

PREPARING THE MEDITATION GROUND

This article is published in the winter issue 2017-18 of *Quest: Journal of the Theosophical Society in America*

<https://www.theosophical.org/publications/quest-magazine>

Many years ago I read the following description of meditation and shivered slightly. Apprehension inspiration...?—hard to say.

“As a darkened chamber in the high desert when all is still before the dawn. That word, too fast to be followed, too slow to be comprehended, so powerful to shake even the depths, so gentle and immovable, both speaker and listener, cause and end. Who understands it understands nothing, who declares its likeness lies; who knows it is ignorant. He who knows it as his centre lies, who does not know it as his centre is mistaken, for it is high noon in the busy city.”¹

There’s the scene—darkness in an enclosure in the desert, apparently grappling with unearthly paradox. Seems like meditation is not for the faint-hearted! The darkness is sensory, for the meditation ground requires withdrawing from normal sensory engagement with outer objects to allow more subtle sensation from inner senses to be apprehended. Sense objects include thoughts, for the mind (classified as a ‘sense’ in Buddhist metaphysic) seems indissolubly wedded to its relationship with thought until, with experience, a meditator is able to take a stand in the darkness from ordinary mind, and know a different kind of perception.

Then, with senses darkened, an inner chamber is created, an enclosure, an ark in the desert of interactions with the world. It’s not a low desert of depression and inertia when life loses meaning and emotions run dry, but a *high* desert when those kind of meaningful interactions are consciously suspended. Their absence creates a desert of sense, poised and still, just on the edge of dawn--on the edge of meaning, awaiting illumination from a yet hidden sun.

Meditators in all traditions, no matter what the method or context, should recognise the description, having had some experience of those moments when ‘the grinders cease ...and those that look out of the windows be darkened’. And then perhaps: “...he shall rise up at the voice of the bird”². Commonly, during or after a long course or retreat, experience of this kind of potency can feel like a world away from the daily hubbub. It is when your eyes are clear and still, and

see *into* people and situations instead of grazing across the surface. It is the meditation ground prepared and waiting, but at the same time, not merely preparatory, it *is* meditation. It is what we meditators have in our hearts when we start out, and have to hold on to through the years when circumstances, routine or disillusionment threaten our practice.

The task of preparing the ground for meditation involves 'tilling the soil' on a daily basis, and depends more on consistency than some sort of herculean effort. Weeds may be quick to grow, and especially in the early stages, the grass in the other field always looks greener ('perhaps I should be.....?'). And how is it that other people seem to have reaped a wonderful crop of something--ideas, writings, followers, prestige... ?

A desert, by definition, would appear to be a poor ground for growing anything. But somehow, in the 'high desert, when all is still', none of this matters. Not even the questions: Will the dawn come? I've worked and I'm waiting, but will I see dawn?

Expectations of *fruition, the pay-off, arrival, enlightenment* are the driving force behind many a determined meditator. Yet, we can never know what any dawn will bring. Triumph or tragedy, daylight simply declares it all. Ideally, the true scope of meditation will slip beyond our grasp at some point, because if it did conform to our expectations, however grandiose in conception, the real potential would be limited and circumscribed by our fantasies or beliefs.

None the less, the ground is workable, and it's entirely reasonable to expect that with proper attention, care and consistency, conditions can be set up to know a field of potency, of peace. What is more, it's not that difficult, and every long-term dedicated meditator will have tasted it.

But is it ground for a *seed* to grow, a divine seed, which is creative, transformative, living, emerging from the potential of the ground to become realisation of a new kind of life? Where would such a seed come from? How is it planted? What is its nature?

The Seed

On the understanding that ground and seed in this metaphor are not two things, but a unity of aim, practice and experience, let us examine the seed aspect. The "word" in the passage above is one such seed, and belongs in the tradition of the 'Via Negativa', or 'neti, neti', 'not this, not this'. Whatever can be said of it is wrong, and yet it is "powerful to shake even the depths". It is never the truth to

say what it *is*, but pursuing descriptions of what it is *not* creates a potent vacancy in the middle of the conceptual field. All conceptions generated by mind turn inward and genuflect, and mind itself comes to rest. In this vacancy or emptiness, the seed germinates.

The Word or logos as a symbol for the creative seed has a long tradition in both east and west. In the singular, it has a specific meaning, not just the general ‘word of God’, as teachings or scripture, but the ultimate symbol of something very small which contains limitless creative power and meaning: a Word, mere sound, vibration. In Christianity, Christ as Logos is an embodiment of creative truth, incarnating otherwise intangible truths into the limitations of flesh. In the context of meditation, the Word is an object of attention used to focus meditation, particularly when it is sound-based, as in mantra.

Some examples of sound in meditation:

From a western source is the instruction in the classic text, the Cloud of Unknowing³: “take thee a little word of one-syllable” and “beat on that cloud of darkness...” Here the word is like a lance, aimed to pierce through the darkness of not-knowing, or to “pierce heaven” as the author describes it, and so the smaller and sharper the word, the better.

In the ancient text of the Sepher Yetzirah from the Jewish Qabalah, the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet can become sound-combinations and used for meditation, while you “hold your mouth from speaking and your heart from ruminating, and if your mouth runs into speech and your heart begins to ponder return to the foundation.... on this recognition is the Covenant based.”⁴

From the Vedic tradition is a well-developed system of seed-syllables, called *bija*, each Sanskrit syllable, mostly composed of a consonant, vowel and nasalization is designed to create an energetic vibration in a particular centre of energy or chakra in the subtle body. The position of the tongue and breath create a particular vibrational frequency. As a meditation technique, the mantra syllable is repeated continuously, and interestingly, is said not to depend on conscious attention for its efficacy. Mantra repetition can be a background to conscious awareness, a never-ceasing stream of sound sustained by conditioning set to automatic, while allowing the everyday mind to get on with other things. Details of the specific correspondences in this Indian system are readily found⁵, so I won’t elaborate here, but it’s wise to note that any stylised symbolism lends itself to gross handling—ie. to materialist and superstitious suggestions that rewards can be obtained by a coin-in-the-slot approach-- select the chakra you

want to activate, repeat the appropriate mantra and open sesame! A brief glance at the internet or some of the literature will reveal that the naïve literalist approach is always with us.

Repeating a mantra supplants internal chatter, and when it becomes automatic, a subliminal unified foundation replaces the scattered involuntary meanderings of the mind. It's possible at the same time to think, speak or engage with the environment, or, in meditation, to engage with silence while the sound is still present. The wave nature of sound permits vibrational energy to be sustained, aloud or silently, until the actual sound-quantum drops away. At this point paradox enters, for it is 'not this; not this', or in contemporary symbolic language, both wave and particle are present.

It seems that a child in the womb responds to sounds, so the hearing sense is operating before birth, and hearing is the last sense to be extinguished at death. The first and last engagement with the sensory world is sound, penetrating the chamber of the womb and fading with external conscious awareness at the ending of life.

Besides language and sound-based meditation, of course the breath, image (yantra/mandala), evocation and a variety of other foci for attention are common 'seeds'. The effects are slightly different for each, but the ground has to be prepared in the same kind of way eg. psychological and physical discipline, attitude, consistency and silence.

In the passage above, which comes from the tradition in which I have practiced most of my life⁶, the seed-word is described as "both speaker and listener, cause and end", and thus transcends the duality of a subject and object. You, the meditator, speak the word and hear it; are active and passive simultaneously. Although paradoxical, it's not just a neat trick. Finding the kind balance which is neither one nor the other, neither this nor that, is the essence and deepest aim of any true form of meditation. No matter whether a 'busy' form, with lots of precise instructions and visualizations such as Tibetan, or the simplicity of Zen, just sitting or following breath, when the scattered mind is unified, and all conceptual threads pulled into a single focus, presence is different. Being is different. Knowing this, no other justification is needed.

It's true that not every technique called meditation has the same aim. Some are highly manipulative and product oriented. However, if you want to uncover the potential of a 'divine seed as mantra, you have to let go of the wish to manipulate, to send the sound here or there, and *to make it work for you*. A seed

is a living thing. The germinating principle within it is mysterious, not visible when you cut it open. If you plant it, you are invoking the life within it—*its* life, not yours. You can see the structure, the mechanism, but you cannot see within it the mysterious germinative force which will propel into existence a tiny violet, let alone a giant redwood tree.

In some way, every word spoken or written is a carrier of information, a symbol, conveying meaning, which germinates in the recipient to a greater or lesser extent. Communication is really a transaction between information-clouds, or meaning-clouds 'surrounding' the words, so given that we are effectively trading in cloud formations, should we be surprised how often it gets scrambled and we misunderstand each other?

However, if you take and repeat a sound or syllable which has no conceptual meaning in any particular language -- not just any old sound, but one designed consciously, as for instance vowels found almost universally -- you are using an abstract seed. The advantage of abstraction is that it avoids the cloud of associations round a word, and therefore any unintended consequences and involuntary associations from past experience which routinely surge up when one's guard is lowered, as it must be to meditate *deeply*.

As mental activity dies down, repetition will create a vibration from the shape of tongue, breath, lips and the subtle body responds, which may release emotional knots. Systems with an abstract infrastructure, for example combining letter-sounds according to certain principles, are utilizing the penetrating power of pure sound without the burden of meaning, making it easier to settle into silence as the breath becomes finer and almost ceases. Such systems directly invoke the High Desert.

A true mantra or sacred word/syllable is precise. The seed will germinate a particular kind of life, if it grows at all. How can this happen?

Transmission--the mystery of the seed

The mystery of the seed is more than the technique. Whatever form it takes, tradition has it that a mantra imparted by a Guru or realised Teacher has power and efficacy in a way that selecting a mantra for oneself does not. Transmission, passing on or awakening inner growth in another person, bestows the precious germ of life, and impacts many levels of psyche. It can be sudden and life-changing, or a ritualized handing-on, but the principle is simple: if one person inhabits and knows inner silence and is present with it, someone else can pick

up the resonance, as a singing-bowl resonates when its integrity is struck. Consciousness speaks to consciousness, “deep calleth unto deep”⁷, so a mantra given this way has a powerful penumbra and is a living seed. Deeply-planted, with the power of conscious intent, it will go on resonating its significance so long as its life is tended, but the instructions and teaching to support it are also essential if it is to flourish. On-going guidance puts a hoe in your hand for preparing the ground and keeping it clear.

Despite the mystique and awe associated with it, the practical reality of ‘oral transmission’ is not as arcane or rare as esoteric legend suggests, although its value cannot be over-estimated. One form of transmission is simply the effect of human contact to enliven and motivate, as if the field of another’s presence interacts with one’s own personal field and the resonance awakens a response. Personal interaction is always different from reading words or even hearing at a distance. In this way even a humble practitioner through their own dedication, can transmit the lineage of their training. The lineage contains the power, not the individual, but a personal *ego* is an impassable block to the process. Naturally, the more directly and clearly someone is able to see into original nature, the more powerful is his or her influence to awaken the same in another. The basis of *receiving* as well as initiating transmission is the development of a true faculty of discernment, and so by both education and practice, becoming sensitive to those echoes from Infinity in the Word “too fast to be followed”.

And Time is also needed. Maybe a lot of time, for reading, study, focused discussion and debate to help nurture that little seed. Personal guidance is possibly the most important part of the transmission process. All too easily circumstances can freeze, burn or uproot the seed, or forgetfulness allow it to wither. On the one hand its existence is fragile, “so gentle and immoveable” but on the other “so powerful to shake even the depths”. And so the intangible power of the word-seed is poised against the fragility of human resolve.

Yet, age after age, inner knowledge has been preserved and passed down. Seeds have different shapes and sizes, as lineages and methods differ, but every tree in a forest is, in fact, different, and no two roses are exactly the same. In each individual form is a common life, a centre which is both known and not known, and with the unfolding power of discernment, dawn in the desert morphs into “high noon in the busy city”.

The meditation ground can be located anywhere. The ‘chamber’ travels with you, and the stillness before dawn is always present, for it is *high noon*, the hour of transition when the bells of the Angelus used to ring in Christian Europe to

remind man, woman and beast to lay down tools and take a breath, honouring and remembering the spirit-- the seed within.

Then it was back to field and plough, and back we go to the busy city.

¹The Phoenician Letters, Davies and Zur, Mowat Publishing 1979

² Ecclesiastes 12.3

³ The Cloud of Unknowing, 14th century classic

⁴ Sepher Yetzirah, Book of Formation. Zur, Davies. Private translation

⁵ LAM for Muladhara the Base Chakra; VAM for Swadhisthana the Sacral Chakra; RAM for Manipura the Solar Plexus Chakra; YAM for Anahata the Heart Chakra; HAM for Vishuddha the Throat Chakra; AUM for Ajna the Third Eye Chakra Mahatattva; AUM for Sahasrara the Crown Chakra

⁶ High Peak Meditation

⁷ Psalm 42.7