

Opening To and Trusting Life

We are looking at the view of meditation. The view, as I've mentioned, is our understanding of what we're doing. The view is like a map of where we are going as meditators, of what we're doing and what we might find. Like any map, it can help us make the journey we've set out on.

Suppose we want to get to the university from here. We might have a sketchy little hand-drawn 'napkin map' in one hand, and one that identifies connecting streets, stop lights, and other details in the other. Both of these could be said to offer a view of the journey we are making. Of the two, however, the second is far more likely to provide helpful guidance.

It is the same with meditation. While the view is not the actual territory we cover when we practice, it can provide some sense of the landscape: the main roads, the side streets, the distractions, and dead ends we encounter in our practice. As with getting up to campus, the more detailed our view - the more detailed our map, our understanding of what we are doing - the more fruitful our journey is likely to be.

Today we're going to look at this map in a general way. We are going to overview the meditative journey. And what is the meditative journey? While many things could be said about it, today I want to present this as a process of opening to and trusting life.

Maybe this doesn't sound like such a big deal. We might think, 'So what? I'm open to life. I trust

life.’ But, if we’re honest about it, few of us are ever really open and few of us ever really trust. It is important we see this. Though it can be difficult, it is important for us to see what we are actually up to. In some ways, it is relatively easy to say, “Meditation is a process of opening to and trusting life.” It sounds good. It feels nice. Part of the view, however, involves understanding not only where we are going - toward openness and trust - but also where we are. What do we do in our days and what do we bring to the cushion?

This morning, for instance, I woke up exhausted. I got up earlier than usual and, by about nine, felt I was going to fall over from fatigue. My first response was denial: ‘I’m not that tired. A bit sluggish perhaps, but I’ll be okay.’ This did not work too well, so I moved onto a second line of reaction. This was to try and muscle through how I was feeling, force myself into business as usual. This didn’t go so wonderfully either. As a result, I was pressed up against a wall. I had to admit how lousy I felt and surrender to the fact I needed to lay down. Not able to simply do this, however, I came up with a story to rationalize my actions. ‘Well, I’ve got a meeting tonight,’ I told myself. ‘I need to be fresh for this so, for the sake of those people, I will lay down.’

Each of these instances shows me not opening to or trusting life. They show me denying, resisting, rationalizing the fatigue I was feeling, as we all do in so many ways. We feel grief and begin telling ourselves we must ‘get back to normal’ after a few days. We have a strong intuition about some aspect of our lives and reduce this to a quaint story we tell our friends. “I had a dream,” we announce. Everyone “Ooos” and “Ahhhs” at this, but we never actually do anything about what we’ve been shown. We never really open or trust. All of these show us manipulating what is arising for us. They show us trying to make life something different than what it actually is. All reveal a fairly persistent lack of openness and trust.

Meditation stands in contrast to this approach. Rather than having us move away from openness and trust, the practice gradually moves us in this direction. And it is interesting, to me anyway, that this can be seen in the basic technique we practice together.

The first thing we do is place our attention on the breath. In doing this, we allow a rare openness to enter our lives. Normally, when something comes up - when we think or feel or remember something - we grab onto it with our minds. We think and replay, we worry and try to figure out. None of these offers much openness. On the contrary, each is really about shutting down and

closing in. When we meditate, however, placing our attention allows us to simply let experience arise. When we think, feel, or remember something, we just let it happen. It comes and does its thing while we stay on our object of attention, the breath.

Of course, because we are so habitually trained to fret and figure, we do this when we meditate as well. We stay open for a few moments - maybe not even that long - and then whoosh, we're gone. We start remembering something that happened yesterday and begin planning how we're going to do something different tomorrow. 'I'm going to turn my life around,' we tell ourselves. 'Here is how I'm going to do it.' Then we begin listing things off. But what do we do with this sort of situation when we are practicing?

Normally we keep thinking, of course. But when practicing, we bring ourselves back to the breath. We come back to that place of openness, which is a tremendous gesture of trust. Continuing to think about thinking is pretty safe. It gives us more of the same. But cutting short a line of thought and coming back to the breath is kind of risky. We really don't know what we're going to find. We don't know what is going to happen. Am I going to feel worse by doing this? Am I going to lose my mind? We don't know. So there's an undercurrent of trust in this.

Here we might mention an important distinction. This is the distinction between inclusive and exclusive spirituality. Meditation, after all, is a spiritual discipline. As such, this distinction has a great deal of relevance to what we are talking about here.

Exclusive spirituality is the approach most of us familiar with. Exclusive spirituality asserts that certain states of mind are spiritual and others are not. We have good and we have evil. We have love and we have hate. We have peace and we have chaos. These distinctions reflect an exclusive approach to spirituality. In this, one side of each dichotomy is embraced, encouraged, and cultivated, while the other is viewed as a big problem.

This is the approach we have inherited from modern Christianity, though it is certainly not unique to that tradition. As for the qualifier "modern", I say this because I'm not sure this sort of exclusivity is inherent in Jesus' earliest teachings. Much to the contrary, I suspect Jesus' life offers an example of something far more open and trusting, something far more inclusive. But, for a variety of reasons, many modern Christian teachings are quite exclusive in the way we just

discussed. Some states of mind, some experiences, are considered wholly undesirable and, as a result, we push them away.

Inclusive spirituality, in contrast, does not offer the same good/bad distinctions. Inclusive spirituality encourages and fosters an openness to everything that arises, which is so incredibly foreign to us. I was thinking about this just the other day. The couple I work with - my guides on this path - pretty much every interaction I have with them revolves around my struggle to embrace this sort of inclusiveness. "I'm really sad when I practice," I say. "Is that okay?" "I'm really angry when I sit. Is that okay?" "I'm so tired when I meditate. Is that okay?"

There is a sense of doing it wrong, of my experience somehow not being okay, not being 'meditative' or 'spiritual'. Where does this come from? Among other places, it comes from the exclusive spirituality we've all inherited. What does a more inclusive approach say to the above? What do my teachers say? "Of course it's okay, Neil. It is what you are experiencing." Actually, they don't even say this much. Ofttimes all they offer is, "Neil, it's your experience."

There is such an affirming sense to this inclusive approach. Human experience is not problematic from this perspective. It is not something we have to fix or work around. It is exactly what is needed by this person in this moment. From an inclusive approach to spirituality, nothing is turned away as bad or undesirable or problematic. Everything is seen as offering something essential to our unfolding as human beings. The universe is seen as having a deep-rooted imperative toward completion, toward our completion. As a result, what is coming up for us is exactly what is needed - is *only* what is needed - by us right now. So nothing is turned away from our lives, from our practice. Nothing. Everything is included.

Again, we see this in the basic technique we are practicing. We place our attention on the breath and when anger or fear or sadness arises, we stay. We don't do anything at all to what's coming. We don't fix or deny or ignore. We simply stay and allow our lives to arrive. Should we get distracted and drift into thought or planning or worry, we come back. We re-place our attention and once more, we stay.

In doing this, we very slowly become more open to what happens in our lives. We gradually begin to trust a little more. Initially, this seems to take place almost wholly during practice. A

sense of agitation arises and we stay where we are, returning to the breath again and again if necessary. Over time, however, we begin to do this in our lives as well. We become a little more accommodating of fear when it comes up. Or joy. Or anxiety. We stay open a little longer. We begin to listen to what every experience has to say to us. Eventually, we come to reorient the apple cart that we call our lives.

Right now we have the cart placed first, piled high with all our ideas and impressions of how things should be. The horse - that is, the stuff of our lives - is being dragged behind us, very often kicking and screaming as we go. As we practice through time, though, we gradually come to put our lives back where they belong. We put our lives in front of us. We allow our lives to take their place before us. We surrender to this. We, with all our ideas and opinions, begin to follow this majestic beast. We begin to open and trust what is happening, where we are being taken. In doing this, we discover that, though life is frequently surprising and unexpected - and occasionally quite difficult - the journey is always timely, appropriate, and reliable. One hundred percent timely. One hundred percent appropriate. One hundred percent reliable. Always.

For Reflection

- What does the phrase, “Meditation is a process of opening to and trusting our lives” mean to you? What is your sense of the words ‘opening’ and ‘trusting’. How are these embraced and/or resisted in your life? In your meditation practice?
- Consider a number of instances in which you did not open or trust. Make a short list of the strategies you use in order to resist opening and trusting. Can you see ways in which these strategies manifest in your meditation practice? Consider an instance in which you did open and trust. Contrast the felt sense of each experience.
- What are the characteristics of exclusive and inclusive spirituality? How does the first of these terms describe your view of the spiritual path? How does the second describe your view of the path? How do each of these views influence your approach to meditation practice?