.

The consciousness disciplines may be divided broadly

into those that emphasize effort and those that emphasize surrender. Here surrender is used not in its traditional Western meaning of yielding to a conqueror but rather of voluntarily relinquishing resistances. Buddhism is clearly a path of effort, and invocations such as "Oh monks, rouse up yet more effort" are liberally scattered throughout the Buddhist teachings.

The Eastern teachers remarked that Western practitioners seemed to have little appreciation of the intensity of effort required. My own experience is consistent with this. I have been amazed repeatedly at just how difficult it is to train attention and maintain for even brief periods any sort of continuity of awareness of one's mental processes (Walsh, 1977, 1978).

Popular Western descriptions of meditation usually refer to the peace, tranquility, and bliss which it is supposed to produce. While these can occur, and do so with increasing frequency and depth as practice proceeds, popular accounts rarely mention the physical discomforts and psychological difficulties of restlessness, agitation, and emotional lability which accompany intensive practice. Confronting these as deeply and authentically as possible does indeed require deep commitment and effort. Thus the comment by the Indian teacher Dipama that Westerners appear less inured to discomfort than their Eastern counterparts suggests that this may be a factor limiting the degree of commitment made by Westerners. This is consistent with Fritz Perls' (1969) comment that the fear of pain is the greatest inhibitor of growth.

The Tendency To Do Psychotherapy Rather Than Meditation

Both Achaan Cha and the Burmese monks commented that Western practitioners seem to become trapped in doing psychotherapy on themselves rather than meditating. This comment provides some insight into the different processes and mechanisms involved in these two different approaches to psychological growth.

Psychotherapy focuses primarily on changing mental contents at the symbolic level, for example, by changing images, thoughts, fantasies, or emotions. The recognition of patterns, historical antecedents, and current reinforcers of these contents and their behavioral manifestations is its primary emphasis. However, the Eastern teachers thought that while this might sometimes be useful, for a significant number of Western practitioners this focus proved to be a limiting factor preventing an awareness of more subtle mental mechanisms.

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Insight meditation emphasizes the refinement of perception to enable the meditator to observe increasingly subtle components of experience and mental processes. For example, emphasis is placed on developing "bare attention" which allows awareness of stimuli prior to the elaboration of associative responses such as emotions, fantasies, and thoughts. With increasing proficiency the practitioner is trained to observe not only the occurrence of stimuli prior to associative elaborations but also the earlier and subtler stages in the perceptual process itself. Thus, to give an example from my own experience, it seems that prior to the elaboration of fantasy or internal dialogue, there occurs either an image, emotion, or thought which triggers it. If I am aware of these prior components, then they are not elaborated into associations and fantasy. However at a more subtle level of perception, it is apparent that thought and emotion are preceded in their turn by a corresponding body sensation, and if this sensation is fully experienced, then it is not elaborated into thought or emotion.

The focus of Vipassana meditation is therefore a more subtle and microscopic one than psychotherapy. It aims for a radical shift in consciousness by seeing the nature of the processes by which consciousness and its perceptual processes are constructed (Goleman and Epstein, 1980). Concentrating on mental content such as images and emotions and attempting to change them require an active manipulative stance and coarser focus which preclude the simple noninterfering microscopic awareness of the processes by which they are constructed. Thus the greater psychological sophistication characteristic of our Western culture may sometimes prove a hindrance in this practice.

This seems to demonstrate several general principles: First, the maxims that today's problem is yesterday's solution and that our strengths can become our traps. Second, it is consistent with the "principle of increasing subtlety" (Walsh and Vaughan, 1980) which suggests that during psychological growth higher levels of maturity are associated with subtler and noninterfering experiences and preferred therapeutic interventions.

Discussion

Here, then, are five factors which prominent Asian teachers believe hinder the progress of Westerners in

insight meditation. These factors suggest possible correlations with corresponding qualities in Western culture, and it would be interesting to know to what extent these same hindrances occur in Westerners' leading alternate lifestyles. For example, in a lifestyle of voluntary simplicity people consciously choose to simplify their life, paring away more superficial and disrupting aspects in order to focus on central values and concerns. One of the factors found to correlate most highly with voluntary simplicity has proven to be the practice of some type of meditation (Elgin, 1980). It is therefore interesting to speculate on the possible changes in the culture at large as a result of the spreading adoption of meditation. The Transcendental Meditation Organization has referred to "the Maharishi effect," claiming that there is a reduced rate of crime and antisocial activity in those cities where a high percentage of people practice Transcendental Meditation. Whether or not future research validates this claim, it will be interesting to look for a possible ongoing dialectic between the practice of meditation and the cultures in which it occurs.

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Dr. Roger Walsh, M.D., Ph.D., is a senior editor of *REVISION* and a professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior at the California College of Medicine at the University of California, Irvine.