

Poetry and Meditation

by Jay Ramsay

'There is a Spirit that is mind and life, light and truth and vast spaces. He contains all works and desires and all perfumes and all tastes. He enfolds the whole universe, and in silence is loving to all.

This is the Spirit that is in my heart, smaller than a grain of rice, or a grain of barley, or a grain of mustard-seed, or a grain of canary seed, or the kernel of a grain of canary seed.

This is the spirit that is in my heart, grater than the earth, greater than the sky, greater than heaven itself, greater than all these worlds'.

—*Chandoyoga Upanishad, transl. Juan Mascaro*

Meditation and sacred text are deeply interwoven, because the intention of all sacred texts is to evoke an expanded state of awareness, literally around the mental aura—reaching the crown chakra and rooted in the heart. As Rumi invites us in this poem translated by Coleman Barks

*Inside this new love, die.
Your way begins on the other side.
Become the sky.
Take an axe to the prison wall.
Escape.
Walk out like someone suddenly born into colour.
Do it now.
You're covered with thick cloud.
Slide out the side. Die,
And be quiet. Quietness is the surest sign
that you've died.
Your old life was a frantic running
from silence.*

*The speechless full moon
comes out now.*

And in this translation of St John of the Cross by Roy Campbell

*I live without inhabiting
Myself—in such a wise that I
Am dying that I do not die.*

*Within myself I do not dwell
Since without God I cannot live.
Reft of myself, and God as well
What serves this life (I cannot tell)
Except a thousand deaths to give ?
Since waiting here for life I lie
And die because I do not die.*

and we'll refer to the 'I' here and its significance a bit later.



But from the outset, there are three basic points I want to make about meditation and what it is

- a state of calm where brain activity and brain waves are slowed
- an entry into presence and is-ness rather than mind and conceptualization
- a capacity for disidentification (beyond little or egoic me), opening into the Bigger Picture

In my own poem from *Anamnesis—the remembering of soul* written as part of my residency at St James' Church Piccadilly in London (2005-6):

*Traveller: stop a moment.
It is time to stop time, to step inside.
Come into this house of quiet
and let it take your mind. Can you ?
The hardest thing. To stop thinking.
So you can start really seeing
and enter the silent mind
that waits in the stillness, and your breathing.*

*Can you sit still ? Can you let
everything be around you?
Then you will find new eyes
and the rose in your heart will open.
Then you will know what is true
infinitely made for you in each moment;
this dew drop, this day's pearl
this grit irritating deep I your being
where everything is reflected to you.*

*Traveller, who are you ? Under your name
your occupation and your clothes
you are formless consciousness living in time
with a strange disposition to love.
Dear naked soul, come home.*

the allusion here is to Sri Aurobindo's 'Silent Mind', the mind beyond thinking. Here is Satprem's commentary on the implications of attaining the silent mind—or mind of meditation in his classic book *The Adventure of Consciousness* (1970)

Actually, one makes all kinds of discoveries when the mental machine stops, and first of all one realizes that if the power to think is a remarkable gift, the power not to think is a far greater one yet; let the seeker try it for just a few minutes, he will soon see what he is dealing with ! He will realize that he lives in a surreptitious racket, an exhausting and ceaseless whirlwind exclusively filled with his thoughts, his feelings, his impulses, his reactions—himself, always himself, an outsized gnome intruding into everything, hearing and seeing only himself, knowing only himself (if that !), whose unchanging themes manage to give the illusion of novelty only through their alternation.

However, then

Everything comes to a standstill. We become filled with it. The very sensation of 'current' disappears as though the whole body from head to foot were charged with a mass of energy at once compact and crystalline (a solid cool block of peace, says Sri Aurobindo)

And as he says in summary, intriguingly (and in my experience, truly)

The silent mind seems therefore to bring an expansion of consciousness which becomes able to project itself at will toward any point of universal reality and learn there what it needs to know.

If we go back to the beginnings of poetry here, we see that it is reflectiveness that allows experience to become meaning. This is from the Anglo-Saxon poem 'The Wanderer'

*A man who on these walls wisely looked
Who sounded deeply this dark life
Would think back to the blood spilt here,
Weigh it in his wit. His word would be this:
'Where is that horse now ? Where are those men ?
Where is the hoard sharer ? Where is the house of the feast ?*

However the poet has also to be capable of self-reflection in order to offer a poem as meditation—he/she has to be able to say 'I' and mean it—in the sense of reaching the 'I' that is beyond me.

This is certainly present in Rumi, the Sufi tradition (Attar, Hafiz, Sanai, Saadi), in Kabir, in Lalla (in India) but it's not really present in English Poetry till Shakespeare or after. Shakespeare's Sonnets are amazing compact intellectual meditations, but they are still primarily mind-identified.

Compare the difference with this from John Donne ('The Extasie')

*Our hands were firmly cimented
With a fast balme, which thence did spring
Our eye beames twisted, and did thread
Our eyes, upon one double string
So to entergraft our hands, as yet
Was all our means to make us one
And pictures in our eyes to get
Was all our propagation.
As twixt two equal Armies, Fate
Suspendes uncertain victorie
Our soules, (which to advance their state
Were gone out) hung twixt her, and mee.
And while our soules negotiate there
Wee like sepulchral statues lay
All day, the same our postures were
And wee said nothing, all the day.*

With Thomas Traherne (1670) we have an epiphanic witnessing where the I in the poem (prose-poem, in fact) is both personal and transpersonal

The Corn was Orient and Immortal Wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from Everlasting to Everlasting. The Dust and Stones of the street were precious as GOLD. The gates were at first the End of the World, the green trees when I saw them first through one of the gates transported and ravished me; their Sweetness and unusual beauty made my heart to leap, and almost mad with Extasie, they were such strange and Wonderful Things...

To clarify what we mean by 'I' here is John Firman (from *Psychosynthesis—a psychology of the spirit*)

All such practices, whether psychotherapeutic or meditative, demonstrate that 'I' is distinct, though not separate, from all of these contents of experience, in other words, 'I' is transcendent-immanent within contents of experience, otherwise it would be impossible to observe such contents continuously coming and going, with our point of view remaining ever-present to each succeeding content. There must be someone who is distinct but not separate from the contents, remaining an observer/experiencer of the contents, and who can choose to affect them. 'I' is this transcendent-immanent 'who' who is in, but not of, the changing flow of experience and therefore can be present to any and all contents of experience.

With Romanticism, that vital early 19th C radical outburst, with what some have criticized as 'the egotistical sublime' (re Wordsworth in particular) what we also have is a quality of self-reflectiveness that is now able to reflect on the state of meditation itself.

I think I learnt more about poetry from this poem than perhaps any other—one of the great mystical poems in the English canon.

*Five years have past; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters ! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain springs
With a soft inland murmur. — Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.
The day is come when I again repose
Here, under this dark sycamore, and view
These plots of cottage ground, these orchard-tufts,
Which at this season, with their unripe fruyits,
Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves
"Mid groves and copses. Once aghain I see
tyhese hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild; these pastoral farms,
Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees !
With some uncertain notice, as might seem
Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,
Or of some Hermit's cave, where by his fire
The Hermit sits alone.*

These beauteous forms

*Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind
With tranquil restoration: — feelings too
Of unremembered pleasure: such perhaps
As have no slight or trivial influence
On that best portion of a good man's life,
His little, nameless, unremembered acts
Of kindness and of love. Nor less, I trust
To then I may have owed another gift*

*Of aspect more sublime, that blessed mood
In which the burden of the mystery
In which the heavy and weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world
Is lightened:—that serene and blessed mood
In which the affections gently lead us on
Until even the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.*

And as he adds, forty or so lines on

*For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth: but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts, a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is in the light of setting suns
And the round ocean and the living air
And the blue sky, and the mind of man
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought
And rolls through all things.*

—the profound connection between inner and outer here, as you can see, that is rooted in ‘Nature’ rather than ‘Man’, and which leads to an expanded state even more relevant to us now in an ecological context where connectedness is our humanity.

How can we meditate meaningfully when we don’t see ourselves as part of the Tree of Life ?

In the late 19th and early 20th C. the very state of meditation was under attack with the spread and pace of modern industrial life that we’ve inherited, and of course the fragmentation of two world wars. TS Eliot described this fracture, and its disconnection using the myth of the Waste Land—a land acutely in need of redemption and healing—in a poem that still ends with the meditative manta *shantih shantih shantih (peace peace peace)*—despite everything.

In the Four Quartets, composed during World War 2, he goes further and deeper into what we might call the psychology of meditation allied to faith:

*I said to my soul be still, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre,
The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed
With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of darkness on darkness
And we know that the hills and the trees, the distant panorama*

*And the bold imposing façade are all being rolled away—
Or as, when an underground train, in the tube, stops too long between stations
And the conversation rises and slowly fades into silence
And you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen
Leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about;
I said to my soul be still, be still and wait without hope
For hope would be hope of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought;
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.*

and of course he specifically alludes to St John of the Cross, and St John's via negativa that is the ego death that gives birth to the I or true self

*Shall I say it again ? In order to arrive there
To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
In order to arrive at what you do not know
You must go by a way that is the way of ignorance.
In order to possess what you do not possess
You must go by the way of dispossession*

this surrender to a higher purpose that is Self—the inner purpose of meditation—is again clarified by Firman

In other words, Self is not something, not an it, but a someone— a Thou to whom we may meaningfully relate

Beyond this, there is the deeper witnessing that enters into the question of who we are in our authentic selves—as Thomas Merton puts it 'the unthinkable one/you do not know' that we find in stillness and silence. Here's his poem from *The Strange Islands* (1957)

IN SILENCE

*Be still
Listen to the stones of the wall.
Be silent, they try
To speak your*

*Name.
Listen
To the living walls.
Who are you ?
Who
Are you ? Whose
Silence are you ?*

*Who (be quiet)
Are you (as these stones
Are quiet). Do not
Think of what you are
Still less of
What you may one day be.*

Rather

Be what you are (but who ?), be

The unthinkable one

You do not know.

O be still, while

You are still alive,

And all things live around you

Speaking (I do not hear)

To your own being,

Speaking by the Unknown

That is in you and in themselves.

“I will try, like them

to be my own silence:

And this is difficult. The whole

World is secretly on fire. The stones

Burn, even the stones

They burn me. How can a man be still or

Listen to all things burning ? How can he dare

To sit with them when

All their silence

Is on fire ?”

—and note the difficulty he expresses with fire as a metaphor of urgency, and which he personally explored in the paradox ‘contemplation in a world of action’ (the title of one of his later books of essays).

And in these lines from ‘Stranger’ (in the same collection)

Closer and clearer

Than any wordy master,

Thou inward stranger

Whom I have never seen...

the stranger is the Self (the Divine)—and who we are revealed in non-verbal reality.

This reality is also reflected in Kathleen Raine’s later work, where as she says spiritual reality lives in and through us whether we are aware of it or not, and indeed we can only be aware of a fraction of its glory by definition. In this poem transcendence and immanence come together in a small backyard (that was her Chelsea garden) celebration. She died at 95 in June 2003.

THE PRESENCE

Present, ever-present presence,

Never have you not been

Here and now in every now and here,

And stiull you bring

From your treasury of colour, of light,

Of scents, of notes, the evening blackbird’s song.

How clear among the green and fragrant leaves,

Ads if in childhood always new, anew.

*My hand that writes is ageing, but I too
Repeat only and again
The one human song, from memory
Of a joy, a mode
Not I but the music knows
That forms, informs us, utters with our voices
Concord of heaven and earth, of high and low, who are
That music of the spheres Pythagoras heard.
I, living, utter as the blackbird
In ignorance of what it tells, the undying voice.*

And if as Alice Bailey said it 'True knowledge is intelligent love' then we may see that the whole purpose of meditation and perhaps poetry (but certainly mystical poetry) is to lead us into the consciousness of a greater love, for ourselves and for each other, that is God where God is Love.

That love is unconditional and it has to be based on freedom, with respect of each other's souls and the soul journey we are all on.

So I want to end with two poems that reflect this.

First is Rumi's 'We Point to the New Moon' again translated by Coleman Barks

*This time when you and I sit here, two figures
with one soul, we're a garden,
with plants and birdsong moving through us
like rain.*

*The stars comes out. We're out
of ourselves but collected. We point
to the new moon, its discipline and slender joy.*

*We don't listen to stories
full of frustrated anger. We feed
on laughter and a tenderness
we hear around us,
when we're together.*

*And even more incredible, sitting here in Konya,
We're this moment in Khorasan and Iraq.*

*We have these forms in tie
and in another in the elsewhere
that's made of this closeness.*

The second is 'Beloved', the last poem in my recent book Places of Truth

*We are one body
you, alive inside me
permeating me
through and through
as I, you*

*And yet other
apart, and mortal
as I can
and cannot grasp*

the mystery

in which we are

as we will be

in You

And so to end with my conclusion in the Conference programme: as I hope we've seen, poetry in essence and meditation are inextricably related in concept and intention. Poetry arises from meditation and in turn leads to it, prompting our deeper reflection from the truth it witnesses. Poetry which has a specifically spiritual dimension heightens and deepens this connection so that the poem can even become a transmission of what it is evoking, within and beyond words.

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