

READING MATTERS

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The Fine Arts of Relaxation, Concentration and Meditation- "Ancient Skills for Modern Minds", Joel Levey, Wisdom Publications \$14.95

Reviewed by Jon Kabat-Zinn

In this beautifully done book, Joel Levey has skillfully woven together contemporary insights into the value and need for meditation practice in our lives, with a large number of extremely evocative suggestions for making use of different ways to practice relaxation, concentration and meditation.

The first impression of the book is how beautiful it is physically and how satisfying it is to hold in one's hands. Wisdom Publications appears committed to publishing paperback books that embody in their appearance and materials a sense of care, attention and simplicity which is the essence of meditation practice. This is marred only by a number of spelling mistakes and typos which unfortunately were not caught by the proofreader. Nevertheless, it has the same feel as the Weatherhill paperback edition of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, which set a very high standard for how a book on meditation might look and feel.

The quality of the contents lives up to the surface beauty. The author masterfully describes for the reader in succinct introductory chapters of the major sections of the book: (1) the potential value of practicing relaxation, concentration and meditation; (2) what the essence of these practices consists of; and (3) how to apply them in one's life.

Joel Levey clearly has a great deal of experience teaching in a wide range of different settings and this is reflected in the precision and vividness of his instructions in and commentary on the various techniques. He is highly skilled in incorporating multi-sensory

"visualizations" into the instructions and suggestions for practice.

In essence, the book is a compendium of one or two page instructions regarding approximately fifty different meditation techniques from a number of different traditions. Major influences include Theravada and Tibetan teachers. The book is divided into sections on relaxation, concentration and meditation, followed by a short section outlining some application of meditative approaches to handling stress and pain, improving performance in sports, and using visualization and biofeedback. It is interspersed throughout with inspiring and wholly appropriate quotations from a wide range of ancient and contemporary sources and teachers, from Chuang Tzu and the Buddha to Albert Einstein and Henry Ford.

The Fine Arts of Relaxation, Concentration and Meditation— "Ancient Skills for Modern Minds" can be used as a practical manual for inspiration and guidance both in deepening and enriching one's meditation practice, and in cultivating particular qualities such as compassion and generosity. As such it will be an especially useful and inspiring book for people who already have a strong meditation practice.

The book's major strengths are the simplicity of the author's explanations of the value of these meditative practices and his clear instructions for how to practice them. If the book has a weakness, it is that the value of disciplined and sustained practice of one method over an extended period of time is not emphasized adequately. In fact, it is not emphasized at all. Thus, the reader who is new to meditation may be somewhat overwhelmed by the sheer number of different techniques offered and might come away with the erroneous notion that doing "a little of this and a little of that" to fine-tune one's body or mind states is what meditation is about or what is required to manage the pain and stress in one's life. In the same vein, the reader who is new to meditation might also tend to be attracted to the visualizations offered to cultivate different kinds of internal experiences and feeling states, and avoid practicing the less sexy, more bare bones con-

centration and mindfulness exercises which form the foundation for what in this reviewer's mind is the essence of meditation practice, namely moment to moment awareness.

However, these are the inevitable hazards of writing a short book which attempts to span such a wide range of different techniques and traditions. The author clearly states that he is using the word "meditation" to encompass three different types of practice: concentration practice; what he arguably terms "receptive" practice, meaning mindfulness; and "reflective" practice, meaning contemplative exercises to develop particular qualities. He also explicitly suggests that different blends of techniques may be more effective for individuals with different types of problems, although the beginner, again, is left with intuition alone for sorting through the alternatives.

For the readers of "Primary Point", who are for the most part involved in a personal meditation practice, *The Fine Arts of Relaxation, Concentration and Meditation* is certainly a book that they will want to own and consult regularly both for inspiration and for ideas about enriching their practice. It is a real gem. Joel Levey has proven himself to be a highly articulate spokesman for the Dharma in the modern world and I, for one, am looking forward to hearing more from him.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Preventive and Behavioral Medicine and director of the Stress Reduction and Relaxation Clinics at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. A long-time student of meditation, he is currently writing a book about his experiences teaching mindfulness in a medical setting.

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RETREAT

by Larry Goolsby

During the evening meal of the first day of the retreat, I noticed the other participants intent on their eating, and I realized that I didn't know most of these people. I didn't even know most of their names. I had spent the day with them in silence. The night before, I had slept on the floor in the same room with them, and now I was eating with them in silence.

No one talks during a retreat, so there is little chance to "get to know each other", to ask about each other's jobs, or to inquire about other social aspects of a person's life. In that respect we were still largely before distinction, before discrimination, before opinion, and before prejudice. In the words of Soen Sa Nim (Zen Master Seung Sahn), we had not yet had the chance to form divisive opinions about each other. We were still largely empty in that respect. We had no basis on which to create distinctions and separations. We had no basis on which to discriminate.

So here we all were, just eating. We were just doing these things- eating, sleeping, sitting in silence. We did these things as individuals, but to the degree that we had not created each other through "knowledge" about each other, we also ate, slept, and sat as a group— as one. There was no expressing of opinions, no arguing over religion or anything else. We didn't come to the retreat to do that. We just came to do this strange thing, this practice— this sitting, chanting, and bowing. I decided that if a person is just paying attention, this sitting, chanting, bowing, watching a sunset, and eating are all practice— the practice of being alive in this world. Practice is an expression of

our before discrimination nature, an expression of our true nature, our "human" nature.

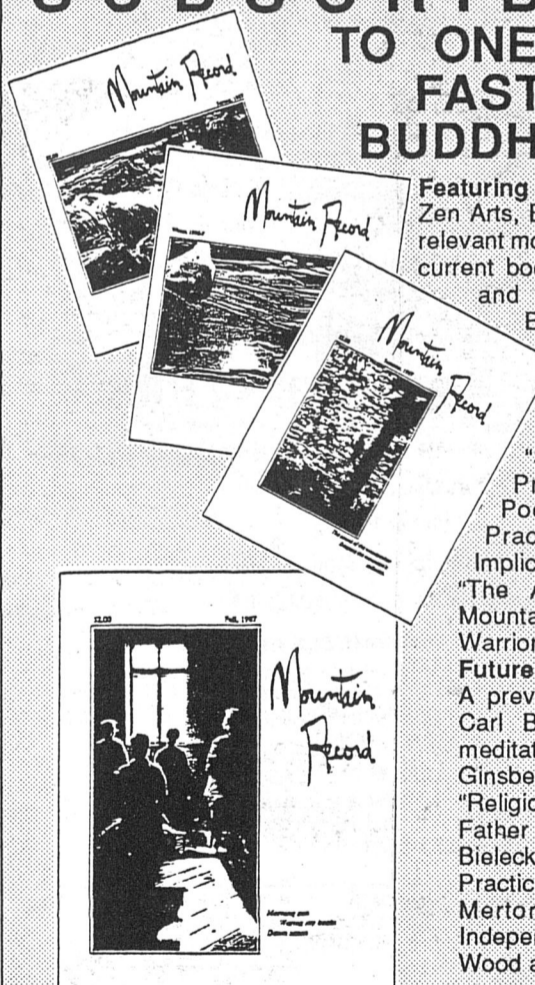
When we are sitting or bowing or chanting or eating, our mind wanders and we bring it back. It wanders again, and we bring it back again. Again and again. Sometimes when we are sitting, we bring our mind back and it is very still for a time. We are home for a while. We are living without discrimination.

It is a strange practice that we have— this sitting, chanting, and bowing. But, it's a strange world. We don't know where we came from before we were born and we don't know where we are going after we die. Nothing is stranger than that.

We are strangers in a strange land— a land of wondrous mysteries and forms arising from emptiness. The mystery permeates all. So we wander through this land of mysterious sights and sounds. Sometimes we practice; we just bow, we just chant, or we just eat. And sometimes we just sit watching our breath, aware of the stillness, aware of the emptiness: we return home. As we sit in the stillness, we may enter samadhi or we may not. We may become enlightened, or we may not. If we enter samadhi, we would still only be home. If we become enlightened, we would still only be home. And somehow, as we sit, with thoughts coming and thoughts going, we are still only home.

Larry Goolsby wrote this article after attending a retreat at the Nashville Zen Center. The article was excerpted by permission from "Paying Attention!", A Publication of the Very Center in Cookeville, TN., Bob Harwood, Editor.

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