

Practicing presence

One of the most evocative yet enigmatic fragments of the Gebser canon is a Tagebuch offering scribbled two weeks before his death. It is also, in my opinion, one of his most accomplished and aesthetically penetrating poems. It reads:

Ganz klar und heiter
ist der innere Himmel und
weiter als er, um vieles weiter
der Aufstieg zum Grund.

Ungesäumt freilich
und überaus wissend –

kein Atem verhält sich im Hier...

When Rudolf Hämmerli and Christian Bärtschi suggested that I speak informally to the subject of meditation in the light of Jean Gebser's philosophy, this luminous verse fragment came immediately to mind as a portal of entry through which to steer my tentative treatment of the subject.

On one hand, Gebser's poem seems as close as we are likely to come to receiving an instruction in meditation from the master of the Ursprung und Gegenwart. On the other hand, the poetic resonance of this spiritual testament both sums up the meditative background against which the Gebserian oeuvre unfolds and expresses the depth of spiritual insight that leads us to associate Jean Gebser with the pursuit of a meditative discipline in the first place.

More concretely, Rudolf and Christian thought it might be useful to discuss the meditation practice of someone "influenced" by Gebser, i.e. someone for whom the insights of Jean Gebser, and the particular way in which these insights resonate through

his unique use of language, have a concrete bearing on the practice of meditation and provide a vibrant framework for deepening such practice.

Now, it goes without saying that I claim neither to be a “master of meditation” nor to have achieved any particular depth of realization. Thus in my brief remarks today I do not presume to impart any concrete instructions or insights on the practice or significance of sitting meditation. Instead, I hope to stimulate in you your own reflections, your own exploration of what a meditative stance toward life has to do with the same deep yearnings or interest that led you to read Gebser in the first place. I also hope to trigger some discussion, whether today or in the future, about what advice Jean Gebser might have for us on deepening our cultivation of this meditative stance.

So perhaps the first thing we need to do is to clarify what we mean by the term “meditation” and, from there, explore what might be the motive or purpose of engaging in a meditative practice. My copy of the *Wahrig Deutsches Wörterbuch* defines meditation as “religiöse Versenkung, tiefes Nachdenken, sinnendes Betrachten”, and clearly, meditation in the sense that I am using the term here includes all of these aspects as well as finding a salutary equilibrium between the three.

On one hand, I will be discussing here the specific components of a meditative discipline involving regular sitting in contemplation, cross-legged on a cushion – a practice that has its formal roots primarily in Buddhist tradition. But more fundamentally, I wish to explore briefly what it means to adopt a meditative stance in life and how this relates to the particular intensity and creative harmony that Jean Gebser has described under the designation “integral consciousness”. And in this respect, perhaps we might be tempted to add a fourth element to the *Wahrig* definition: something along the lines of “integrierende, ursprüngliche Gegenwart.”

My own meditation practice has been influenced, guided and nurtured over the years by various Buddhist traditions, but primarily by the Soto Zen school as shaped by the magisterial 13th century monk and philosopher Dogen Kigen. Dogen’s philosophical relevance and kinship with Gebser’s integral insights is a subject of great interest in itself, but one whose proper treatment will have to be reserved for another day. Not least because what chiefly concerns us here today is the challenge of developing an authentic

meditative stance within our present realities and inclinations. And in this respect one of several pertinent questions we might pose is whether it is possible to borrow practices, methods and postures from Buddhism (or from other meditative traditions) and apply them in the naked existential framework of an individual life in the 21st Century. An individual who might find more resonance in Gebser's integral worldview than in the rich but somehow alien framework of a monastic, medieval, East Asian, religious outlook. For me this is an ongoing question, with which I am continuously confronted, but one which has nevertheless not prevented me from adopting something very close to the Soto Zen framework without however immersing myself fully in that tradition.

As a result, my formal meditation practice has been shaped and instructed by the Soto Zen form of meditation, an approach known in Japanese as "*shikan taza*" or "just sitting". Concretely, this involves the meditator sitting cross-legged on a cushion in a position of great stability, with the back straight, the eyes open but directed downward, the hands folded gently, one atop the other, and the mind resting present to the naked fact of being and returning to this present reality each time a train of thought draws the attention inadvertently elsewhere.

Now, there is much more that could be said about the "mechanics" or rationale of this essentially objectless form of meditation, but of particular relevance to our discussion here is the fact that in the Soto tradition, *zazen* or seated meditation is considered not as a means to an end but rather as an embodiment of our true identity, as distinct from the habitual reflexive identity constructed over time through our conditioning, desires, fears or existential boredom. And if I describe this form in basic detail, it is not because I wish to recommend this particular practice or because I consider it the only viable approach to authentic meditation, but simply because *shikan taza* is the form I have come to adopt and thus is the basis for several observations that I intend to offer here. Observations that I suspect may have relevance for any meditative practice and particularly for the kind of existential posture that Gebser seems to speak about, a posture, it might be added, of transparent true identity.

When thinking within a framework other than that of Soto Zen teaching, I tend to employ the term "practicing presence" to refer to this sort of meditation. And what is "practiced" in meditation, I might add, is a presence not encompassed by thinking.

When I first encountered the work of Jean Gebser, I was drawn by the Ursprung part of the equation, investing it with a salvific depth of meaning inaccessible to my groping intellect. Now, as I grow older and have experienced some of the difficulty, significance and promise of being fully present in the world, it is the Gegenwart element that strikes me as most compelling, a mysterious equilibrium existentially within my grasp. But to actualize such original presence we need to make a posture of our life.

So this is the first element I would like to underline as constituent of meditative practice: the work of identifying, adopting, nurturing and embodying a certain kind of existential posture, a posture of presence to what is deeper in us than thought. On the cushion (or in a chair, or in whatever configuration we make of the impulse to meditative awareness), the physical posture of sitting anchors the existential posture of embodied presence. And by its nature such a posture reflects an underlying element of inquiry – as we settle into the plenitude of identity beyond our laborious ambitious self, the very act of sitting becomes a kind of luminous investigation in which a question is posed beyond the limits of conceptuality as to what or who this embodied presence is.

But to speak of investigation is to raise the issue of intention – and here I think we encounter a second defining feature of meditation: the transparent dethroning of personal desire as the primary engine of motivation. What is the point of meditating in the first place? What leads us to invest the time and energy required for cultivating primordial presence? Obviously we are motivated by a variety of existential or psychological factors. It would be unrealistic to expect the average human being to engage in a sustained meditative discipline purely for altruistic or otherwise disinterested reasons. Our culture does little to instill appreciation for the Angelus Silesius school of personal motivation: “Die Ros’ ist ohn warumb / Sie blühet, weil sie blühet.”

Still, paradoxically, one of the values of seated meditation is that it configures an existential force field in which personal motivation doesn’t take the meditator very far. To practice meditation fruitfully we need an authentic enabling intention, but an unalloyed intention free of any sense of gain. Or to state it in terms of identity and presence: our purpose must be rooted not in a personal sense of being, but in the impulse toward integration, which defines us.

Lest this sound like some sort of moralistic prescription, let me stress that I am referring here to the nuts and bolts of meditative practice. What actually happens in that space atop the cushion? In the form of meditation I've been describing, all sorts of experiential currents form the background against which fundamental presence is cultivated. On the face of it, maintaining attention in the here and now sounds simple enough, but in practice it is far more complicated and unwieldy. In addition to being assailed by any number of underlying anxieties, the meditator quickly learns that he or she is prey to every passing train of thought. Various techniques exist for focusing the attention in meditation, such as concentrating on the rise and fall of the breath, repeating a mantra, visualizing a healing gestalt or deciphering an intractable conundrum. In the "just sitting" school of enacting primordial presence, however, the instruction is merely to cultivate strong reliance on the posture of meditation and to return again and again to that present reality no matter how many times the habitual bent of mind draws the attention astray. It is an approach without crutches and with a tendency to foster boredom, which one exasperated meditator likened to asking a kindergartner to prepare a doctoral thesis.

An advantage of this sort of meditation however is precisely its radical formlessness, which allows it to serve as a vehicle for individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds or inclinations. More important is the fact that it necessarily cultivates an attitude of existential confidence, as the meditator is repeatedly thrown back to reliance on the resources of essential identity. Practically speaking, this generates a growing familiarity with the mechanisms of self-construction, whereby the individual experiences directly both an underlying existential uneasiness and the habitual patterns of mind in responding to such uneasiness by fabricating comforting alternatives out of material from the future and the past. Cultivation of presence is a move to break this habitual pattern and in the process to adopt a posture of creative original trust.

And here I see a third characteristic that defines a meditative stance: the opening to a primal confidence in the adequacy of essential being. I think Jean Gebser said somewhere that *Urvertrauen*, or primordial trust, is characterized by a sense of being equal to reality and to the challenges it may pose. And in this sense, our cultivation on the cushion is a statement of just such confidence, an embodiment of an underlying

sense of adequacy that defines us more essentially than do our desires or our fears. Practically speaking, in the experience of meditation, this involves stepping off the cliff of our habitual, fabricated self-identification and at each moment throwing ourselves on the mercy of the universe – a universe replete with destruction, derision and danger but also with the quivering presence of a loving, apersonal intention.

So on one hand we hear that “die Ros’ ist ohn warumb”; on the other, the act of meditation is experienced as a configuring of primordial intention, a deepening of personal presence into something more fundamental than self. The paradoxical character of this existential aspiration is well expressed, I believe, in the following vibrant fragment from Friedrich Hölderlin:

“...mein Herz wird
Untrügbarer Kristall, an dem
Das Licht sich prüfet...”

Posture, intention, Urvertrauen, diaphanous presence – here we are squarely within the realm of personal being, confronted (as is the meditator) with fundamental issues of self and identity. And in this sense, meditation, for all of its focal and concentrative power, is more than just an exercise in mindfulness on the here and now: it is also non-discursive inquiry into the meaning of what we are. And since what we are is neither fixed nor ever reducible to what we know, questions of identity are inevitably entwined with the mystery of creativity. Indeed, meditation is learning to sit with what is, but also with what is potential and creatively imminent.

Practice of this nature is undoubtedly therapeutic. But I think it is also important to stress that meditation as I am describing it is not a form of psychotherapy and shouldn't be approached as the space in which we deduce what our problems are. This is not to deny that through the practice of meditation one can become acquainted with one's psychological make-up and can gain an embodied intuitive familiarity with where one's knots and eddies lie. Still, cultivation of meditative presence is something qualitatively different than analytical, deductive scrutiny. Inevitably such presence involves an element of inquiry, but not the “tiefes Nachdenken” of the Wahrig definition – unless of course we redefine “Nachdenken” as something we do with our entire being.

While practicing presence, the meditator – whether she likes it or not – becomes keenly aware of the inexhaustible effervescence of thought and the patterns of thought that compose her habitual being. But one of the characteristics of presence not encompassed by thinking is the embodied creativity of the meditator’s physical experience, anchoring identity amid the relentless rush of thought. And the force field of this tension between the projected and the embodied world becomes a transformative space –beyond the consciousness of the meditator – where she meets head on the difficulty of personal identity, physically, psychologically and mentally experiencing the underlying ill-ease of mortal existence. And meeting it with a posture of radical existential trust.

As I noted before, this is not psychotherapy, but it can hone our character and can put us in touch with an underlying balance that enables us to establish psychological equilibrium. And at a more dynamic and creative level than analytical thought, meditation can acquaint us with acquired or conditioned patterns of thought and emotion that rule and undermine us as much as make up our personality. In my meditative glossary, I make a distinction, by the way, between “personality” and “character” as descriptive of individual identity. Unlike personality, which is an expression of reflexive self, character is not an entity but rather a quality of essential being, a degree of individual presence and the ultimate embodiment of what our life configures. Among the treasures bequeathed to us through the work of Jean Gebser is an enabling distinction that is relevant to the question of character: Gebser distinguishes between several modes of being, which he designates *ichlos*, *ichhaft* and *ichfrei*. The extent to which we mature from one of these postures to another is reflected in our character and the degree to which our character shapes our actions in the world.

In meditation the dynamic tension between the *ichlos*, *ichhaft* and *ichfrei* frequencies of being is mirrored in the play that occurs between anchored primordial presence and our tendency to identify with thinking. Echoing Gebser we might distinguish three modes of comporting ourselves vis-à-vis the scourge and potential of thought: *gedankenlos*, *gedankenhaft* and *gedankenfrei*. Rather than eradicate our capacity for thinking, or embroil ourselves in a patchwork reality constructed almost entirely of abstract thought, our aim, Gebser might tell us, should be to develop a stance of dynamic freedom in our dealings with the gift of thought. And meditation as we have been discussing it is the

practice of embodying this attitude – meeting the flow of thinking with an encompassing original presence.

With this, I needn't tell you, we are deep in Gebser territory. In describing the quality and import of meditative practice, we have been served by language and insights from the Gebser cannon. But the exchange is reciprocal, as I have tried to intimate. A consideration of meditation can also engender and stimulate a number of questions about Gebser's philosophy and its application to our daily lives. Here my purpose has been merely to muse allusively about the practice of meditation. For the past 35 years I've drawn on Gebser's insights and set a meandering, zigzag course by the compass of his arational prose. The power and precision of Gebser's philosophy has stood me well and will continue to do so in the future. But ultimately, rather than any philosophical precepts I might decipher in his work, it is the spirit, aura and sensibility conveyed by that language that I would like to reproduce in my faltering efforts to be truly present in the world.

And so, in concluding my remarks, I would like to return briefly to the question of intention and the purpose of meditation practice. What is its relevance to the way we live our lives? What does a meditative attitude contribute to addressing the urgent moral and ecological challenges of our time? What is the role of meditation in striking a salutary balance between equanimity and engagement in the world?

The stance we cultivate in meditation resonates in the posture we adopt toward others. Presence at its deepest is a vibrant, caring stillness in which distance is indistinguishable from intimacy, and soberness – that quintessential Gebser watchword: *nüchtern* – is positively Dionysian. Indeed, if you were to get me drunk and catch me off guard and persuade me to do something as wildly foolish and presumptuous as to give you an instruction in meditation, it might be this: rather than striving to be a neutral observer of the thoughts, emotions, anxieties and yearnings that arise, be instead the presence in which that happens, or, more precisely: be the presence of all that happens.

And then once off the cushion in the not-so-tranquil world – where posture become bearing or the way we hold ourselves from moment to moment – meditative presence is an ethical imperative, it's what makes possible a truly moral stance in our fragmented

rapidly disintegrating world. Often meditation is defined within the categories of a lofty spirituality or an esoteric striving for “enlightenment”, but for me the context is more poetic or existential (though mysterious enough in the face of impending mortality): meditation as cultivation of a deeply lucid presence in the world. And we need that lucidity to be able to decide between increasingly untenable options, to avoid demonizing our opponents and to develop a sober and challenging political discourse without falling into either ideological rigidity or moral indifference. We need to know where acceptance of reality and an unflinching commitment to democratic values meet or clash, resonate or prove illusory. Most of all we need to know how to care for one another beyond the nexus of our little, fearful selves.

Meditation on the cushion is not reflection on these questions, but the presence that we practice is certainly the fabric of our world. One of my criteria in assessing the value of meditative practice has always been “Will this reveal someone who could survive morally in a concentration camp?” The question is of course misplaced and perhaps excessively dramatic, but the challenge it poses is somehow the one we face in meditation, whether on the cushion or off, and in our daily intercourse with others. How we respond is the substance of our lives, an insight beautifully expressed in the following poem by Rosa Ausländer, with which I will conclude my remarks:

Wirf deine Angst
in die Luft

Bald
ist deine Zeit um
bald
wächst der Himmel
unter dem Gras
fallen deine Träume
ins Nirgends

Noch
duftet die Nelke
singt die Drossel
noch darfst du lieben
Worte verschenken
noch bist du da

Sei was du bist
Gib was du hast