

Meditation and the Art of Doing Time

by

Sister Elaine MacInnes, OLM

The Buddhist/Christian Retreat held at Amaravati during a weekend in March of last year was a red-letter day. Meeting so many old friends like Ajahn Sobhano and Dom Aldhelm Cameron-Brown, as well as many of the Merton Society and meditating with them was a great bonding experience of what meditators share in common. Of course ALL people share this Bonding Power, but when those who make a practice of it get together, BE-ING becomes combustion. This convergence was certainly true and evident in the life of Thomas Merton, and the influence that combustion exercised is still being felt by people today. I know it influenced me.

It was with the publishing of his autobiography in the mid-forties that I got my first real insight towards an interest in mystical experience. Just previously, I read some snippets of Pascal's writings which tugged at something within. I had long been interested in philosophy, but had recognized in a vague sort of way that the great common experience which bonds people is not just an idea. Although Merton's journal seemed principally about conversion and vocation, it was the articulation of his spiritual episodes which proved to be the thrust towards my realizing that mysticism too isn't just an idea or theory, but a reality.

Specifically, in his autobiography, Merton spoke of spiritual insights coming in their own time, and I became aware that there were frequent moments of heightened awareness for me too. I practised becoming sensitive to those times, and one day, I too SAW that the only way to live was in awareness or attentiveness to the 'it' that was charged with the presence and reality of God. I began to want to take the necessary means to learn more about that world, not so much in a philosophical way any more, but concretely and experimentally. I began to desire 'something' although I still could not articulate what that something was.

I began to have little experiences that brought me up short like finding myself alone and sensing something. I'd look around, 'What is it?' But there was just emptiness, although a kind of charged emptiness. Eventually, heaven hounded me right into the convent. And although I did not particularly like it at first, before I had a chance to leave with measured dignity, someone had put in my hands a copy of Paul de Jaeger's book,

One with Jesus. Every page spoke to that inside ache, especially the words in the quotation I LIVE NOW NOT I BUT CHRIST LIVES WITHIN ME. There 'IT' was. No longer just intimacy but identification! However nebulous, I had found a direct link and knew that my seeking was on course. Now, how to make it happen! How to practise it and live it became paramount.

Although I cannot recall specifics, I'm certain Merton influenced my great desire to go to Japan, which was accomplished 3 months after final vows. Japan became my spiritual home, firstly for the 15 years I lived there (1961-1976) and then more latterly for the almost annual return.

It was at the feet of a Japanese Buddhist Zen Master I learned the core of the secret was to be found in the 'NOT I' of my biblical quotation, and that that was not available to intellectual knowledge. It had to be experienced. The *kensho* experience of Zen is of that 'NOT I' and following its confirmation, I started to grasp what spirituality really is.

The Japanese ideogram for that 'IT' expresses the content of the experience and has two *kanji*, the one on the right being 'life-ing' or 'living'. Charged full of the energy and power, the seat of the Sacred... the Divine Indwelling... after being harnessed in practice, and released in experience, 'IT' carries through in action. The Buddhists insist on compassionate action, but action nevertheless.

I was delighted to read in a recent *Tablet* article (Feb 15, 1997) Cardinal Hume saying that Christian 'spirituality is the soul of religion, its inner dynamism from which every other Christian action derives, its motivation and its energy'. Each and every word of that sentence also belongs to my Zen teacher who was a Buddhist. The bottom line seems to be that Wisdom expresses itself in an 'ing'!

Merton's spirituality and dynamic energy propelled him into being a world caring-citizen. He could not be otherwise. His seeming hyper-activity had nothing to do with a supposed fed-up-ness with life in Gethsemani. I have not had opportunity to study his writings sufficiently to speculate whether or not he had a zen *kensho* experience, but one suspects so, not only because of the way he wrote but also to have been so socially involved.

Zen is a prayer of silence which Merton obviously practised. But he was also a poet, which means he was prone to slide into associations, and not just stay soaked in the silence. Silence gets heavy after a while in meditation, and people start sitting as Dogen Zenji advised.. viz.. sitting like a mountain. The body is settled and still in silence, and the mind is also

unmoving. This gives leave for the inner dynamism to flow freely and to act according to its own spontaneity. Nothing is seemingly available to the individual's psyche at such a time and there is certainly no story to tell about the time spent in such prayer. But AFTERWARDS we find that everything within us is recharged.

As I was nearing the age of 70 and my work in the Philippines finished, it never dawned on me to retire. A letter from Ann Weatherall, founder of the Prison Phoenix Trust in Oxford, invited me to take over her work. Having had the unique experience of teaching meditation to prisoners tortured during the worst of the Marcos regime, I had first hand knowledge of its therapeutic effects

My assistant and I go all over the UK to give workshops in yoga and silent meditation in prisons, not only to inmates, but also staff and prison officers. At any given time, we are in correspondence with over 2100 inmates writing of their involvement in meditation, and we have teachers in about 80 prisons. The PPT recognizes that people need to change their view of themselves before they can change their behaviour. Most prisoners have a low self-esteem and many have long been dependent on drink and/or drugs. By regarding their cell as a place for spiritual retreat, just like monks and nuns in religious orders, prisoners are encouraged to build programmes into their timetables which include yoga stretching exercises, breathing techniques and meditation. Prisoners are supported and encouraged whatever their religion- if any.

To many, this first contact with silence, the sacred, and awareness of their breath and bodies, comes like a great light and freedom which they welcome with gratitude. As one prisoner wrote, 'over the past year and a half, I have accomplished more inside prison than ever I accomplished outside. No drink or drugs could ever give me the buzz I feel when I awake and see the sky. Rain or shine, there is a wonderful feeling of a private and personal link to something very elemental. I feel that.'

Our files are full of such letters. One young offender wrote, 'As long as I can remember, I have had this pain inside me and since coming into prison, I cut or burn myself to get the pain on the outside. I just want you to know that after starting to meditate only one month ago, not only is the pain better, but for the first time in my life, I can see a tiny spark of something within myself that I can like.'

And then what happens to our prisoners who start to change from their offending behaviour? The PPT has just completed a Survey concerning the volunteer community work undertaken by inmates whilst

still incarcerated, but nevertheless eligible for such duties. The result is all good news and strengthens our assertion that meditation leads to action.

Our Survey shows that all the needs of local organizations are met whenever possible. Prisoners work with older people (inmates from HMP Latchmere House run a club for older people in sheltered accommodation).... adults & children with physical and/or learning disabilities, youth at risk, local Church repairs of all denominations (inmates from HMP Hull completely renovated a disused church turning it into a Community Centre), animal welfare, wildlife, environment (clearing, fencing, general maintenance), farmer's organizations, Third World communities, Bosnian refugees, SCOPE, MENCAP, Victim Support, Age Concern, Riding for the Disabled, RNIB (Blind), RNID (Deaf), Oxfam, Special Olympics etc.

All the prison authorities cited the benefits to inmates in increased self esteem and a definite rehabilitative effect. All mentioned the appreciation of the community and good relations between the prison and the local community. Helping out in otherwise unfamiliar sectors of the community fosters mutual understanding, sympathy and respect. The needs of the community are being met in a way that is of benefit to both inmates and community members. Offenders have the opportunity of putting something back into society. Knowledge of the goodwill of people in prison has a positive effect on the public perception of offenders thus reducing prejudice and public resentment.

So the next time you hear the hackneyed phrase 'being tough on crime', do not give it assent. Speak of the healing aspects of meditation, and the impulse it gives meditators to compassionate action. Help us tell the British people that it IS happening, and in some cases, right inside Her Majesty's Prisons.

