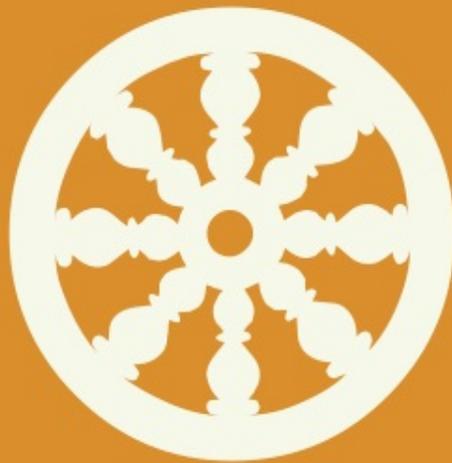


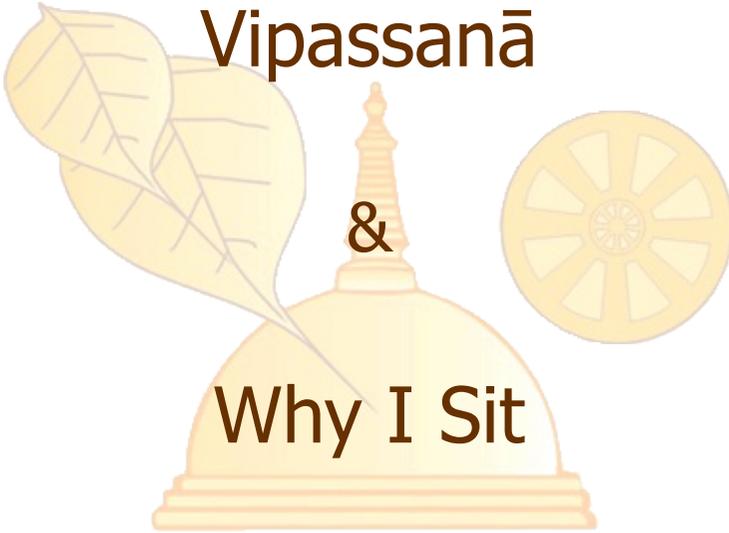
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**The Therapeutic Action  
Of Vipassanā  
&  
Why I sit**

*Dr. Paul R. Fleischman*



# The Therapeutic Action Of Vipassanā



Two Essays By

Dr. Paul R. Fleischman

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# Preface

In the summer of 1982, at the end of a meditation course, and during the time when a number of old students were discussing the creation of a meditation centre in North America to facilitate the teachings of this pure tradition, Goenkaji suggested to me that I write an article about meditation. “Since you are a psychiatrist, people will believe you.” The result was “The Therapeutic Action of Vipassanā.” The thrust of this article is to explain how a scientifically trained physician could understand, validate, and practise Vipassanā meditation, as taught by S. N. Goenka, and to show what is universally practical, efficacious, and therapeutic about it, while at the same time clarifying the divergency between psychotherapy and the Dhamma: the art of living taught by the Buddha.

That summer, the Vipassanā Meditation Centre was born in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts.

I found, however, only half my work was done. Friends, colleagues, fellow meditation students, sometimes ask my opinion: “What *is* meditation ... does it *really* work ... *how* does it work ... how does it compare to psychiatry?” Now I could just hand over a copy of “The Therapeutic Action ...”!

But people also ask a more difficult question: “Why?” To answer this question, I had to seek inward. Inside, revealed to me through the practice itself, was a mixture of holy and unholy motives—some true to the mark and others wide of the entire target. I wrote “Why I Sit” to explain to people of my time and place—psychiatrists, post-doctoral fellows in my Psychiatry and Religion seminar, fellow parents, carpenters at work on my beams—the real human heart of the matter, in case the question was asked from the heart. An unplayed guitar, in a room where another is being played, will vibrate to it.

Koshi Ichida, a Soto Zen priest and a dear friend, unveiled many aspects of Buddhism to me in hundreds of hours of conversation. Jim Phillips, life-long colleague with wide-angle vision and sharp focus, compelled critical re-writing—as did my wife, Susan, who also lives the whole thing with me.

Paul R. Fleischman

# THE THERAPEUTIC ACTION OF VIPASSANĀ

Vipassanā meditation, as taught by S. N. Goenka of Igatpuri, India, and of Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts, is alleged to be the meditation practice expounded by the historical Buddha as the direct way to complete liberation from human suffering. Long before that goal is reached, however, the committed ordinary student may gain profound therapeutic benefits from Vipassanā. Having practised this technique religiously for many years, and being a practising psychiatrist as well, I thought I would describe these therapeutic actions in contemporary psychological language, for the benefit of new and prospective students. All these benefits are potential in the technique; which ones, and how much, accrue to any individual's practice, varies with who one is, where one is coming from, and one's adherence to the technique day after day for a lifetime. I will not attempt to describe the actual practice itself, since that requires the lived experience of a ten-day training course.

According to traditional descriptions of the mind as seen through the media of Vipassanā, a great part of human mental activity consists of wishes for the future and fears about the future, and desires from the past and fears from the past. The freer the mind is from memories and yearnings, and from desires and hatreds, the more it rests in the present, and the more mental contents come to reflect clear, immediate reality as it is. The technique of meditation allows the controlled release of mental contents, while simultaneously anchoring the student in concrete contemporary reality. This reality-based, equanimous position enables craving and aversion, past and future, to rise to the surface of the mind and to pass away without provoking a reaction. In this way the mind is de-conditioned, and one's life becomes characterised by increased awareness, reality-orientation, non-delusion, self-control, and peace.

## Self-Knowledge

This lucid and logical psychology hardly expresses the animated human drama that in fact unfolds whenever anyone undertakes training in Vipassanā. No matter who we are, our inner lives are less like a box with separate compartments than like a flood-tide on a river. When we sit down to be still, a seemingly endless stream of memories, wishes, thoughts, conversations, scenes, desires, dreads, lusts, and emotionally driven pictures of every kind wells

up in us, thousands upon thousands. The clearest, most immediate and inescapable effect of meditation is to increase one's self-knowledge. This may be curious, exciting, and interesting but it also could be devastating. Taking this into account, therefore, the technique enables one's vision of one's true inner life to expand in the structured, protected, controlled, holding and nurturant environment essential to a safe launching on high seas.

The qualities of the appropriate environment have been studied, codified, and transmitted for millennia from teacher to teacher. Like the map to a traveller, they constitute the framework of the correctly taught course and define the qualities of the teacher. A precise adherence to the details of the technique, and the embracing, generous human love of the teacher, enable any ordinary person to open the doors of his or her own heart and mind. Nothing in the human condition will remain unknown or strange to one who has sat, hour after hour, thus safely stationed and continuously aware.

## Basic Trust

As a corollary to the expansion of knowledge of one's inner life, then, there is the activation of that basic trust, which contemporary psychology posits as deriving from the earliest trust a child extends to the parent who nurtures, warms, and feeds it and which forms the substrate for later intimate human relationships. In the context of Vipassanā,

this trust operates as the informed adult faith that permits full engagement with the technique without wishful thinking about what magical results it may bring. Such faith must be rooted in thoughtful understanding, reasonable confidence, and the commitment to proceed as directed. Willfulness has to be surrendered, for the platform of knowing is participation.

## Integration of the Past

The millions of vignettes, scenes, and anecdotes that flood up from one's personal past, arise to pass away; paradoxically, before they do, one sees who one has been, one knows where one has come from. Even while walking towards the common centre, everyone starts from a particular position on the periphery. That position is beyond one's control, because everyone has been conditioned by his past experiences, by the thousands, and many of these are not what we would have wished for ourselves. So the present can be grasped, but the past is both elusive yet inescapable. Sitting with it hour after hour necessitates that one come to terms with it. There is no running away, no distraction. Coming to terms with the past, acceptance of what has been, the personal integration of all of oneself without rejection or denial—these are also therapeutic effects of meditation.

## Future and Will

Similarly, in spite of any effort to the contrary, the meditation student will find himself thinking, preparing, planning and anticipating. Even as this often fanciful activity declines, it enables the meditator to see his real volition emerge. When, as usually happens in life, volition is rapidly followed by action, we find the action more memorable and gripping. Thus retrospectively, we construe life as a series of actions causally linked. We explain ourselves to ourselves based upon what has happened to us and what we did, thus covertly coming to believe ourselves to be dependent products of events, reactors rather than agents.

But the command to ourselves to remain seated, alert, aware, and unmoving, breaks the automaticity of that sequence. The choices and decisions—the motive will in our lives—are pulled out from the shadows to stand on an unobstructed stage. What occurred in fleet milliseconds, to be rapidly followed by loud sequences of actions, now occurs ... and that is all. With the conviction of experience we see how we move, shape, push, and bend with our hearts and minds moment after moment to build the next platform for action. Our future may take us less by surprise, and may ironically require less planning, when we increase our awareness of how our wills mould it. Another therapeutic effect of meditation is to decrease our need to plan, control, and organise the future, because it activates our determination right now to observe, identify, and consciously participate in the thousands of decisions that

determine us each day.

## Responsibility

Helplessness is one of the most threatening feelings. To be out of control, to be a victim of fate, is universally dreaded. The rites and rituals of organised religion—one of the most widespread phenomena of human culture—are intended to restore a sense of potency, control, and order over events. The wisdom teachings of diverse cultures, on the other hand, eschew reliance on external powers that must be cajoled, coerced, or implored, and teach instead ownership of one's own feelings and actions.

For example, Freud stressed that mental life was not capricious and incomprehensible, but lawful and orderly. Similarly, the Book of Job teaches that apparently arbitrary events can be seen to be caused and meaningful if one maintains the correct attitude; and Jesus' ethics focused on the role of intention and wish in the ultimate destiny of the soul. Existentialism stresses that the individual alone is the maker of his own essence. Viktor Frankl, the existentialist philosopher and psychiatrist, writing from personal experience, claims that even in Auschwitz the individual in essence determined his own fate and had no one else to beseech or blame.

For the meditation student, neither faith nor philosophy, but systematic observation of mind clarifies that every mental event is meaningful, caused, one's own responsibility. Even

in fixed conditions, we determine our own attitudes and our responses to those conditions. One mind moment conditions the next: the more experientially convinced of this we become, the more fully we shoulder responsibility for our own lives. A greater sense of control and responsibility directly follows activation of determination through clarification of will.

## Right Concentration and Ethics

But merely “observing the mind” or “watching memories and expectations” is impossible. We cannot simply objectify the very mind that seeks to objectify. There is a technique of meditation that enables us to see the stream of mind-moments rather than be swept along by it. One aspect of the technique is concentration, right concentration. Right concentration is achieved, not by willfully blotting out, repressing, or trampling distraction, but by eliminating distraction’s root. So concentration, the treasure of human integrative capacities, which gives coherence and direction to life, cannot be built with a sledgehammer, but requires a feather. When we cease to be distracted in our heart, so too our mind.

Right concentration depends upon ethical living. Ethics creates inner harmony, the unity of the multiple parts of our being, so that the complexity of a human being attains a point of focus only when the actions of daily life are lined up in the same direction. For right concentration, then, a

soft, subtle stimulus is necessary, because the concentration that results from loud demands merely obscures the inner patchwork. Attempting to concentrate upon the difficult-to-concentrate-on produces unavoidable awareness of exactly what is distracting one. So the meditation leads not only to self-awareness, committed participation, integration with and acceptance of one's past, clarity about one's causal role in the future, and a sense of responsibility for one's life, but also to direct experiential knowledge of the basis of ethics. To have peace, we must be at peace.

Distractions from concentration, when neither followed nor suppressed, but *seen*, are generally desire and fear concerning the past or the future. To concentrate on the subtle, we must dwell in the present and relinquish the multitude of self-enhancing or self-protecting manoeuvres that constitute the incessant psychological pressure to fantasy. Then the natural qualities of a mind facing reality become evident.

## Self-Control

Concentration—built on harmony, built on ethics, built on an integration with rather than a struggle against reality—occurs not only at the moment-to-moment level but also at the level of life-structure. Order, self-control, and discipline are part of the life of meditation. There is no concentration without them, and they in turn express a focused life. The technique of meditation interlocks with the technique of

living; some regulation of sleep, food, sex and physical motion expresses and enhances awareness and equanimity. But a disciplined life is not a cold or rigid one. As the waves of sentiment wash up on the shore and then—unresponded to—wash away again, we find not flatness of feeling, but depth of emotion, the ocean that underlies the waves.

The frequent misconception that peacefulness is dullness, that detachment is heartlessness, that calm is lethargy, comes from a mind that equates agitation, excitement, and passion with pleasure. But beyond pleasure and displeasure, personal preference, titillation and taste, are the deep pools of live participation and energy. Rather than static compartmentalization, the disciplines of meditation allow full emotional access, spontaneous and generous flows of compassionate, empathetic feeling.

## Conflict Resolution

From the ancient religious masters like the Buddha, Jesus, St. Paul, Krishna, and Rumi to modern theologians like Tillich, Buber, and Eliade, human wholeness has been considered the goal and meaning of religion. Freud claimed that conflict or disunity was the cause of neurosis, and post-Freudian psychology has intensely studied integrative aspects of the personality, such as identity. Meditation is a direct method of decreasing psychological conflict through its prescriptive ethical codes, its integration of past and future, its elucidation of self-responsibility, concentration,

and will. Conflict resolution could be said to be the main thrust of the practice.

Yet life is dynamic. There is no final static formula that can encase the fluid ocean of reality that we experience as commitments, goals, meanings, and concerns. So meditation often heightens awareness of existential conflicts as it decreases the level of division, fragmentation, or disunity. There is no automatic drive pedal in Vipassanā, no end to renewed right effort and real challenge.

## History and Community

Vipassanā meditation comes from people of the past, and is part of contemporary lives. It passes from person to person—not from books or lectures or mass media. The depth of feeling created by the practice is not an abstraction, a religious ideal. Friendship, companionship, actual human warmth are part of the technique. This is not chattering sociability, but the mutual respect and support of those who see the pre-dawn stars side-by-side.

Just as the practice is shared now, it has been shared across time. A sense of heritage, lineage, history is an inevitable experience of the Vipassanā student. Awareness of one's personal history increases one's sense of personal integrity, and experience of the meaning of human history is a critical element of all deep psychological healing. Like our language, our meditation places us in a trans-temporal human community. Membership in generative continuity is

a sweet antidote to self-aggrandisement. The finest plant has to be modest in the presence of the soil. Philosophical meaning is an idle abstraction to those whose hands actually reach across generations.

## Time and Change

Location within the transmission of generations is only one way that Vipassanā opens the student's eyes to the reality of time and change. Improving the student's capacity to look directly at the reality of impermanence, flux, emptiness, and death is at the core of the practice. The technique involves seeing reality fully, but only after appropriate preparation. Confrontation with pain and dissolution, however, is a universal human experience; Vipassanā enables that meeting to occur with equanimity. So the technique contains an irony: the starker our confrontation with reality, the deeper our equanimity; the deeper our equanimity, the more superficial desires and fears peel off like onion skins and the closer we come to the core anxieties of human existence.

Physical immobility is a core human fear (*everyone* has had the dream of paralysis, being unable to run, unable to speak); Vipassanā prepares us to face it. Physical pain is a core human fear (some psychiatrists consider it the bedrock of all fear); Vipassanā leads us into it, and out of it. Loneliness is a core human fear; Vipassanā leads us to trust, community, faith, but also to profound solitude in silence,

and we can learn to turn that ice into a cool drink for a hot mind. Ancient and modern theories of the human heart frequently point to death as the node, the point where character forms, where knowledge is tested, and where the deepest anxieties take their root. Socrates, of course, considered philosophy the art of dying; a large body of contemporary psychiatric theory echoes that, as does the technique of Vipassanā meditation.

One reason the mind is always in flight, daydreaming, thinking, planning, remembering, is that concentration on immediate physical reality will inevitably clarify the feared truth: the body is decaying right now, every moment, irreversibly. One of the paradoxes of the Vipassanā technique is that the deep physical concentration and relaxation, the exquisite luminescent peace, will lead to the core of dread... which in turn can be experienced as a simple sweet truth like night followed by dawn, hunger followed by food, tiredness followed by sleep, rest followed by morning stars. A mind that returns to the body knows both the limitations of that body, and the vibrating universal energy flowing from form to form.

## Bodily Integration

Vipassanā is not a mental activity. It happens in a body, and is more analogous to learning to ride a bicycle than to learning to read. Awareness of all of our body all of the time is one of the keys to the practice. Thoughts and emotions

inevitably have counterparts in bodily events. So systematic awareness of ourselves requires awareness of how we sit, eat, sleep, think, and feel directly through the body itself. Emotions that were formerly placeless ghosts in the halls of ourselves can be experienced as producing specifically located sensations in the skin, heart, eyes, scalp. Desires and fears that drove us half-consciously to a ceaseless flurry of comfort-seeking can be found to affect the bodily process at deep and subtle levels. Even the past and future, to which we previously did obeisance as awesome external powers, will be found in us, in our vibrating physical selves, as excitation, hunger, and lethargy.

Since all bodies decay, dissolve, and pass away, physical pain and illness are inevitable universal human experiences; and Vipassanā can quickly disperse a student's covert belief in his own invulnerability. But another fraction of suffering stems from ignorance: reactions blindly stored in muscle spasms, engorged overconsumptions, chronic constrictions of self-chastisement, recoiling and clamping down, in blood vessels or intestines. Deepened bodily awareness is the best method of observing the living organic root of thought and emotion, and may also reorder bodily habits, occasionally effecting cures of psychosomatic headaches, gastrointestinal spasms, and the like.

## Relationship

The experience of ceaseless, continuous change in every

molecule of the body in every moment casts life in a different perspective. Meanings and purposes organised around oneself alone are clearly pointless. In every millisecond life rises out of the whole and returns to it again, re-arising fresh, new, different. We exist in the whole, like flecks of spray thrown up momentarily out of the ocean. What is the point of those self-aggrandizing efforts we were so recently, so strenuously pursuing?

Contemporary psychiatry has expressed a renewed interest in the way a person organises a sense of self in relation to other selves; in Vipassanā we experience directly the arsenal of attitudes, postures, lectures, and reactions we all elaborate to create and sustain the image of our own impregnable, eternal, inviolate existence—and how doomed a defence that is. The psychology of the self is a study of building castles of granite on quicksand. That static self that we yearn for, demand, and forever insist upon is a plastic sticker pasted over flow, process, interaction, relation. Without preaching or ideation, the direct experience available through meditation washes away our entitlement, grandiosity, self-preoccupation, and incorporative greed. This cleansing is particularly refreshing to people from modern Western cultures, which have been called cultures of self-absorption.

## Truth

Truth is not a content, but a process. It means an attitude of

expectation and freshness, a willingness to mentally restructure again and again. Vipassanā meditation could be described as the technique of living by the truth. The truth in this sense is not a school, an idea, a doctrine. It doesn't imply an "us" and a "them." It doesn't imply a possession. It doesn't mean that people living in other ways don't have the truth. The practice simply points to one technique whereby a person's life can stake itself out to the process of exploration every day, day after day, up to death itself, which hopefully can be greeted with the same query: objectively, what is the nature of the reality of my mind and body at this moment? Science, philosophy, or any open-minded living share in this truth. Meditation is one well-tried and proven technique, and it contains the paradox of an objective approach to the subjective, an inquiry into the nature of ourselves. Truth is not just the 'high-falutin,' and the living attempt to express oneself truthfully in fleeting conventional moments is one of the finest tools to pry loose the door of the over-defended self.

## Human Love

What *does* the experience of meditation reveal in the human heart? Underneath the self-protective shields of anger, aggression, possession, and control lies the well of clear, simple, loving, energetic, vital life. Generosity, compassion, and human love are not virtues, but attributes. Everybody yearns to feel love, engagement, and the light of truth. But

fear and caution encourage us to continually take detours. We imagine that one more wall, one more lock will keep us safe. Practising Vipassanā means practising the direct action of human love. It crystallises the yearning in us, the call, so that we feel ourselves in possession of the jewel for which we'd been searching.

## II

There are a few questions I am frequently asked when people find out that a psychiatrist has chosen to root his life in meditation.

Do I teach patients to meditate? Definitely not. As a secular professional, I don't impose practices or world-views (beyond the broadly sanctioned general ethics of the dominant culture) on patients who come to me. No one is value-free, but a psychiatrist must be ready to listen to and nurture many ways of being a human being. Central to the profession is the capacity to follow another person's need and lead. People who are called to the practice of meditation will come to it, so I neither hide it nor flaunt it. A number of patients who have seen me have come to know about my way of life; most haven't, knowing that as a professional I offer not a person to emulate or admire, but a treatment that enables them to be more fully and deeply themselves.

In my own mind I imagine that the truth has many facets but one essence. I respect the facets. In any case, a psychiatrist frequently is the interface for the exercise of a bitter cynicism, not to mention the panorama of perversions, rages, paralysing confusions, and so many other phenomena of hurt lives. People start in different places and require various modes of help—in this light psychiatry, too, is also very limited.

Then do I use meditation at all in my work? Yes—it *is* my work, heart and core. For in all those variations of human pain, I see myself as I have seen myself as I sit. There is little in the phenomenology of my patients' lives that is not in mine also. Meditation has greatly enriched my empathy, and my vision of what it is to be a human being: the fear and anxiety and dependency and exhaustion and desperation and defeat and revival and acceptance and vision and work and delight and struggle and doggedness and creativity and appreciation and gratitude. By having experienced my own deeper, truer nature I know more; by experiencing those vibrations in every hour of my daily work with people, I have been able to open more fully, to receive and hold, to drop defences of my own, to really listen, to really understand.

Interestingly, Freud described a similar process; he said that the psychoanalyst has to turn off his conscious thinking, but to open his own being like a receiver to the transmitting antennae of the patient. I can hold more, and it is clear to me that I've been given more to hold. But practising psychiatry

is more than being nice, and I've also learned from meditation how long, difficult, demanding, and very painful it is to face reality, to break old moulds.

Is meditation really effective? I think so, but only with devoted practice. While I have seen many lives, my own included, send down taproots into the simple, common, human decency that transcends theology, philosophy, and psychology, I have also known many people who have meditated for periods of time and then just tumbled on. Meditation cannot be practised casually alone in the bedroom; there must be real training. But there is also an essential requirement for disciplined regularity in daily life. According to the Buddha, the ultimate source of human suffering is ignorance, which includes within itself a resistance to knowing the truth that can set us free. The moment we turn away is when the bird glides into its nest. When we skip, miss, forget, can't make it—that's when the unconscious controls us. Systematic choiceless routine is essential for opening the mind to observation, for in one small lapse the large source of that lapse is obscured. If you draw a water bucket steadily up from a well for five minutes, and then let go for one split second... the result is clear.

Although the practice of Vipassanā is not a religion in the sense of buying into or swallowing dogma, ritual, or blind faith, I think it is critical to practise "religiously": that is, with devoted centrality of commitment. Meditation as a desultory practice, an amusement, an occasional hobby in a

cluttered life, has little effect, and may stir up more confusion than it relieves. Unfortunately I have seen intermittent, self-directed meditation used to hide from reality, to devalue painful dilemmas, and, in one instance, to aggrandize the self to the point of madness and suicide.

Vipassanā references itself to universal human wisdom rather than to particular culture forms. It is non-sectarian in thought. Its framework is mirrored whenever people ponder the art of living. For example, Thoreau wrote, *in* Massachusetts, in the nineteenth century: “Renew thyself completely each day; do it again, and again, forever again ... To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest art ... no method or discipline can supersede the necessity of being forever on the alert ...”

The potential therapeutic actions of Vipassanā include increased self-knowledge, deepened human trust and participation, integration with and acceptance of one’s past, deepened activation of one’s will, increased sense of responsibility for one’s own fate; greater concentration, deepened ethical commitments, firm yet flexible life structures and disciplines, fluid access to deeper streams of feeling and imagery, expanded historical and contemporary community; prepared confrontation with core realities such as time, change, death, loss, pain, leading to an eventual diminution of dread, anxiety, and delusion; fuller body-mind integration, decreased narcissism, and a fuller panorama of character strengths such as generosity, compassion, and human love. Each student starts at a

different place, and progresses individually; there is no magic and no guarantees.

### III

To consider meditation from the standpoint of its therapeutic actions is only one way of describing this technique of living. Seen from another direction, meditation transcends the merely therapeutic, the way that the water of the planet exceeds its mere thirst-quenching property, the way the sun exceeds its life and warmth-giving qualities, the way a timeless poem exceeds the personal pleasure that we may individually extract from it. We are part of a reality that is more than a cure for our personalities. The point is not towards ourselves, but towards everything else.

The entire description of Vipassanā meditation via its therapeutic actions clarifies some points, but obscures a very central one. While meditation is therapeutic—enhancing many other human qualities—it has intrinsic value as an activity in itself. Art may help us to appreciate life; it also expresses human nature’s artful heart, eye and hand. Meditation is most therapeutic when it is not looked upon for therapeutic effect, but is put into practice as an end in itself, an expression of an aspect of human nature. That aspect is not a single attribute, like one slice of a pie, but a

sustaining, synthesising, creative force in all other aspects, like the heat that baked the pie. It is more like the bony skeleton than like one limb. So meditation expresses something about the integrated process of a person, rather than being merely a means to ends in other spheres of life.

Meditation expresses that aspect of us which can receive: the non-selective embracing receptor. We can know ourselves as member cells of an integrated whole.

Occasionally a person will feel this way during special hours of special days: watching a sunset from the rim-rocks of a sandstone canyon in a wilderness of pinyon pine and ancient ruins. These moments are inspirational, serendipitous interludes. Meditation entails the systematic cultivation of this formative human potential as a lifelong centreing enterprise. While some activation of this receptive, interpenetrative, non-judgemental mode is the foundation of any art or science, any significant engagement of the world, it has been most exquisitely expressed by certain writers, like Tagore, Whitman, Thoreau, the Socratic dialogues, Chinese and Japanese Zen poets, and the nameless authors of many classical Pali and Sanskrit texts from ancient India.

This equanimous, aware, unfiltered, receptivity is the *sine qua non* of religious experience (as opposed to mere religious membership or affiliation). Opening it up makes us feel whole and alive just as eating does. There is no need to rationalise supper as being therapeutic; it is an essential expression of life itself. Similarly, to open up and know with

our being is not health-giving, but life-giving. I have come to believe that meditation activates the process underlying all religious life when looked at for what lies inside the specific cultural or religious formulas, that it contains the essential ingredient of all the pleomorphic panorama of religion—based on studying the great students of the psychology of religion: William James, Carl Jung, Paul Tillich, Erik Erikson, Jerome Frank, Mircea Eliade, et al.

But when we open to receive the whole, a great darkness floods in too. Our previously selective, circumscribed flashlight cannot illumine it alone. We can no longer exclude the devouring mouths of time, the Hitlerian epochs cauterising living limbs of whole centuries, civilizations, peoples; our fears for ourselves and all we love seem like ephemeral flecks of spray foaming up and vanishing endlessly on a boundless endless ocean. Human culture itself, with its religious and artistic and scientific geniuses, has provided candles, torches, even suns for us, that reveal miraculously the dry land between the seas. Vipassanā is one of these. It is a technique that enables us to hear the wisdom of life itself, contained in our organism just like the wisdom of hunger, revealing the deepening shaft of vision, determination, more indomitable skill and gentleness in service of the life in which we live. Inside us and around us is the maker for whom we care. Vipassanā meditation is one way to activate an enduring, sustaining love in the web of all contacts.

Students who undertake training in this discipline will find

themselves walking into a large, dark hall at 4:00 AM. Around them will be one hundred silent, seated, erect friends along the way, men and women, professors and unemployed travellers, lawyers and mothers, who have been there, morning after morning, day after day, for ten days. Darkness will fade, there will be fewer stars, the crescent moon will glow alone, birds will unroll a curtain of life before the new day, and then depart. The hall will be light, yet still, motionless, silent; a chant will begin, whose twenty-five hundred year-old words simply point us towards the best in us; and even slightly bleary and dry, the students may motionlessly reach up and pluck an invisible jewel of immeasurable worth.

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## WHY I SIT

This morning the first thing I did was to sit for an hour. I have done that religiously for nine years, and have spent many evenings, days and weeks doing the same. The English word “meditate” until recently had a vague meaning, referring to any one of a set of activities like extended deep thought, or prayer, or religious contemplation. Recently, “meditation” gained a pseudo-

specificity: “T.M.,” deep relaxation, or alpha-wave conditioning, with connotations of Hinduized cult phenomena like mantras, gurus, and altered states of consciousness. To “sit” is a basic word, with connotations ranging from chicken-coops to boredom and sagacity, so it forms a neutral starting point for an explanation of why I have spent thousands upon thousands of hours “sitting,” and why I have made this activity the centre of my life.

## I

I would like to know myself. It is remarkable that while ordinarily we spend most of our lives studying, contemplating, observing, and manipulating the world around us, the structured gaze of the thoughtful mind is so rarely turned inwards. This avoidance must measure some anxiety, reluctance, or fear. That makes me still more curious. Most of our lives are spent in externally oriented function, that distract from self-observation. This relentless, obsessive drive persists independently of survival needs such as food and warmth, and even of pleasure. Second for second, we couple ourselves to sights, tastes, words, motions, or electric stimuli, until we fall dead. It is striking how many ordinary activities, from smoking a pipe to watching sunsets, veer towards, but ultimately avoid,

sustained attention to the reality of our own life.

So it is not an intellectual intrigue with the platonic dictum that leads me to sit, but an experience of myself and my fellow humans as stimulus-bound, fundamentally out of control, alive only in reaction. I want to know, to simply observe, this living person as he is, not just as he appears while careening from event to event. Of course, this will undoubtedly be helpful to me as a psychiatrist, but my motives are more fundamental, personal, and existential.

I am interested in my mind, and in my body. Previous to my having cultivated the habit of sitting, I had thought about myself, and had used my body as a tool in the world, to grip a pen or to chop firewood, but I had never systematically, rigorously, observed my body—what it feels like, not just with a shy, fleeting glance, but moment after moment for hours and days at a time; nor had I committed myself to observe the reciprocal influence of mind and body in states of exhaustion and rest, hunger, pain, relaxation, arousal, lethargy, or concentration. My quest for knowing is not merely objective and scientific. This mind-and-body is the vessel of my life. I want to drink its nectar, and if necessary, its sludge, but I want to know it with the same organic immersion that sets a snow goose flying ten thousand miles every winter and spring.

It seems to me that the forces of creation, the laws of nature, out of which this mind and body arose, must be operative in me, now, continuously, and whenever I make an effort to

observe them. The activity of creation must be the original and continuing cause of my life. I would like to know these laws, these forces, my maker, and observe, even participate, in the ongoing creation.

Newton founded modern science with his assumption that there is one continuous world, one unbroken order, one set of laws governing both earth and sky; so along with this great tradition, and along with the ancient religions of India as well, I assume that the physics of the stars is the physics of my body also. The laws of chemistry and biology, predicated on the laws of physics, are also uniform throughout nature. Since these laws operate continuously, without reserve or sanctuary, but uniformly and pervasively, I deduce that eternal, unbroken laws operate in me, created me, and create me, that my life is an expression of them continuously linked by cause and effect to all that antedated, all that follows, and all that is co-existent; and that, to the extent that I am conscious and capable of learning, a systematic study and awareness of creation's ways is available to me if I live with attention to this field.

Even if I am frequently incapable of actually observing the most basic levels of reality, at least the mental and physical phenomena that bombard me are predicated on nature's laws, and must be my laboratory to study them. I want to sing like a bird, like a human. I want to grow and rot like a tree, like a man. I want to sit with my mind and body as they cast up and swirl before me and inside me the human stuff which is made of and ordered by the matter and laws

governing galaxies and wrens.

Because the harmony in me is at once so awesome and sweet and overwhelming that I love its taste yet can barely compel myself to glimpse it, I want to sit with the great determination that I need to brush aside the fuzz of distraction, the lint of petty concerns. To sit is to know myself as an unfolding manifestation of the universals of life. A gripping, unending project. Hopefully one I can pursue even when I look into death's funnel. For me, this knowing is a great force, and a great pleasure.

## II

I sit because of, for, and with, an appreciation of daily life. The great poets sing of the omnipresent ordinary pregnant with revelation—but I know how easily and recurrently my own life yields to distraction, irritation, tunnel vision. I do not want to miss my life the way I once missed a plane at La Guardia. It may be ironic that simply to wriggle free of daydreams and worries I need a technique, a practice, a discipline, but I do; and I bow to that irony by doing what I *must* do to pry my mind off ephemeral worries, to wake to more dawns, to *see* my child unravel through his eddying transformations.

It may be contrary that I must work so hard to be at peace with myself, but I do; and I have become increasingly convinced, learning as I sit and live and sit and live, that “being at peace” is not a state of mind, but a state of mind and body. At the core of my life is a receptive drinking in. The simple beauty of things keeps flooding in to me. I live for this draught, and build my life around it. Yet it slips away. I can try to crash back through by taking dramatic journeys—to India, or to lakes at tree-line in the Rocky Mountains—but this kind of breath-taking beauty is only an interlude, a punctuation mark. It reminds me of what I intended to emphasise in my life, but like an exclamation point, it has limited use.

The clear direct sentence—the death sentence, the sentence of love—ends with a mere period. This declarative beauty is more like looking up over the slums of Montreal to see the moon wearing a pendant of Venus in 4:00 AM darkness. Not what is sought or built, but what I discover when the walls fall away. I walk alone in the autumn forest, up and down gneiss and schist hills and ridges of Vermont, and I become confused whether that intense pulsatile drumming is the “booming” of grouse wings, or my own heart, strained by the last climb. Not what excites, moves, or informs me, but the beat of recognition. The tuning fork of my life humming in response to the living world.

This receipt—like a parent accepting back a soggy, half-eaten cracker—requires, for me, a framework, a matrix in my body, that, simple as it should be, I do not simply have.

This knowing requires a bodily preparation. I sit to open my pores, skin and mind both, to the life that surrounds me, inside and outside, at least more often if not all the time, as it arrives at my doorstep. I sit to exercise the appreciative, receptive, peaceful mode of being filled up by the ordinary and inevitable. For example, the sagging floorboards in the crooked bedroom where I am a husband. Or my two-year old son, tugging one splinter at a time, to help me stack firewood in new January snow.

### III

I feel a need for a rudder, a keel, a technique, a method, a way to continue on course. I need ceaselessly increasing amounts of self-control (though not constriction, deadening, or inhibition). It seems to me that the best of human life is lived on a narrow ledge, like a bridge over a stream in Nepal, or like a trail in the Grand Canyon, between two chasms. On the one side is desire, on the other side is fear. Possibly it is because of my work as a psychiatrist, often with essentially normal people, who are none the less pushed and pulled about by their inner forces like tops, that I feel so sensitised to these faults that can send seismic shudders through apparently solid lives. But my own life has ground enough for these observations.

Sitting is, among other things, the practice of self-control. While sitting one does not get up, or move, or make that dollar, or pass that test, or receive reassurance from that phone call. But military training, or violin lessons, or medical school, are also routes to self-control in this ordering and restrictive sense. Sitting is self-control around specific values. Observation replaces all action. What is the point of committing one's life to this practice, only to spend the time with erotic daydreams, or anxious yearnings for promotion and recognition? Of course, those will happen anyway. They are part of the human make-up. Cultures would not have proliferated the ubiquitous moral codes, the Ten Commandments, if we were not so replete with ten million urges.

But moral invective, preaching, always seemed feeble to me—possibly just a measure of my wild horses and snails. I need a constantly usable, constantly renewable lens to see through my yearnings into my loves, to see through my anxieties into my faith. What is a bedrock feeling, the core of my identity, and what is a titillation that will ultimately be discarded? What characters walk in front of the mirror of my soul day after day, year after year, and who are the clowns that steal the stage for a scene?

An hour of sitting is one thing; longer periods another. Once a year, under the guidance of a teacher, I sit for ten days, all day. That kind of practice induces pain. To face pain has become a regular inescapable part of my life. It is for most people—labourers, poor, infirm, cold, infected, hungry

people throughout the world. But I have not elected sentimental, identificatory masochism. I am looking at another side of myself. While I spontaneously seek to avoid pain, a higher wisdom than knee-jerk reaction tells me that, in Socrates' words: "... pain and pleasure are never present to a man at the same instant, and yet he who pursues either is compelled to take the other; their bodies are two, but they are joined by a single head" (Phaedo).

Just how serious am I about being who I said I was? How integrated do I want to be with this screaming body that has to be fed, slept, positioned just right, or it howls unbearably? I sit because I know I need a self-control that does not lecture or stomp on my tendencies, but reorganises desire into love, and pain and fear into faith.

## IV

As I understand it, love is not an emotion, but an organisation of emotions. It is not a room, but a dwelling; not a bird, but a migratory flyway. It is a structure of emotions, a meta-emotion. This is in contrast to love understood as a sentimental gush of attachment or as romantic sexuality. Sitting has helped me to find love, to live by love, or at least, to live more by love. It has helped me come alive as a husband, father, psychiatrist, and citizen,

within the bounds of my character and capabilities. It pried me open beyond either my previous sentimental position or my rational moral knowledge and has given me a tool, a practice, an activity expressive of love. For me it is both crowbar and glue.

As Erik Erikson has written, it is only “ambivalence that makes love meaningful—or possible.” In other words, it is only because we are both separate, and united, that love exists. If we had no individual existence, no personal drives, there would be merely the homogeneous glob of the world, devoid of emotion, unknowing, like a finger on an arm. Yet if we were irreconcilably separate there would only be self-maintaining cold stars co-existing in dead space. I understand love to mean the organisation of human emotions into those complex states where separation and merging, individuality and immersion, self and selflessness paradoxically co-exist. Only an individual can love; and only one who has ceased to be one can love. Sitting has helped me develop both these poles. It breaks me open where I get stuck; and where I fall off as a chip, it sticks me back on to the main piece.

Sitting pushes me to the limit of my self-directed effort; it mobilises my willed, committed direction, yet it also shatters my self-protective, self-defining manoeuvres and my simple self-definition. It both builds and dismantles “me.” Every memory, every hope, every yearning, every fear floods in. I no longer can pretend to be one selected set of my memories or traits.

If observed, but not reacted upon, all these psychic contents become acceptable, obviously part of myself (for there they are in my own mind, right in front of me): yet also impersonal, causally—linked, objective phenomena-in-the-world, that move ceaselessly, relentlessly, across the screen of my existence, without my effort, without my control, without *me*. I can see more, tolerate more, in my inner life, at the same time that I am less driven by these forces. Like storms and doves, they are the personae of nature, crossing one inner sky. Psychic complexity swirls up from the dust of cosmetic self-definition. At the same time, the determination and endurance I have to muster to just observe, grow like muscles with exercise. Naturally the repetition of this mixture of tolerance and firmness extrapolates beyond its source in sitting, out to relationships.

There is little I have heard from others—and it is my daily business to hear—that I have not seen in myself as I sit. But I also know the necessity of work, training, and restraint. Dependence, loneliness, sensuality, exhaustion, hunger, petulance, perversion, miserliness, yearning, inflation are my old friends. I can greet them openly and warmly in people close to me, both because I know them from the inside and therefore cannot condemn them without condemning myself; and also because I have been learning to harness and ride their energy. To love, I try to hold the complex reality of myself at the same time that I try to catch the complex reality of another.

I have known my wife for twelve years. We have dated and

swam, married and fought, travelled, built cabins, bought houses, delivered and diapered together; in short, we have attained the ordinary and ubiquitous. In a world of three billion people, this achievement ranks with literacy, and would have no bearing on why I sit, except that it does. Even the inevitable is fragile. I, we, am, and are, buffered by unshy thanks. We are sharpened by life with an edge.

I sit and life moves through me, my married life too. This sphere also takes its turn before my solitary, impeachable witness to my own existence and its eternal entanglements. As a married man, I sit as if in a harbour from my selfish pettiness, where the winds of my annoyance or anger have time to pass; I sit as a recipient of a generous outpouring of warmth that I have time to savour; I sit as a squash or pumpkin with his own slightly fibrous and only moderately sweet but nonetheless ample life to lay on someone else's table; I sit as one oxen in a team pulling a cart filled with rocking horses, cars, and porches that need paint; I sit knowing myself as a sick old man of the future awaiting the one person who can really attend, or as the future one whose voice alone can wave death back behind someone else's hospital curtain for another hour; I sit as a common man of common desire, and as a dreamer who with the bricks of shared fate is building a common dream; and I sit alone in my own life anyway.

How fortunate to have this cave, this sanctuary, this frying pan, this rock, and this mirror of sitting, in which to forge, drop, haul, touch, release my love, and not get lost. To sit is

the compass by which I navigate the seas of married love. It is also the string by which I trip up the fox on his way to the chicken coop. To love is a deep yearning and hard work. It cannot be done alone! There are many ways to receive help, and many ways to give it. Martin Buber says that men and women cannot love without a third point to form a stable triangle: a god, task, calling, or meaning beyond their dyadic individuality. What about two who just know the pole star?

There is a joke in "Peanuts": "I love mankind. It's just people that I hate." I think love is concrete and abstract. If it is only an amorphous generalised feeling, it remains a platitude, a wish, a defence against real entanglement. This is what sounds hollow in the pious, sanctimonious "love" of some churches and martyrs. But if love is only concrete, immediate, personal, it remains in the realm of possession, privatism, materialism, narcissism. This is the paternalistic love a person has for his house, cars, family. My understanding is that actual love expands outward in both spheres. Riding the wings of the ideal, it sweeps up and carries along those who are encountered.

I sit to better love my wife, and those friends and companions with whom I share even a day's journey on my flight from the unknown to the unknown. It is difficult to love the one with whom my fate is most closely entangled during those moments when I would like to batter down the corridors of that fate. But it is easy to love her when we sweeten each other's tea. It is easy to feel affection for

friends I encounter on weekends devoted to family life and outdoor play; it is difficult to let our lives, our health and finances, entangle. Such an embrace threatens private safety. And it is more difficult still to try to place this way of being, first among all others, and risk myself over and over again.

Shall I keep all my money, or risk it on a charitable principle? Shall I study the text sanctioned by the authorities, or sing out from my heart? When I sit, money does me little good; approval evaporates; but the tone of the strings of my heart, for better or worse, is inescapable. I sit to tie myself to the mast, to hear more of the song of elusive and unavoidable love.

## V

A baby looks fragile, but if you neglect his meal or hold him the wrong way, your eardrums will have to reckon with an awesome wrath! Anger springs from and participates in the primary survival instinct of the organism. Yet how much trouble it causes us in daily life, not to mention large-scale social relations! Probably the height of inanity would be to sit, angry. What is the point of such impotent stewing?

I sit to grow up, to be a better person, to see trivial angers rise up and pass away, arguments on which I put great

weight on Thursday morning fade by Thursday noon; and to be compelled to re-order, re-structure, re-think my life, so that, living well, my petty anger is orchestrated ahead of time into flexibility, co-operation, or the capacity to see other viewpoints. Sitting helps me to transcend the irritable, petulant infant in me.

But that only solves the periphery of the problem. I am no longer angry about my diapers. I am angry that my votes and taxes have been turned to oppressing other nations; I am angry that I will be judged for the rest of my life by multiple choice exams; I am angry that research is ignored and dogma is used to coerce one religion's point of view: I am angry that mountains are scoured for energy to manufacture throw-away soda cans. I sit also, then, to express my anger, and the form of expression is determination. I sit with force, will, and, when the pain mounts, something that feels fierce. Sitting helps me harness authentic anger.

I have been sitting at least fifteen hours a week for nine years, and when, as often happens, I am asked how I find the time, I know that part of the certainty in my aim is an anger that will not allow the rolling woodlands and hilltop pastures of my psyche to be bulldozed by T.V., non-nutritional food, fabricated news, tweed socialisation, pedantic file-cabinets of knowledge, or loyalty rallies to leaders, states, gods, and licensures. The voices of the herd will not so easily drive me from my forest cabin of deeply considered autonomy and honest talk, because I have had

practice in this sort of firmness. A child's anger is the kindling of adult will. I can stay true to myself yet mature, be willed but not willful, by sitting in the spirit of Woody Guthrie's song: "Don't you push me, push me, push me, don't you push me down!"

## VI

As I understand it, the lifelong disciplined practice of sitting is not exactly religion, but is not not a religion either. For myself, I am not bound to scriptures, dogma, hierarchies; I have taken no proscriptions on my intelligence, or on my political autonomy; nor have I hidden from unpleasant realities by concretizing myth. But I have become increasingly aware of the inextricable role of faith in my practice.

The faith I have been discovering in myself is not blind, irrational, unsubstantiated, or wishful ideas. Following the definitive clarification of these English terms by Paul Tillich, I would call those former "beliefs." I hope sitting has helped me to free myself from my beliefs even further than my scientific education did. Nor does faith mean what I live for—goals, personal preferences, commitments, and loves. These are ideals, visions, tastes—very important—but not faith. Faith is what I *live by*, what empowers my life. The

battery, the heart-pump, of my being. It is not the other shore, but the boat. It is not what I know, but how I know. It is present, rather than past or future, and is my most authentic, total reaction, a gut reaction deeper than my guts. Tillich defined faith as a person's ultimate concern—the bedrock of what we in fact take seriously. I would like to describe faith, as I have found it, to be the hunger of my existence.

Hunger springs up from my body. It antedates my mental and psychological life, and can even run havoc over them. I do not eat because of what I believe or hope or wish for, or because of what an authority prescribes or what I read. I eat because I am hungry. My body is a dynamic, metabolising system, an energy exchanger, constantly incorporating, re-working, re-moulding—this is the vitality intrinsic to the life of any oak, deer, or human. This being I am consumes, re-works, then creates more emotional, spiritual life. Not what I digest, but the ordered process in me that gives coherence and direction to this continuous organism, constitutes faith.

Faith is not something I have (e. g. "I believe!"); it is something that I realise has already been given to me, on which the sense of "me" is predicated. I find it or receive it, not once, but intermittently and continuously. It is not a set of thoughts, and it provides no concrete, reducible answers. Who am I? What is this life? Where does it come from? Where is it headed? I don't know. On these important questions, I have no beliefs. Yet no day has shaken this strange bird from his perch!

I sit with impassioned neutrality. Why? This activity is not *in order to get* answers with which to live my life. It *is* my life. Bones are not in order to hang skin and muscle on. (In scientific thought, too, teleology—goal-directed thinking—leads nowhere. Who knows the goal of the universe? Then what is the goal of any part of it?) I eat, I read, I work, I play, I sit. If I have no big intellectual belief by which I can justify my day, myself, my life, my supertime, I eat anyway! Usually with pleasure.

I am neither an existentialist, a Marxist, nor an anorectic. Hunger is a spontaneous action of life in me. The hunger of my existence also demands sustenance daily. The nourishment I take becomes my body; the sustenance I take becomes my being. To be alive, to be alert, to be observant, to be at peace with myself and all others—vibrating in ceaseless change—unmoving: I find this is my sustaining passage through the incandescent world doing the same.

As a scientific fact, I know I am alive only inside the body of life. Physically, I am aware of myself as a product of other lives—parents, ancestors. I breathe the oxygen created by plants, so that, as I breathe in and out, I am a tube connected to the whole life of the biosphere, a tiny, dependent digit. Through digestion and metabolism I biotransform the organic molecules created by plants and animals, which I call food, into other biochemicals with which I mould this form called my body, which is constantly, continuously being re-moulded, re-formed, like a cloud. And this form will eventually cease its regeneration and vanish, as it arose,

from causes, forces in nature.

It is easy for me to comprehend this description of physical reality, which is so obvious and scientific. But my person, my psychological reality, is also a product of causes: things I have been taught, experiences I have had, cultural beliefs, social forces. This uninterrupted web of causality—physical, biological, psychological, cultural—connecting from past to future, and out across contemporaneousness, is the ocean in which the bubble of my life briefly floats. Death must be inevitable for such an ephemeral bubble. Yet while it is here, I can feel how vital is this breathing, pulsating being, alive, resonant in exchange with past and future, people and things—creator, transducer, knower, taut node in the web, message in the synaptic mind of creation.

The faith that underlies my practice is not in my mind, but is the psychological correlate of animation. I experience faith not as a thought, but as the overwhelming mood which drives this thrust upward of emerging. By sitting I can know, assume, become, this direct hum of energy. Retrospectively, verbally, I call this “faith.” When I am bored, pained, lazy, distracted, worried, I find myself sitting anyway, not because I believe it is good, or will get me into heaven, nor because I have particular will power. My life is expressing its trajectory. All mass is energy, Einstein showed. My life is glowing, and I sit in the light.

## VII

Sitting enabled me to see, and compelled me to acknowledge, the role that death had already played, and still continues to play, in my life. Every living creature knows that the sum total of its pulsations is limited. As a child I wondered: Where was I before I was born? Where will I be after I die? How long is forever and when does it end? The high school student of history knew that every hero died; I saw the colours of empires wash back and forth over the maps in the books like tides. (Not me!) Where can I turn that impermanence is not the law? I try to hide from this as well as I can, behind my youth (already wrinkling, first around the eyes, and greying), and health insurance: but no hideout works.

Every day ends with darkness; things must get done today or they will not happen at all. And, funny, rather than sapping my appetite, producing “nausea” (which may be due to rich French sauces rather than real philosophy), the pressure of nightfall helps me to treasure life. Isn’t this the most universal human observation and counsel? I aim each swing of the maul more accurately at the cracks in the oak cordwood I am splitting. I choose each book I read with precision and reason. I hear the call to care for and love my child and the forest trails that I maintain as a pure ringing note of mandate. I sit at the dawn of day and day passes.

Another dawn, but the series is limited, so I swear in my inner chamber I will not miss a day.

Sitting rivets me on the psychological fact that death is life's door. No power can save me. Because I am aware of death, and afraid. I lean my shoulder into living not automatically and reactively, like an animal, nor passively and pleadingly, like a child pretending he has a father watching over him, but with conscious choice and decision of what will constitute each fleeting moment of my life. I know that my petals cup a volatile radiance.

But to keep this in mind in turn requires that an ordinary escapist constantly re-encounters the limit, the metronome of appreciation, death.

I sit because knowing I will die enriches, and excoriates my life, so I have to go out of my way to seek discipline and the stability that is necessary for me to really face it. To embrace life I must shake hands with death. For this, I need practice. Each act of sitting is a dying to outward activity, a relinquishment of distraction, a cessation of anticipatory gratification. It is life now, as it is. Some day this austere focus will come in very, very handy. It already has.

## VIII

I sit to be myself, independent of my own or others' judgements. Many years of my life were spent being rated, primarily in school, but, as an extension of that, among friends and in social life. As much as I tried to fight off this form of addiction, I got hooked anyway. As often happens, out of their concern for me, my parents combed and brushed me with the rules of comparison: I was good at this, or not good, or as good, or better, or worse, or the best, or no good at all.

Today I find that sitting reveals the absurdity of comparative achievement. My life consists of what I actually live, not the evaluations that float above it. Sitting enables me to slip beyond that second, commenting, editor's mind, and to burrow in deep towards immediate reality. I have made progress in becoming a mole, an empty knapsack, a boy on a day when school is cancelled. What is there to gain or lose as I sit? Who can I beat, who can I scramble after? Just this one concrete day, all this, and only this, comes to me on the tray of morning, flashes out now.

I am relieved to be more at home in myself, with myself. I complain less. I can lose discussions, hopes, or self-expectations, more easily and much less often, because the talking, hoping, and doing is victory enough already. Without props or toys or comfort, without control of the environment, I have sat and observed who I am when there was no one and nothing to give me clues. It has happened that I have sat, asked for nothing, needed nothing, and felt full. Now my spine and hands have a different turgor.

When I am thrown off balance, I can fall somewhat more like a cat than like a two-by-four. When I sit, no one—beloved or enemy—can give me what I lack, or take away what I am.

So as I live all day, I can orient myself into becoming the person I will have to live with when I next sit. No one else's commentary of praise or blame can mediate my own confrontation with the observed facts of who I am. I'm not as bad as I thought I was—and worse. But I'm definitely sprouting and real. It's a pleasure to relinquish yearning and fighting back, and to permit ripples. And I sit to share companionship with other spring bulbs. I feel like one leaf in a deciduous forest: specific, small, fragile, all alone with my fate, yet shaking in a vast and murmuring company.

## IX

Sitting is a response to, and an expression of, my social and historical conditions. Although I practise an ancient way that has been passed on from person to person for two and a half millennia and must be useful and meaningful wider a variety of conditions, I sought and learned this practice for reasons particular to myself.

One of the most powerful forces that pushed my life into the

form it has taken was World War II, which ended, almost to the day, when I was born. It was a backdrop, very present in my parents' sense of the world, and in other adults around me, that left little scope for hope. Fear seemed the only rational state of mind, self-defence the only rational posture. Cultured, civilised men had just engaged in an extended, calculated, concerted sadism the scope of which is incomprehensible. Victory by goodness had brought reactive evil: nuclear weapons. The world-view I was taught and absorbed was to study hard, save my money, and build my own self-protective world, using the liberal, rational, scientific cultures as stepping-stones to an anxious fiefdom of private family life. It was only in that private space that the sweet kernel of affection and idealistic aspiration could be unveiled. I did that well, and to some extent it worked.

Yet at the same time, I had been guided to, and later chose to, spend my summers in the woods, learning about white-tailed deer, mosquitoes, freedom, and canoes, surrounded, it seemed, by a primal monistic goodness that I located in nature and those who lived close to it. I read Thoreau the way many people read the Bible. The world of cold streams running under shady hemlocks, and its ecstatic prophets, seemed an antidote to the haunted, dull, convention-bound, anxious lives of my immediate environment. Moving between these two worlds, I learned a dialogue of terror and ecstasy, survivorship and care, that filled me with an urgency to find the middle way.

This motivated a search that led through intense intellectual

exploration in college, medical school, and psychiatric training, and finally to the art of “sitting,” as taught by S. N. Goenka, a Vipassanā meditation teacher from whom my wife and I first took a course near New Delhi in 1974. Those ten days of nothing but focusing on the moment by moment reality of body and mind, with awareness and equanimity, gave me the opportunity ironically both to be more absolutely alone and isolated than I had ever been before, and at the same time to cast my lot with a tradition, a way, as upheld, manifested, explained, and transmitted by a living person. I am continuously grateful to Goenka for the receipt of this technique.

Vipassanā meditation was preserved in Asia for two thousand five hundred years since its discovery by Gotama, the historical Buddha. His technique of living was labelled, by western scholars, “Buddhism,” but it is not an “ism,” a system of thought. It is a practice, a method, a tool of living persons. It does not end its practitioner’s search. For me, it provides a compass, a spy glass, a map for further journeys. With daily practice, and intensive retreats mixed into the years, I find the marriage of autonomy and heritage, membership and lonely continuity.

Vipassanā is the binoculars—now I can search for the elusive bird.

Before I received instructions in how to sit, my journey through life was predominantly intellectual. I had found lectures and books to be inspiring, suggestive, artful, but

evasive. One could advise, one could talk, one could write. But sitting is a way for me to stand for something, to sit as something, not just with words, but with my mind, body, and life. Here is a way to descend by stages, protected by teacher, teaching, technique, and practice, into the light and darkness in me, the Hitler and Buddha in me, the frightened child of a holocaust world riding a slow bus in winter through dark city streets, and the striding, backpacking youth wandering through sunlight cathedrals of Douglas fir, who, shouting or whimpering, spans the vocabulary of human potentials from sadism to love.

I now can see that I carry the whip and boots of the torturer, I suffer with the naked, I drink from mountain streams with poets and explorers. All these lives live *in* me. And I find ways, often covert and symbolic, to express these psychological potentials in me as overt actions in my daily life. Everything I am springs from the universally human. I cause myself, I express myself, as the conditions of the world roll through me. I see this fact, as I sit, as clearly as I see the impact of history and the inspiration of vision. I sit in clear confrontation with everything that has impinged on me and caused me to react, and in reacting, I mould myself.

Life begins in a welter of conditions; mere reactions to these conditions forge limitations; awareness of and conscious response to conditions produces freedom. This clarity regarding my choices enables me to return from sitting to action as a more focused, concentrated vector of knowing, empathic life.

Sitting itself transforms my motives for sitting. I started in my own historical circumstances, but I was given a technique that has been useful in millions of circumstances over thousands of years. I started with personal issues, and I have been given timeless perspectives to broaden my viewpoint. My search is particular, but not unique. The transmission of this tool has made my work possible. Because others have launched the quest for a fully human life, because others will follow, my own frailty, or villainy, can become meaningful, because these are the soil which I must use to grow. And my own efforts, however great they feel to me, are in the shadow of the much greater efforts of others.

I can flower as one shrub in a limitless forest of unending cycles of life. To flower, for a human being, is to work on the science of honest observation that enables a true picture of humanity to be born. Even coming from my conditioning of nihilism and dread, without the comfort of simple beliefs, aware of awesome human evil and hatred, of wars that kill decamillions, I can be, I will be, an expression of contentless faith. I cannot be much but I can root deep into what is true, how to see it, and how to pass it on.

In response to the overwhelming sense of evil, fear, meaninglessness, and paranoid privatism of my times, and in response to the hope, idealism, and pregnant sense of eternity of my youth, I learned to sit, to better stand for what I found most true. This helps me live out what had before been an unconscious faith. It helps me express

something healing, useful (in both my personal and professional life), and meaningful to me despite apparently absurd conditions, because it is a link to the universal. It puts me in touch with the fundamentally human that is present in every gesture of mine, and every action of other people, in each immediacy. This in turn has enabled me to join with the generative dance of nature. I practise knowing myself, and make that the workshop of the day. I refrain from measuring events by my own inchworm life. I frequently forget time, and so join history.

## X

I sit in solitude to lose my isolation. What is least noble in me rises up to the surface of my mind, and this drives me on to be more than I was. When I am most shut into my dark self I find the real source of my belonging.

Freud claimed that the bedrock of human fear is castration anxiety. This, he felt, is more feared than death itself. I understand castration anxiety to mean physical pain, bodily mutilation, and social isolation, ostracism, loss of membership, generativity, continuity in the cycle of generations. The two greatest difficulties I have, in fact, faced while sitting for extended hours or days are physical pain, and the loss of the social position that I had previously

seemed headed for and entitled to in the community of men. Pain that starts in the knees or back can flood the whole body and burn on and on. The self-protection of calculated membership, and its comfortable rewards, are lost to me in those aching, endless hours.

I imagine my other options: a better house, winter vacations in the tropics, the respect of colleagues listening to me speak as I climb the career ladder. I imagine the financial crises I am less prepared to withstand. I imagine the humiliating rejection that crushes the refugee from poverty or racism or any form of powerlessness, all of which are in my heritage and possibly in my future (and in anyone's heritage or future if you look far enough). Why do I sit there? A thrush hops onto a low limb at the edge of a wooded clearing and shatters the Vermont evening with triumphant song.

Knowing yet staying, I am an inheritor and transmitter, flooded with gifts from those who loved and left their trace; and this still, glowing, posture is the song of my species.

Sitting helps me overcome my deepest fears. I become freer to live from my heart, and to face the consequences, but also to reap the rewards of this authenticity. Much of what I called pain was really loneliness and fear. It passes, dissolves, with that observation. The vibrations of my body are humming the song that can be heard only when dawn and dusk are simultaneous, instantaneous, continuous. I feel a burst of stern effort is a small price to pay to hear this inner music—fertile music from the heart of life itself.

It has been my fortune along the way to find and follow an older brother who, like a long unobserved mushroom, no longer can be shaken from the stump because his roots have reached the heartwood. From him I have caught a glimmer of two lights: devotion and integrity. And it has been an extra pleasure—and sometimes I think a necessity—to be able to sit beside my wife. Even the stars move in constellations.

## XI

I sit to find mental freedom. I was lucky to be able to think rationally, logically, scientifically, in a culture where focused, aggressive thought is the sword of survival. But even Reason's greatest apologist, Socrates, balanced himself with equal reverence for mythopoetic knowing. In fact, many Socratic dialogues point towards the limits of logic and the essential role of myth. As I sit, a million thoughts cross my mind, but, in keeping with the traditions passed on from ancient India's great teachers, I attempt to let all of them go, to let them pass like clouds, like water, like time. Needless to say, I often get caught and find myself spinning around one point like a kite trapped by the uppermost twig. But eventually boredom, exhaustion, will-power, or insight—the wind—spins me free and I'm off again.

Sitting gives me a way back to fluctuant, pre-formed mind, the pregnant atmosphere in which metaphor, intuition, and reason are sparks. Surrounded by a culture of intellectual conquest, I have a preserve of wholeness, a sanctuary in which the wild deer of poetry and song can slip in and out among the trunks of medical cases and conferences. In this sense, sitting is also a nag, tattletale, a wagging finger, reminding me, as well as enabling me. I've got to return to the potential, because any one tack is just a shifting situational response to the origin—less wind.

## XII

I sit to anchor my life in certain moods, organise my life around my heart and mind, and to radiate out to others what I find. Though I shake in strong winds, I return to this basic way of living. I can't throw away my boy's ideals and my old man's smile. The easy, soothing comfort and deep relaxation that accompany intense awareness in stillness, peel my life like an onion to deeper layers of truth, which in turn are scoured and soothed until the next layer opens. I sit to discipline my life by what is clear, simple, self—fulfilling, and universal in my heart. There is no end to this job. I have failed to really live many days of my life, but I dive again and again into the plain guidance of self-containment and

loving receipt. I sit to find and express simple human love  
and common decency.

# About the Author

Paul R. Fleischman was born in Newark, New Jersey, U.S.A., in 1945. He graduated from the University of Chicago in 1967, and from the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in 1971, and trained in Psychiatry at Yale University from 1971 to 1974. On a travel fellowship during medical school he visited India to study Ayurveda, and first began meditation practice. He returned to India in 1974, started Vipassanā meditation under the teaching of S. N. Goenka, and has continued to the present day. He currently practises psychiatry in Amherst, Massachusetts, and teaches Psychiatry and Religion in the Department of Psychiatry at the Yale University School of Medicine. His articles have appeared in the *Yale Review*, the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, the *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, *Nature*, *Landscape*, etc. A book, *The Healing Zone: Religious Issues in Psychotherapy* (Paragon House, New York), was published in 1989. He is married to actress and storyteller Susan Fleischman, and they have a son, Forrest.

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