

## Spiritual Exercise

Alan Zundel at the HeartAwake Center, August 30th 2007

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A few days ago my wife Marianne came home from work and told me about a sudden achievement she had had. She's been going to the gym at work after work a couple times a week for a few months—maybe a half a year, I don't know—and she said that when she first started out she'd be on this one weight-lifting machine, and she would try to lift twenty-five pounds with it. Couldn't do it—a lot of grunting and groaning to get it up, right? Well, she put on a lighter weight and she'd work out a little bit and do the other machines for a while, and she did this for a while and then one day she came in and she put on the twenty-five pound weight and she found herself able to lift it up ten times in a row, and it seemed pretty easy to her.

I don't know if that's a very common achievement [*laughs*] for physical exercise, but I want to make a comparison between her experience with that and meditation—meditation being a spiritual exercise. There's a passage in one of the pastoral letters in the New Testament where someone writes to Timothy and tells him to do spiritual exercises because they're better for you than physical exercises even, and meditation is regarded as a spiritual exercise. You might wonder, when I was giving you that brief instruction on meditating by coming back to your breath all the time, what's spiritual about focusing on your breath? So a little aside here is that—I don't know if anyone has much Latin, but—'spirit' is Latin for breath. So a spiritual exercise would be a breath exercise if you took it literally. [*laughs*]

And meditation is a lot like physical exercise in a number of ways. One way in particular is that not a lot of people do it [*laughs*], and of those who do, some try it and don't keep on with it. So not a lot of people do meditation, and a lot who try it—just like with physical exercise—will go at it for a little while, maybe it's their New Year's resolution, and then quit or not keep it up without a lot of encouragement and support.

And just like physical exercise, the way that people get into meditation as a regular practice is either that they just take to it—you know, some people are just naturally athletic, some people just naturally take to meditation. I think I was like that; the first time I tried it it just did something for me and I felt like, 'Yeah, this is for me, this is something that seems right for me,' and I just kept it up ever since then. But for most other people it seems like it's more the case that like with physical exercise you've got to keep it up on a regular basis and starting out you have to somehow motivate yourself to continue, and it's not always easy because it seems boring, sometimes it seems a drudgery.

But if you keep with it, you start to feel it's coming a little easier, and when you stop then you notice that something doesn't quite seem right, you don't quite feel as good as you did. So it's the same as physical exercise in that sense, when you make a habit of meditating on a regular basis if you stop it you notice a difference, you don't feel as healthy—not necessarily in a physical sense, although it may even manifest in things like higher blood pressure, something

like that—but really what I’m talking about is that sense of a calmness of the mind. And the regular practice of having that time to let your mind start to settle—and even though your mind feels like it’s doing an awful lot, you sit there and you try to keep coming back to your breath or whatever is your particular focus for meditation, and it seems like your mind just goes in a million places and you wonder how much peacefulness you can be experiencing—if you do it on a regular basis and then you stop doing it, you feel the sense of, ‘Well, my mind spins even more, and now I *see* it spinning, I can feel it spinning, I can feel it churned up more than usual.’ And meditation not only helps slow that spinning down a bit, but it makes you aware of that spinning, it makes you conscious of it.

Mediation is also like physical exercise in the respect that you don’t want to do it too hard and you don’t want to take it too easy or you won’t get the right kind of effect. With physical exercise, if you try to work out real hard before your body’s become accustomed to it you can sprain a muscle or something, hurt yourself. Or if you go in to exercise and you’re not pushing yourself, if you’re not raising your heart rate at least a little bit, then you’re not getting much benefit from the exercise.

Same way with meditation, except you can’t hurt yourself; I don’t think you can sprain anything [*laughs*] if you meditate too hard. But it’s—there’s a Goldilocks principle at work here: not too hard, not too easy. ‘Too easy’ would be when you sit to meditate and you don’t make that effort to keep coming back to your focus of meditation, which could be your breath, your in and out of your breath, and you just allow your mind to go off in whatever direction it wants to without catching it and bringing it back. So you become aware you’ve gone off and then you say, ‘Well, rather than come back to my breath I’m going to pursue that thought, because, you know, I have to think this through—it’s something that I forgot to think about during the day that I was worried about or concerned about, or something I have to do tomorrow, or a memory of something I want to work through,’ or maybe it’s just a pleasant daydream and you want to keep with it. So you go with that instead of coming back to the breath. Or you just fall asleep [*laughs*]*—*that would be the extreme of just taking it easy. If you fall asleep that usually just means you’re so tired that maybe you should be getting more rest.

The opposite side of it would be trying too hard. You can’t hurt yourself, I don’t think, doing this. Sometimes I hear horror stories—I guess if you were on some kind of a retreat where you were fasting and not sleeping much and trying to spend fifteen hours a day in intensive meditation or something, you could precipitate some kind of emotional meltdown. But just doing twenty minutes, thirty minutes of meditation on a regular basis, even if you try to do it real hard I don’t think any harm can come from it; I’ve never heard of cases of that.

But trying ‘too hard’ would mean, in this context, that you’re trying to force your attention to stay on your breath with a kind of, what? —effort, a real effort. Effortfulness. As though the harder you try to keep it focused, the more likely you are to achieve something, to make something happen, to experience something different—to have some kind of flash of insight or enlightenment or something like this. Those things can happen, but they don’t generally happen because you’re focusing real hard and trying to make your thoughts stop, or trying to, you know, keep thoughts at bay with some kind of an effort of the mind.

It's more that gentle practice of, okay, you're paying attention to your breath and then you find yourself gone off and you come back. It's the coming back all the time that's the exercise. It's an exercise—it's exercising a part of yourself that you don't generally exercise. And it's not the part that can force attention on something as though you're studying for an exam or trying to work out a mental puzzle or something, it's the part of yourself that pays attention, and it's the part of yourself that's aware of what's going on around you. So when you go off in a daydream you're losing some of that awareness; your awareness is being transferred from the present moment into whatever it is you're thinking about, and the exercise is to catch that and to bring it back—to reinforce that part of yourself that's aware, that's awake, that's present to what's going on.

In Zen Buddhism there's an example—a metaphor—that they use about that 'not too hard, not too easy,' and it's the string on a musical instrument. You're tuning it. If you do it too tight the string snaps; if you do it too easy it's out of tune.

**Voice** [*interrupting*]: I've heard it said—I've read somewhere—a good meditation should make you not so sleepy. More aware, alive, and it would be [*inaudible*].

It would, yeah. If you start out sleepy, though, it's hard to have a good meditation [*laughs*] because that tendency to go off into a daydream ends up in a *real* dream. But yeah, that—if you're keeping coming back, and you're trying to pay attention to that back and forth and keep it coming back to the breath, there's a kind of invigoration that comes from it. And the more adept you become at it the more you'll sense that—the more it'll tap into that part of yourself that has that alertness.

So how is this like Marianne's exercise? Usually you think of physical exercise being a gradual, cumulative strengthening, right? —and you don't have that experience of all of a sudden you're able to do something. I think meditation for most people is more like Marianne's experience with exercise than it is with the usual gradual development of strength, in that you don't notice something happening right away, and it would feel like for a period of time nothing much is happening, but there will be times, at least a couple of times, when you can shift to a whole different sense of who you are. Now this can sometimes be subtle, to the point where don't notice it or recognize it yourself unless someone starts pointing it out to you. But just like with Marianne's experience in trying that heavier weight, what happens is you find yourself put to the test and you are responding in a different way than you usually do. If she hadn't tried that twenty-five pounds and done it that ten times she wouldn't have known that she was capable of doing that—she thought she wasn't, she found out she was.

Same thing—when this shift in your sense of who you are starts to go from up here, in all these thoughts and daydreams and emotions and stuff, and it starts to become accustomed to being more centered more down here—more deep, more in the breath, more in the spirit—you're tapping into a part of yourself that has greater capacities for handling difficult situations. What you can find is that when you start meditating regularly, you're responding differently to situations where in the past maybe you would have gotten angry quickly, or gone off on a tirade, or held a resentment, or gotten suddenly stressed out or anxious—and you find yourself responding differently. There's a little more calmness to what you're doing. A little more

distance from the way your mind is reacting to this, so that you can take that step back, feel that breath again and say, ‘I can respond from a slightly different place.’ Now this doesn’t mean you’re miraculously handling every situation with the patience of Mother Teresa. *[laughs]* But it means that you start to notice these moments, and that can be a testing moment just like her lifting the weight.

It can also happen more dramatically, where you’re sitting there and meditating and you have this uncovering of this deeper sense and all of a sudden you feel this sense of greater energy and awareness, and that it’s *you*. You feel that you have this and that, if you think in monotheistic terms you feel the presence of God a little more acutely—you know, some *life* here, something connecting us all, some force of love and compassion that’s there and working through you. It can happen fairly dramatically but usually those dramatic things happen and then they’re gone. And there’s some sentiment not to talk about those things too much because it can set people up to do this trying hard to experience something that I said earlier wasn’t the most fruitful way of meditating. If you’re trying trying to concentrate real hard and make something happen, make some kind of an experience happen, the kind of thing you’re looking for is less likely to happen.

I guess I’ll wind up with a final thought on the breath and this different mind, this larger mind or this different sense of awareness. The breath is always there, right? As long as you’re alive you’re breathing, but you don’t always notice it. Without it, you’re dead; it’s got to be going on. You don’t have to pay attention to it—if you pay attention you might breathe more deeply, partake of it more deeply, have greater health maybe—but it’s always there even though you don’t notice it. This large mind, this sense of awareness that you’re trying to allow into your life, is like the breath in the sense that it’s always there, it’s always present. It’s not something that has to be created, or manufactured, or—it doesn’t have to be an intrusion on your ordinary life. It’s like the breath in the sense that it’s always there and it’s always bringing life into you. It’s really a matter of having your awareness pay attention to this, something that’s so subtle it’s easy to overlook. This state of awareness is always present in you for you to be conscious, just like your breath is always present for you to be alive. It’s there; it’s underneath you might say, or it pervades all the other operations of your mind. So it’s a matter of bringing some of your focus of attention out of that mind stuff back into this deeper sense of, what? —life, of attentiveness, that’s always present, that allows you to tap into that a little more fully.

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