

# hard-wired

*Talk by Father Kevin Hunt OCSO  
at the March 2001 Christian-Buddhist retreat  
at Providence Zen Center*

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We have made our  
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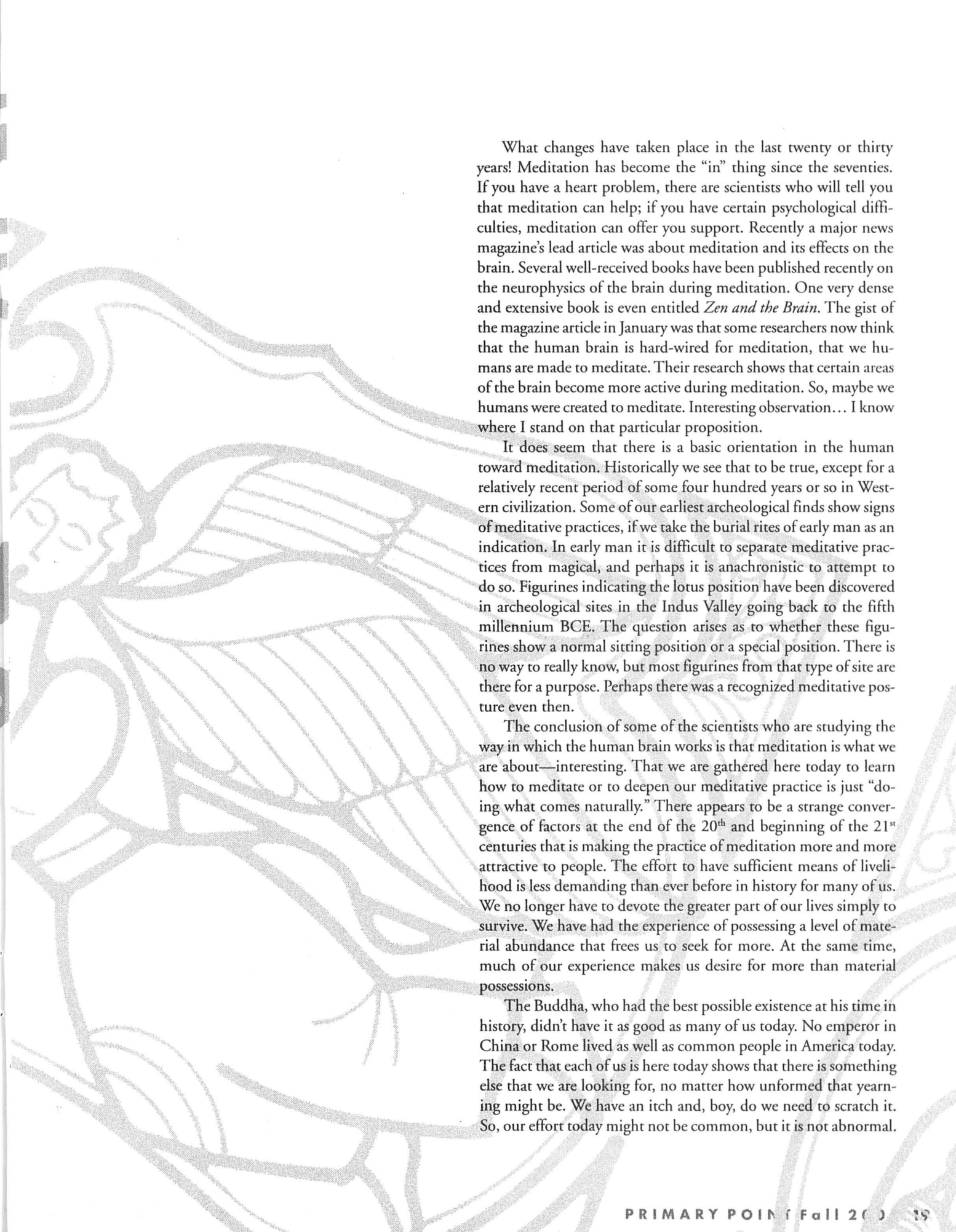
I have been a monk for over forty-five years and one advantage of living so many years is that I can look back and see how things have evolved and changed.

I remember when I was a young man and thinking of joining a monastery. I grew up in New York City and went to college there. I was interested in joining Saint Joseph's Abby in central Massachusetts, so I would frequently travel there from New York. Like most young college students I had little or no money. What money I had was not going to be spent on things like bus or train tickets, so I always hitchhiked from New York and back. This was before interstates, so I used the Wilbur Cross and Merritt parkways.

I will never forget one time when I was returning to New York after spending several days at the monastery. I had to get back for class the next day. It was a miserable day, pouring rain, and cold. My first ride had taken me from Worcester to someplace in Connecticut on the Wilbur Cross. I remember standing under an overpass trying to keep dry and feeling very sorry for myself, hoping for a lift. After about twenty minutes or so a car stopped with two men in it, and the driver asked me where I was heading. "To New York City," I replied. They too were heading in that direction and invited me to join them. I climbed into the back seat. It felt great to be out of the rain and cold. I sat there soaking up the warmth of the heater going full blast.

After a few minutes of bliss I began to pay attention to the conversation that was going on in the front seat. I heard them talking about meditation and those interested in meditation, especially monks. The older of the two said that people who meditated had severe psychological problems and used meditation as an escape. Those who entered monasteries were basically people who had death wishes, were depressed or wanted to avoid reality. They were all suicidal. They did crazy things like taking a shovelful of dirt out of their graves every day, never talked, and moped around all day.

After a few minutes of listening to this I tentatively asked if they had ever visited a monastery. The reply was "no" but the whole world knew what it was like. So, I said that I was just returning from several days of retreat at a Trappist monastery in central Massachusetts and had never met a more cheerful group of men in my life. "Impossible, impossible!" I was told. "And this meditation stuff. It is all daydreaming. It is all a figment of their imagination." I was also informed that my host was a professor of psychology from Yale (I think he said) and his companion was one of his graduate students. After all, they studied these things and knew better. I soon realized that nothing I said would change their minds and shut up, allowing the conversation to keep going along its own way. I heard how modern science was proving that psychology would soon replace such atavistic practices, etc.



What changes have taken place in the last twenty or thirty years! Meditation has become the “in” thing since the seventies. If you have a heart problem, there are scientists who will tell you that meditation can help; if you have certain psychological difficulties, meditation can offer you support. Recently a major news magazine’s lead article was about meditation and its effects on the brain. Several well-received books have been published recently on the neurophysics of the brain during meditation. One very dense and extensive book is even entitled *Zen and the Brain*. The gist of the magazine article in January was that some researchers now think that the human brain is hard-wired for meditation, that we humans are made to meditate. Their research shows that certain areas of the brain become more active during meditation. So, maybe we humans were created to meditate. Interesting observation... I know where I stand on that particular proposition.

It does seem that there is a basic orientation in the human toward meditation. Historically we see that to be true, except for a relatively recent period of some four hundred years or so in Western civilization. Some of our earliest archeological finds show signs of meditative practices, if we take the burial rites of early man as an indication. In early man it is difficult to separate meditative practices from magical, and perhaps it is anachronistic to attempt to do so. Figurines indicating the lotus position have been discovered in archeological sites in the Indus Valley going back to the fifth millennium BCE. The question arises as to whether these figurines show a normal sitting position or a special position. There is no way to really know, but most figurines from that type of site are there for a purpose. Perhaps there was a recognized meditative posture even then.

The conclusion of some of the scientists who are studying the way in which the human brain works is that meditation is what we are about—interesting. That we are gathered here today to learn how to meditate or to deepen our meditative practice is just “doing what comes naturally.” There appears to be a strange convergence of factors at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries that is making the practice of meditation more and more attractive to people. The effort to have sufficient means of livelihood is less demanding than ever before in history for many of us. We no longer have to devote the greater part of our lives simply to survive. We have had the experience of possessing a level of material abundance that frees us to seek for more. At the same time, much of our experience makes us desire for more than material possessions.

The Buddha, who had the best possible existence at his time in history, didn’t have it as good as many of us today. No emperor in China or Rome lived as well as common people in America today. The fact that each of us is here today shows that there is something else that we are looking for, no matter how unformed that yearning might be. We have an itch and, boy, do we need to scratch it. So, our effort today might not be common, but it is not abnormal.

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We are here today to fulfill ourselves as human beings, to satisfy something that is deep within. The history of humanity is actually a history of such seeking. Often other words and phrases are used to indicate this yearning, whether it be a warrior or hunter quest as found in the American Indian tradition, or the shamanistic quest of Siberia or the training of the Druids of the Celtic tradition, or the Aryan tribes that invaded India in the second millennium BCE. The quest is sometimes formulated as “who am I?”, “what am I really?” A lot of us have spent time seeking the answer to that question in ways that end up dehumanizing us: in wealth, sex, drugs, and the control of our environment.

Am I simply what others perceive me to be: a doctor, a lawyer, a mother, a daughter, a son? Many of us here are at an age where we already are what we will be. We have made our mark in life. And it is good... but not good enough. Is this all there is? This question is why the Hindu tradition has a further step in life after that of the householder. Having fulfilled the demands of society and family, the adult is now encouraged to make another passage in life: that of the wandering seeker. Our Western culture doesn't have that, which is perhaps part of the reason why our philosophers speak of existential angst, although Sartre does not seem to be as popular as he was twenty or thirty years ago.

There has to be more to life than this... but what? People seek the answer in a multitude of ways: alcohol, drugs, sex, toys, big mansions, fantasies—whatever. But the problem with that type of answer is that when we have these things we are still left with the question: Is that all there is?

During this retreat we are going to find out, we are going to discover who and what we truly are, who am I? In the Christian tradition in which I grew up, we had something called a catechism, a simple book that contained questions and answers. When I was a child it was called the Baltimore Catechism. I can remember sitting at the kitchen table memorizing the questions and answers because you had to remember both when you were called upon to recite in class. One of the first questions in the catechism was “Why did God make me?” A question worthy of Thomas Aquinas! The answer was one, the depths of which I am still discovering: “God made us to know Him, to love Him, to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him in the next.” The Christian tradition has always recognized the innate attraction of the human person to the Absolute; whether we term that absolute God, or emptiness.

Saint Augustine, who lived in the first Christian centuries, summed up the Western Christian tradition very succinctly by saying that at the core of every human being is an attraction that moves us toward the Absolute. He termed this core a “pondus,” a weight. This “center of gravity” pulls us toward God in the same way that gravity attracts us to the center of the earth. Today we are going to give this “pondus” some encouragement, a little kick to get it started on its journey to the Absolute, to the center, to God.