

IS

MEDITATION

IN

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From a talk at Providence Zen Center in March 2001

Why meditate? Why get involved in this wonderful thing called meditation?

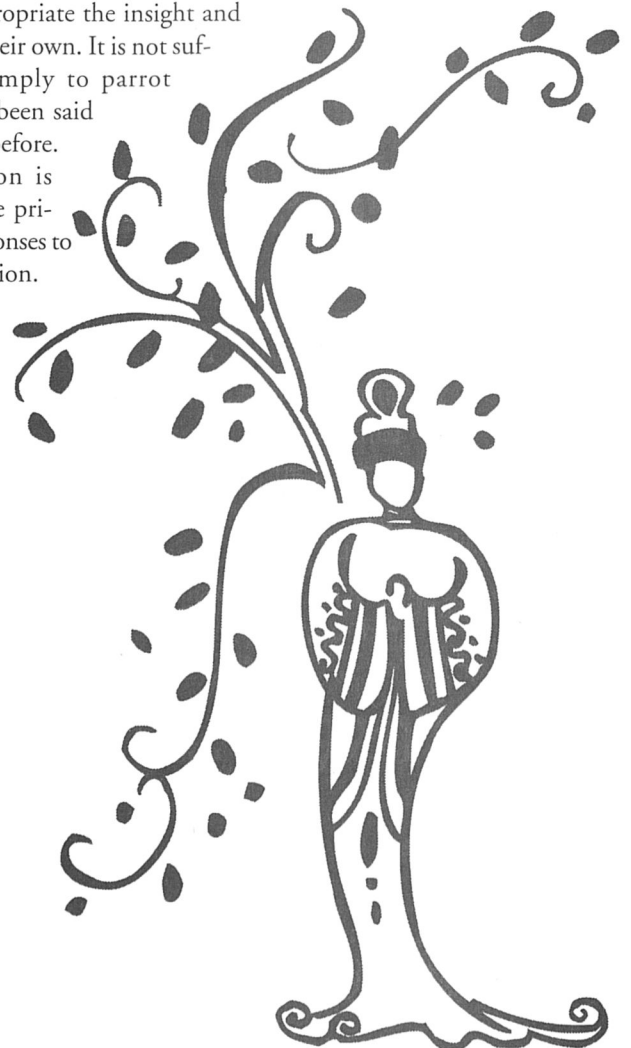
Especially on a bright Saturday morning, and there are so many other things I could be doing. Why meditate? Here I am sitting in this large room on the floor, on some cushions... and it is beginning to get uncomfortable. Wouldn't it be easier if we sat on chairs, or had lazyboys available to us?

There are a lot of other things I could be doing. This is one of the two days that I have to myself; I only get two days off in a week. There are so many things that I put off to Saturday so that I can give them the time they need. So what am I doing here?

Do these thoughts find a certain resonance in you?

And there is a growing movement to meditate for non-religious reasons. It is recommended for health, for stress relief, for realizing one's full potential. Earlier this year news magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek* even ran cover stories on meditation. They said that meditation is a natural desire and function of the human person. All the major religions have strong traditions of meditation. I think that we can discover a simple statement which can be agreed on by anyone who meditates or who is thinking of meditating. Who am I?

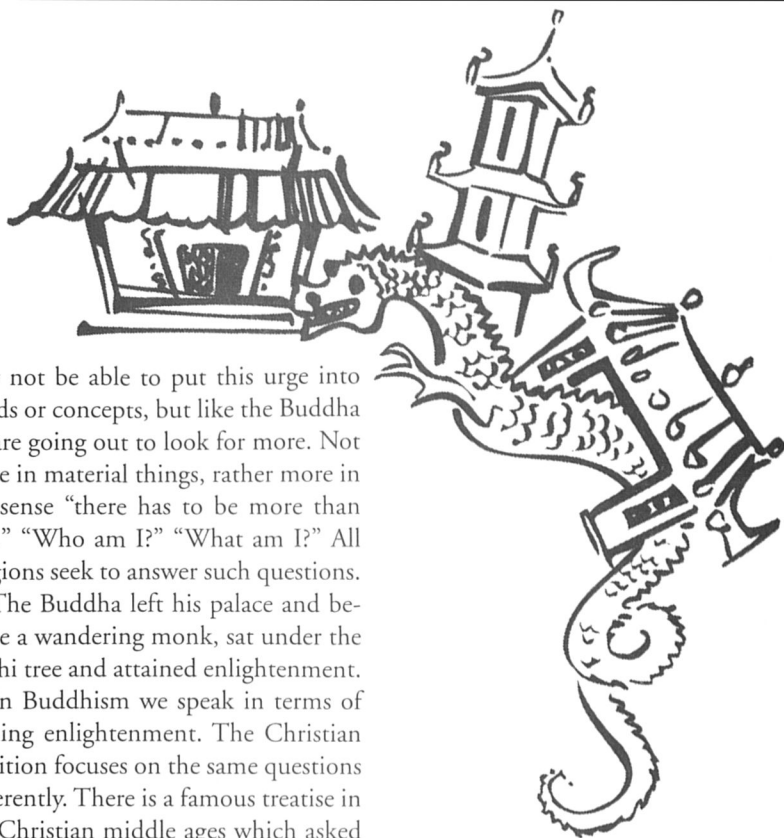
It is easy to give an off-handed response. I'm Kevin Hunt, 68 years old, fat and bald. Or, I am Kevin Hunt, a Trappist monk, and I wear a white robe and a black scapular. But is that all I am? Who really am I? Much of the modern existential angst found in our philosophy and literature today is due to our inability to answer that question. Yet the question itself is not new, nor are we the only age which confronts it. That question is at the basis of all philosophical and religious endeavor. It is the question that all the great religions say that they have answered. However it is not sufficient for any philosophical or religious tradition to answer it once. The question must be asked and answered in every generation and in each one's life. Each religion answers that question in a different way. These answers are expounded in ways that are culturally and time conditioned. That does not mean that the insight is not adequate or untrue, but that each age and person must appropriate the insight and make it their own. It is not sufficient simply to parrot what has been said or done before. Meditation is one of the primary responses to that question.



It is not so strange that meditation has become an "in thing" at the end of the 20th, and beginning of the 21st centuries. When I was a young man, if you were at a party and were asked what you did, if you replied that you were a meditator, the reaction would be: "Huh?" Today the response probably is: "Yeah, what kind? Tibetan? Zen? Hindu?"

As a people we find ourselves in a condition similar to that of Shakyamuni Buddha. He lived a life that was the best that his time and culture could offer. (Still it is so primitive to us.) But even Shakyamuni might envy how so many of us live today. Here in the first world nations we have a pretty secure and easy life. We have a lifestyle that is the envy of most of the world; one that was undreamt of just a few generations ago. My grandparents were happy to have a roof over their heads and food on the table. My parents had a roof and food and were able to give their children an education. We are not satisfied with a roof, food and education. I might have a car: Ford, BMW, Jaguar? Would that satisfy me?

Shakyamuni found himself unsatisfied with the best that his world could offer. Many of us feel somewhat the way he did. Just as Shakyamuni, we have an impulse that is moving us to seek more. More what? We might not know. We



may not be able to put this urge into words or concepts, but like the Buddha we are going out to look for more. Not more in material things, rather more in the sense "there has to be more than this." "Who am I?" "What am I?" All religions seek to answer such questions.

The Buddha left his palace and became a wandering monk, sat under the bodhi tree and attained enlightenment. So in Buddhism we speak in terms of gaining enlightenment. The Christian tradition focuses on the same questions differently. There is a famous treatise in the Christian middle ages which asked that question as "Why did God become man?" Its author, Anselm of Canterbury, responded with a very traditional Christian answer: "God became man so that man could become god."

Meditation is one of the keys to experiencing what the Buddha experienced; it is one of the keys to grasping what Anselm's response means. In and through meditation we find out who and what we are.

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