

Regarding the Correct Use of Guided Meditations available on Internet

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The appearance of numerous guided meditation sessions Online is a recent phenomenon and in a sense the issues it raises are essentially no different from those involving the notion of spiritual teachings in book form as opposed to oral traditions and teachings which bring teacher and student in direct contact. Plato himself in his time was not enthusiastic about the use of the written word as opposed to close relations between master and disciple to ensure a spiritual transmission not through words alone but also thanks to the effects of a direct presence. And yet, it is thanks to the written word that today we have access to the mind and philosophy of Plato, and obviously we cannot push aside new means of communication and recording, but instead learn to put them to good use. An internet site offering guided meditations provides useful information for learning to practice and discovering new approaches. However, it can also be like all those Web sites on health which, in case of a problem, are no substitute for a face to face consultation with a doctor or a nutritionist for example. These guided meditations should be considered as part of a whole, of an interior journey and reinforced by an attitude of detachment, discernment, vigilance and benevolence, and by widely reading in view of gaining understanding of what constitutes psychological and spiritual evolution. Also important is experiencing contact among groups and teachers who can explain or clarify difficulties or confusion encountered. In such a context, online meditations can be very useful and accompany us along the path. They should not be seen as an end in themselves but can be used as aids to help us cultivate our capacity for concentration and drawing inward. This will enable us to have a clearer and more direct perception of our body in the literal sense and also in the subtle perception of it and thereby of our awareness itself.

A study by British Psychologists compared two groups learning mindfulness meditation, the first practicing with a live teacher, the second practicing with video explanations on Internet. After taking into account all the parameters thanks to the methods psychology offers including all sorts of questionnaires and measuring devices, they found that the results of the teachings were equally satisfactory in both cases. Of course, practicing via Internet requires a certain amount of discipline, but then, so does practicing at home what has been learned with a teacher, as well as going off to attend the classes he gives.

We should also point out that all meditations are not necessarily suitable for all moments; for example when we tend to sway between drowsiness and mental agitation. Certain

meditations are stimulating and so should be used when you are feeling drowsy and vice versa. This classification is simple but useful. For instance in certain guided meditations I focus on opening up the more closed of the nostrils which leads to the opening of the energy channels, an important phase in Yoga and considered a fairly advanced practice. A moderate practice of this kind of opening can be of considerable help against feeling sluggish and can bring about a wide awake feeling if not a spiritual awakening. But should the practice be intensive it would be preferable to do it under the direct guidance of an experienced teacher and to stay in solitude.

Certain psychotherapists criticize the meditation process for not making the subject face, and deal with his resistances. This is a legitimate concern which must be addressed. If the main motivation for your practice is personal comfort, then undoubtedly you will tend to avoid the issue. One simple method of reducing this escaping tendency in meditation is to regularly return to a state of immobility as perfect as possible. In fact resistance often takes the form of slight bodily movements made in order to escape from some small discomfort which we generally take as being of physical origin, but more likely is a psychic phenomenon, corresponding therefore to a psychological resistance. To quote a fundamental definition of meditation by Zen master Wangchai, “face it, relax, and find your balance!”

The question of evaluating a teacher’s level of attainment based on his behavior in daily life is central in the context of meditation. In the traditions of Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism for example, they say that you must be with your master for twelve years before accepting him as such. This is of course not possible when your guide is a book or a recording. Fundamentally, these practices of meditation are there to enable us to become better persons and the question naturally comes up as to whether the teacher behind these methods has really achieved this goal. These same questions apply to guided meditations Online, or books and even oral teachings dispensed by well- known religious figures speaking from the protection of a stage. It’s hard to know exactly how they behave when they’re not in the eye of the public.

The various traditions say that when a group meets to practice together, this leaves a positive imprint on what might be called the memory of the universe. The fact that these practices can be recorded and replayed at a distance is a new phenomenon, but we can reasonably consider that these recordings prolong a positive effect which in another day and age was a unique phenomenon in time and space. Our interdependence exists not only when we practice with a given group at a given time and space. The phenomenon is much larger and links us in particular with those who practiced in the past. Even if they are already dead, they live on through what they’ve transmitted to us, particularly when we practice within the framework of a specific teaching tradition or lineage. This interdependence also connects people distant from each other in space. Science still has a lot to discover regarding the possibilities of this communication at a distance and certain researchers are on to this idea and are trying to identify and explain these phenomena in a systematic way. It seems the subtle networks created by common spiritual experiences are not contradictory with communication by Internet when it is used in the right way.

Seeking help through guided medication recordings can open up new horizons but should never become addictive. The following anecdote can be used to illustrate this point. At the end of his life the Indian sage from Mumbai, Nisargadatta Maharaj suffered from an illness that impaired his ability to speak. Because of this he began to use recordings he had made in former days, which were played for his visitors. He was present on these occasions and from time to time would summon all his strength to speak and ask that the recording be stopped. Then he would say simply, “Ask yourself, who is listening!”

Of course, there is a dark side to everything, and we know that the acceleration of collective thought made possible by the exposure Internet provides, can also lead to spectacular types of regression in the thinking capacities of the individual subject, for example the collective deliriums and paranoias, all totally untrue, that spread in the form of rumors on social networks. Ideas have their own logic and means of propagation following a highly contagious pattern just as viruses do. Sometimes a concept or representation may meet with a certain success, but might not be in the best interests of humanity. (For example in Susan Blackmore, “*The Meme Machine*” and Max Milo & Richard Dawkins, “*The Selfish Gene*”, English editions in 1976 and 1989). If we consider the virus, its sole concern is its own self-preservation and propagation, being unable to see any farther than that. The Spanish Flu killed 50 million people during the First World War. Ideological and/or Psychological deliriums can become widely diffused and bring about a large number of deaths, and obviously are detrimental to humanity. This means we must remain vigilant, watchful. Surprisingly, those who claim to be alternatives to the system are not really so. They very often turn out to be new conformists within the groups outside of the majority. We must understand that the deepest ambition of the ego is not to be happy but to exist, and it feels itself exist most intensively in situations of suffering, persecution and even outright and open paranoia. This explains the success of a certain number of collective deliriums on the Web. Those who are affected by delirium suffer greatly from it, but still they become addicted to it because it gives their ego the impression of being fully and intensely alive.

In order to navigate through all these tendencies and still keep going in the right direction it is important to rely on common sense in our search for meaning. My publisher and friend for the past 30 years, Marc de Smedt, wrote a book about this. In this sense, it is essential to return to two fundamental values as recommended by the Chinese sages Confucius and Mencius two and a half millennia ago, for all virtues arise from those two qualities: watchfulness and benevolence.