

MEDITATION AS A TOOL THAT LINKS THE PERSONAL AND THE PROFESSIONAL

This narrative explores my experience in using meditation to link my personal and professional self in teaching, in relationships and toward my self. I found as the practice of meditation progressed, my life took on new significance and meaning. I began speaking and teaching my classes from an understanding that transcended the mind, from an understanding of my heart.

By Sadyle L. Logan

Sadye L. Logan, DSW, ACSW is Associate Professor, School of Social Welfare, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas

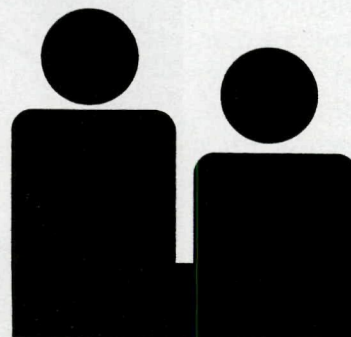
*"I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence;
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by –
And that has made all the difference."
– Robert Frost*

We are all seekers of truth on an extraordinary journey through life. Although I believe that the journey is essentially the same for everyone, there are some differences. These exist in our experience of the journey. This narrative is about the profound effects of meditation on my personal, professional and spiritual development.

The quote above from the poem, "The Road Less Traveled," captures the essence of this journey for me. Along the way I found I needed to answer these questions: Who am I? Where have I come from? Where am I going? How will I get there?

These questions are not reflective of queries specifically about my personal or professional endeavors, but are of a spiritual nature. Authors who address the subject of spiritual development tend to describe this questioning process as spiritual awakening or unfolding (Harris, 1989; Small, 1995; Scott, 1978). Unfolding has sometimes been described as slow and resistant, as gradual and welcoming, or as abrupt and tumultuous. Great seekers throughout the ages have referred to this process as coming out of sleep or a dream and coming alive or awakening to our true nature, to our essence (Muktananda, 1994; Fox, 1980; Ochs, 1983).

Although this unfolding happens in its own time from within, I have experienced this unfolding throughout my life. The subtleties of these experiences have not always been easy to discern. For the most part they are powerful transitions or remembered events that somehow rearrange my usual or predominant ways of perceiving or being in the world. I define these transition points as life-changing events. In some instances these events are experienced as a personal crises that occur both naturally and unexpectedly (Lindermann, 1965; Ell, 1995). Generally, these natural events include going away to school, falling in love, getting married, learning to walk and talk, learning to play an instrument, having a mystical experience, or experiencing adolescence. Unexpected events include chronic or acute illnesses, divorce, tragic death or an accident



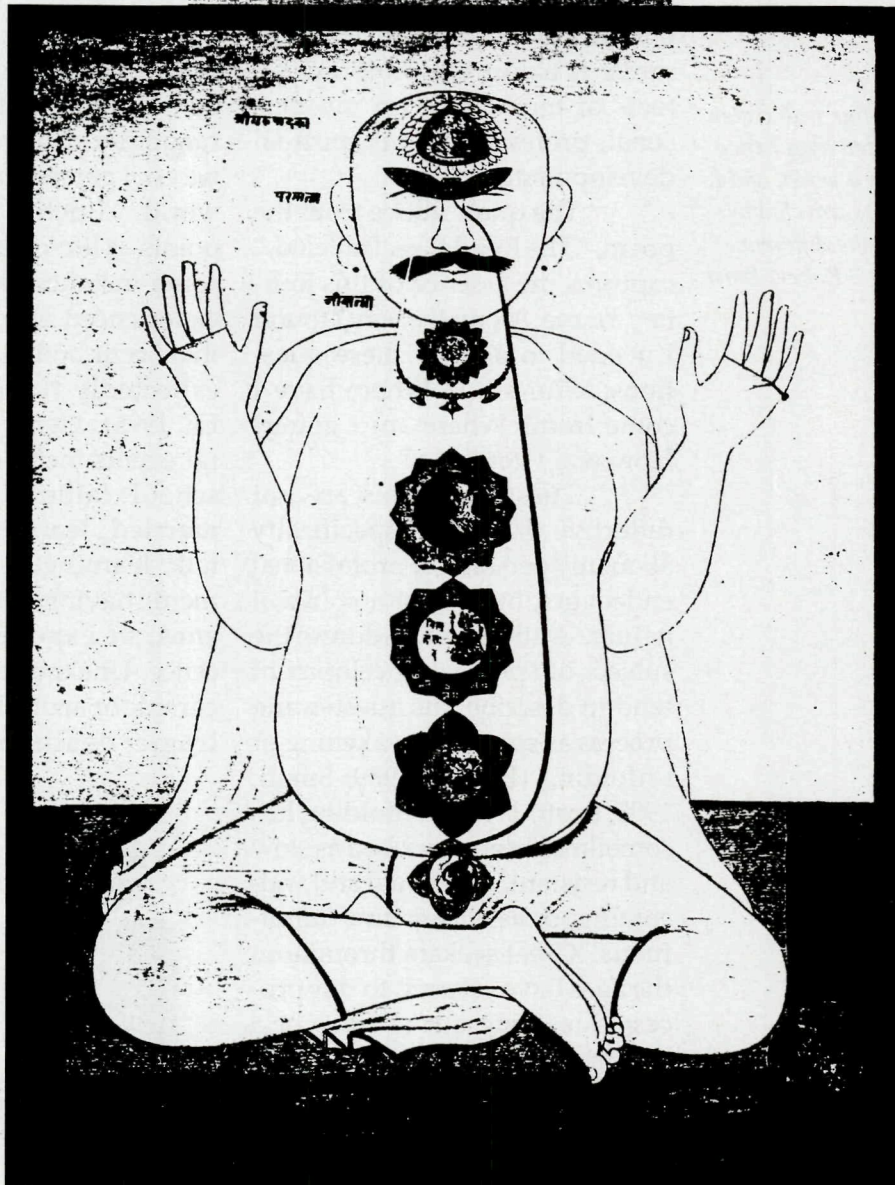
(Lindermann, 1965). Often those events and the more esoteric types of life changing events are minimized as unimportant. For example, it's not unusual to read or hear stories similar to the ones below dismissed as esoteric or an unexplained passing event:

I wouldn't say that I am a deeply religious or spiritual person, but I do believe in a higher power. I have had some low moments in my life. They have been times when I have thought about dying, even about suicide. I can remember one day, however, walking along on a beautiful beach, and feeling really depressed. I started wondering whether this higher power really exists. A strange thing happened. From somewhere inside of me, I heard a voice that said, "I am always with you."

I was walking alone in the woods one spring day when suddenly I started having this extraordinary experience – all of the trees and bushes around me were shimmering with a kind of radiant energy. It was as if they were alive in a special way – this energy was emanating from the trees and touch-

ing me. As they touched me I seemed to meld with the trees and the energy. It was as if I were not different or separate from anything around me. Finally, this level of perceiving ended, but as I left the woods I was tingling all over and felt great joy and happiness. This feeling stayed with me for weeks...

The Subtle Body



Some of my friends think it's a "little strange" that I view meditation and chanting as my form of worship. Some colleagues think that I am a "little strange" because I acknowledge spirituality as an important aspect of growth and development, and meditation as an important tool for self growth and understanding. As a result of potential misunderstanding, I am careful how and to whom I speak about meditation. Further, I am finding it easier to be laughed at, albeit good humoredly, by colleagues, friends and others.

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

The popular television actress, Suzanne Sommers (1988), described a similar experience to those described above, which led to the writing of her book, *Keeping Secrets*. Sommers spoke of sitting for some time on a beautiful grassy ledge. Afterwards she went indoors and began writing a book about growing up in an alcoholic family. She described writing the book as if it were being done by someone else. Recalling this event during a brief radio clip, "I think," she said, "something happened to me sitting on that ledge." Unfortunately such stories such are dismissed as passing events of little or no importance. They are rarely viewed or experienced as an important point in the process of one's spiritual unfolding — a movement toward reconnecting with one's true es-

sence. For me, moving into this awareness of my true nature, my essence, was like coming home to something that was so familiar. At the same time there was an elusive quality of something long forgotten. Meditation has served as an essential tool in propelling my process of reconnecting and remembering that which I already know: That I am a divine, perfected being.

I believe that this special journey begins with birth. For me, that beginning originated as a Gullah-speaking native on a Carolina sea island. Although I have come to view this culturally rich beginning as the perfect place to be born and raised, I didn't always feel that way. Initially, public opinion and negative sentiments about Gullah and Gullah-speaking people engendered shame, self-doubt and feelings of inferiority. My childhood on this

beautiful, lush island was simple and joyful. A contrasting experience existed for adult islanders. Due in part to the harsh reality of segregation practices, poverty and lack of available jobs, life was a struggle. I was the eighth child in a family of seven brothers and two sisters. We grew up as Methodists in a religious family. As children we attended Sunday schools, Sunday services and summer Bible school.

Growing up in the 1950s and the 1960s was an interesting, exciting time of bobby sox, crinoline slips, the Platters, sit-ins and protest demonstrations. Although I danced the twist and did the jerk and most of the things done by the youth of the time, there was a deeply serious side to me. An example of my serious side is that I believed in God — in a higher power — though, I questioned the concept of a the God of fire and brimstone variety. My early ideas about God and religion came from my mother, lovingly called Claudia — my teacher and friend. She attempted to answer my questions about life in general and more specifically about who was God. Later questions were more spiritually-oriented and of, who am I, and where am I going variety.

In junior high I had the desire to know more about God, and committed myself to a more religious life by becoming an official member of the church family in which I grew up. I remembered stories that my mother told me about the older church members who sought their God in the traditional Gullah fashion. This consisted of the seeker initially experiencing an "inner calling" to



know and serve God. When this "inner calling" was "heard," the seeker approached one of the church Elders to guide him/her through a process called seeking. The seeker observes silence and becomes focused inward. S/he spoke only to the Elder and to others only when absolutely necessary. The Elder interpreted dreams or visions and provided spiritual guidance to the seeker. The seeking period extended from three to six weeks. At the conclusion, the Elder pronounced that the seeker had achieved the prerequisite experience to confirm full membership into the church family. The new member continued to grow and develop spiritually under the Elder's guidance. The practice ended with my mother's generation and was no longer required in the church for full membership.

I loved this story and wanted this, or a similar experience of confirmation and God in my life. This desire became a real issue for me during high school. I felt that if I did not experience God in this tangible form before leaving high school and the protection and guidance of my parents' home, I would never again seriously contemplate the concept of God or any of the life-transforming questions. At first I attempted to force this process when I was in junior high school. I wanted to make it happen. This produced my first learning about spiritual awakening: It is not forced; it happens in its own time. Eventually I experienced a religious conversion. It began at an Easter sunrise service when I was a junior in high school. It led me to seek the guidance of Elder

Crawford, a wise, thoughtful gentleman in our church. He provided me an experience of seeking God very similar to that of my great-great-grandparents. We met on a weekly basis and spoke about my dreams, thoughts and questions. Based on Elder Crawford's recommendation, I was accepted into full church membership. Even though my journey has taken me quite a distance from where I began, I still hold Elder Crawford as one of my most important guides. Reflecting over my life, I have come to view this experience as a significant catalyst for my current spiritual development.

My seeking, though, did not end with this confirmation experience in the mid-sixties. I explored several church organizations in the late 1970s — Baptist, Episcopalian and Unity — still searching for that irrefutable experience of God. As my questioning about who I was and where I was I going became more intense, I began reading numerous spiritually-oriented books, attended workshops, presentations and conferences. I was searching for something greater than a mundane experience. I wanted to know more about my overall existence about my higher self or God, and about how this higher self connected to my overall existence.

In the late 1970s reading *Play of Consciousness or Chitshakti Vilas*, the spiritual autobiography of Swami Muktananda Paramahansa, one of the great spiritual masters of our time, marked another transition for me. His yoga is called Siddha Yoga, the perfect path, the path of love. This book

propelled my journey in an unexpected direction. Muktananda's teaching is simple, universal and profound: God dwells within you as you for you. In other words, within every human being divinity exists — spiritual practice is not separate from everyday existence, but a part of it.

THE AWAKENING

I did not begin the practice of meditation until 1982 when I met a great spiritual master and teacher, Swami Chivilasananda, the current head of the lineage of Siddha Yoga Masters entrusted with the lineage when Her spiritual teacher (Guru) Swami Muktananda died in 1982. I have meditated under Her guidance since 1982. She is a Siddha Guru and has the power and knowledge to give others the inner experience of God, and is dedicated to sharing that experience. She awakens a seeker's spiritual energy through Shaktipat initiation. From that time on She offers seekers guidance along the spiritual path to complete self realization. Over the past 13 years, I have spent time in Her presence in the West as well as the East. Free of all limiting qualities she exudes a presence of pure unconditional love. She lives in a state of total awareness. Chivilasananda continues the Guru's tradition, offering the teaching of the Siddhas and Shaktipat initiation to seekers around the world.

As my meditation progressed and I practiced more regularly and consistently, my life took on new significance and meaning. In the beginning my

understanding of meditation and its benefits was somewhat unbaked, to put it mildly. On some level I expected to sit a few times and have all the profound experiences that I had read or heard others talk about. It didn't work that way. I have come to know and respect my meditation practices as a personal journey that unfolds according to my spiritual needs and self-effort. I have come to recognize that the outcome is a subtle process reflected in my ways of seeing and being in the world. Initially I witnessed my inner transformation through meditation in the form of behavioral changes. For example, old habits of subtly putting my self down and limiting impressions seemed to simply vanish. These "old tapes" were about not being smart enough, pretty enough or articulate enough or about experiences that made me feel contracted. I found myself becoming centered in an inner place of calmness and clarity. The fear that accompanied the limiting impressions were gradually dissipating. A useful image of this process is a huge iceberg, with a crack straight through the center, being moved out to sea and melting slowly by the warming effects of the ocean air. The iceberg is the limiting impressions eroded away by the meditation process represented by the warming effects of the ocean air. These are all the signs that a powerful meditative energy has been released — dynamically and spontaneously. Those old self-defeating ideas were being peeled away like layers of an onion. My perception is confirmed by friends, family and colleagues

who say such things to me as "we see such confidence in you" or "there is a kind of peace or calmness in your presence."

I recall several occasions when visiting my former social work practicum instructor, Ruth Brenner, from Hunter College School of Social Work in New York City. Ruth, would always marvel at how much I changed, and inevitably ask: "Are you in therapy?" Somehow my response about meditation was never acknowledged. I assumed that she could not accept that meditation provided such results. Friends and colleagues responded in a similar manner. Some curious, others changed the subject, and a rare few asked for instruction or more information. These responses are not unusual in that most people believe that meditation is exotic and done by those who might be just a little strange.

Daily practice of meditation allows me to live my life fully and present in every moment. To me, this means to practice living in the awareness that a divine consciousness exists within me as me, for me, and that same consciousness exists within fellow human beings, all other creatures as well as every particle of the universe. Although this view of my existence may sound somewhat radical, it is an awareness that puts a different slant on the way I live my life daily. Problems and concerns are placed in a calm, manageable perspective. I often describe this way of being as similar to living in the "eye of the hurricane." Regardless of what exists around me, centered within myself I am responding calmly and undisturbed. They are more

obvious during stressful situations. When my car rolled into the street it was totaled by a passing dumpster truck. The truck driver said how sorry he was while I stood there feeling as if I had just lost a close relative. I struggled with numerous emotions, especially anger at the truck driver. Recognizing what was happening I choose to focus inside, and watch my breath. Soon I became calm and inwardly forgave the truck driver instead of wanting to blame him. I have experienced similar situations on more than one occasion with groups of angry students.

I teach a year-long foundation practice course. It is one of the most challenging, yet invigorating courses in the curriculum. Due to the students' diversity in terms of level of preparedness, expectations and experiences, many students come into the program with a great deal of anxiety and assumptions about how the course should be taught. There is an ongoing challenge in working toward achieving a balance between discussion about practicum matters and teaching content that requires students to think, write and speak critically about their practice. It goes without saying that such situations are fertile ground for misunderstanding and conflict. There was a group of four students in a class of 16 who through fidgety behavior, little or no overt participation in class discussion, and a general air of dissatisfaction with the class. I engaged the entire class in dialogue about what appeared to be apathy. This discussion dissipated the uneasiness and lowered the anxiety. Later in the se-

mester I read a student paper to the class to illustrate a practice principle. Carey, a student who acted as the spokesperson for the class, spoke out in a hostile, attacking tone, suggesting that I should have read the paper earlier in the semester to provide more detailed guidelines about what I wanted in papers. Carey's criticism sparked the voices of the other 3 students. The remaining class members became very quiet, even those who disagreed with Carey. In that moment I felt attacked and struggled not to react defensively. It would have been easy to attack back, but again, I choose to focus inside, breath deeply and respond to the student's accusation instead of reacting out of frustration and anger. Soon the tension dissolved and the situation was dealt with in a calm, respectful manner. Students have come to view such situations as teachable moments. I view them as opportunities to model for the students as well as to practice what I am learning from my meditation practices.

THE UNFOLDING

As suggested earlier, it is evident that my interactions with family, friends and colleagues are being transformed, but more importantly, I have become more compassionate with myself. I have become softer and kinder to myself. I am tuning in less to old, self-defeating tapes that subtly undermine my confidence in my abilities. I take time to nurture myself, to spend time with friends, family and nature. I can now say "I love you" very easily to my loved ones. There is a light-

ness, a spontaneity, a joyfulness. In concert with such powerful, personal changes, I began speaking and teaching my social work classes from an understanding that transcended the mind, from an understanding of my heart. The lightness of being that I am experiencing daily spills over into my classroom in the form of openness, spontaneous role plays, more concrete and specific practice example. In short, my classroom lectures have become more personable, more alive, more natural. During the early period of my teaching career there was often dissonance between what my students thought they wanted and what I thought they needed. Now I witness more enthusiasm in my students about the subject matter and more commitment to the work. They take more risk in bringing work to the classroom, engaging in the role plays, joining in open dialogues and critically analyzing practice related issues and concerns. It seems to me that my students and I are growing to genuinely like and respect one another in different ways.

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

It is obvious from the foregoing that I am excited about the potential of meditation as an integrative tool for personal and professional growth. I believe it is especially relevant in view of the turbulence which exists within us and in the world around us. Our world is filled with anxiety, violence and hatred. Although love and caring do exist, it is not nearly enough. It is im-

portant that we work more consistently to love ourselves and to strengthen our spiritual selves. Muktananda (1985) reminds us of this. He states, *"Everything we do in life we do in the hope of experiencing love. Love is essential for all of us. There is a sublime place inside us where love dwells. That is why we meditate. Through meditation the inner love is unfolded. As we constantly meditate we get drunk on this inner love and that is when we begin to realize what love really is"* (175-176). Despite my excitement for the potential that meditation holds for clients as well as helpers, meditation is still a new venture for social work and other helping professions. I do not wish to give the impression that if one sits down to meditate sporadically that one would achieve the highest goal of meditation. I am suggesting though, that not unlike other practices, meditation requires consistency and continuity. Further, it is important to recognize that from the point of treatment intervention, meditation gives meaning to a strength-based, solution-focused perspective. In other words, it enhances and reinforces life skills such as the ability to concentrate, discriminate, be present centered. Overall mediation has removed my fear and feelings of inadequacy and supports me in living my life to its fullest. □

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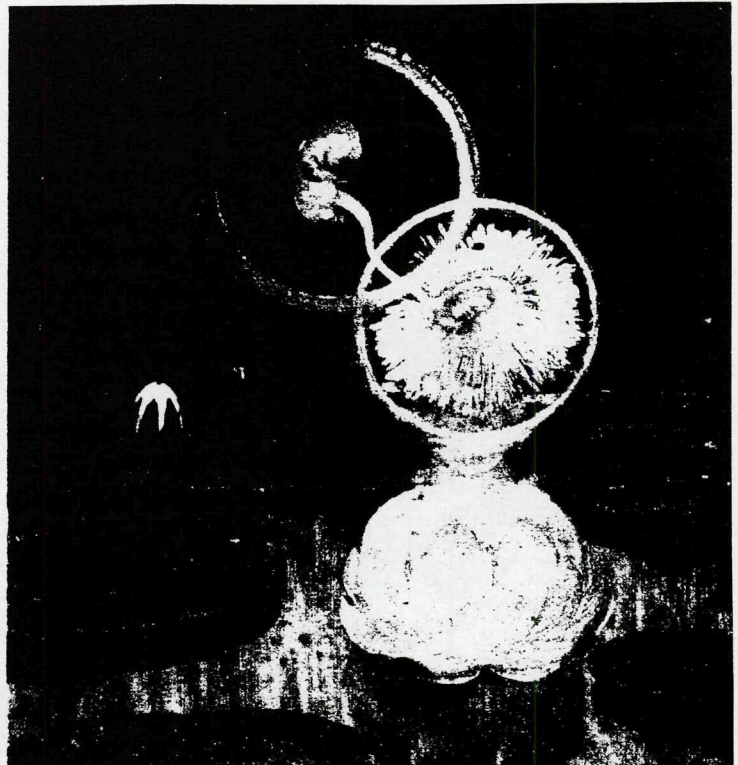
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