

## Adapting Eastern Spiritual Teachings to our Western Culture: A discussion with Shinzen Young

Charles T. Tart

University of California  
Davis, California 95616 and  
Institute of Noetic Sciences  
Sausalito, California 94965

(1990, Journal of Transpersonal Psychology.)

Reprinted from Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, 1990, 22, 149-165. 1990 (see detail)

### Abstract

Eastern spiritual teachings about mindfulness and enlightenment are important sources of stimulation, methodologies and concepts to our emerging discipline of transpersonal psychology. These are embedded in a cultural matrix, however, that makes understanding and transfer of the essence difficult. The author discusses this problem of adaptation with a Western meditation teacher well trained in the Eastern methods, Shinzen Young, who had deliberately adapted Eastern methods and concepts to Western culture. Factors important in his adaptation included egalitarianism vs. hierarchy, de-emphasize of doctrine in favor of practical meditation technology, drawing key understandings out of Western students' experiences as opposed to directly teaching them, using Western scientific and psychological terminology to effectively evoke responses in Westerners, and placing the Eastern methods in the broader context of the world mystical tradition. The importance of reinforcement of practice through interpersonal networks is discussed, as well as relations between psychotherapy and meditation, including a form of one-on-one meditation counseling which has been especially effective in teaching meditation skills.

### Article

"The desire of intelligent seekers in the West today is for a balanced doctrine and practical technique which will be free from all occult mystification or religious bigotry, which will satisfy the cravings of the heart and yet reconcile them with the conflicting claims of the head, and which will be suited to the needs of modern people. Is it not possible, out of the rich mystical and philosophic past of mankind and out of the creative resources of present-day human intelligence, boldly to bring to birth a comprehensive explanation of the world and a practical method of self-discovery, which can be followed by men and women who still work at their daily tasks in the world?"

-- Paul Brunton, 1987, p 56.

### Introduction

As Gautama the Buddha emphasized, a certain amount of pain in life is inevitable, but the suffering of life is typically far greater than the actual pain, and is largely

unnecessary. Suffering is our reaction to life events, an ignorant and unskillful reaction which could be controlled so as to minimize unnecessary suffering.

Why do we suffer so much, then, if we don't really need to? In his Four Noble Truths, the Buddha gave the basic causes of suffering as attached craving, attached aversion, and ignorance. By a combination of understanding the ways in which we are emotionally attached to our desires and cravings and emotionally attached to our fears and aversions, understanding these in the light of our to-be-discovered true nature, we could let go of all this unnecessary suffering and live in the inherently intelligent and compassionate nature that is our true heritage.

Why don't we do so? There are two major dimensions of this problem. First, we don't know how to really concentrate, and so we lose much of the force of the decisions and insights that we try to use to guide our life. Too many things easily divert our energies away from their intended goals. Second, we don't know how to study and observe ourselves to discover the way our mind works and our true nature. This is related to our inability to concentrate, for the ability to focus underlies the ability to observe. Thus we miss many important but delicate insights and intuitions because we haven't trained ourselves to "listen" to the quiet, rapid, more subtle levels of our mind, emotions, and body.

Concentrative meditation, where you learn to focus steadily on a selected aspect of experience, and insight meditation, where you learn to observe the rapid flow of experience in its totality, without becoming lost in limited aspects of it, are very useful in improving the quality of our ordinary lives. They have an even more important function of taking us beyond our ordinary selves and lives.

I had practiced various forms of meditation off and on for many years, but, like many Westerners, had never been very successful at it. I sometimes half-jokingly (and sadly) described myself as an expert on the difficulties of meditation as a result of so much experience of my mind wandering off instead of focusing! In spite of my intellectual knowledge of the importance of meditation practice, some confusion as to just what to do, and the consequent lack of results sapped my motivation, so I had not regularly practiced formal meditation for years until quite recently.

In January of 1986 I was fortunate to meet a remarkable man, Shinzen Young. The occasion was the First Archaeus Congress at the Pecos River Conference Center near Santa Fe, New Mexico. This was one of the most exciting conferences I have ever attended. Shinzen Young's lecture on meditation and his subsequent early morning meditation practice sessions were the high point of the conference for me. He has the intellectual knowledge to bridge the gap between the Eastern meditative traditions and our modern Western minds as a result of years of graduate training in Eastern religion and philosophy. Even more importantly, he has spent years in the Orient as a student of various kinds of Buddhist practices, and so can speak from direct experience, not just conceptual knowledge. His goal is to make meditative practice a viable path for Westerners, not just an exotic import from the East.

Shinzen Young was born in Los Angeles in 1944. He became interested in Oriental culture at an early age and was fluent in both written and spoken Chinese and Japanese before he finished high school. He did graduate work in Oriental religions at the University of Wisconsin with Professor Richard Robinson, one of the leading scholars of Buddhism. While carrying out field research for his dissertation in Japan in 1970, he realized that scholarly approaches to meditation could not begin to substitute for the knowledge gained from actual practice, so he became a monk

(hence the name Shinzen) in the Shingon sect of Buddhism, a form of Vajrayana Buddhism preserved in Japan. His later studies as a monk included Zen and the Vipassana tradition.

He returned to Los Angeles in 1975 and taught meditation in the traditional manner at the International Buddhist Meditation Center. Eventually he began his experimentation in adapting the essence of Buddhism to contemporary Western culture, founding the non-sectarian Community Meditation Center of Los Angeles in 1982. He lectures extensively and leads retreats at several locations in the United States each year. He is currently on a year's personal retreat.

Shinzen Young's lecture and practice sessions changed my attitude and motivation about meditation drastically. He was so clear and lucid in explaining and in guiding meditation practice that, to my great surprise, I found myself looking forward to getting up at 5:30 each morning to meditate for an hour before breakfast! This is quite a contrast to my usual habit of waking up, getting a cup of coffee, and going back to bed with it until I feel awake.

I have continued regular meditation, of both the concentrative and insight kinds, since that conference. I would not describe myself as particularly "good" at it yet, but I am enormously better at it than I used to be, continuing to improve, and enjoying it.

I had the following discussion with Shinzen in 1990 to clarify the ways in which he had adapted classical meditative practice to make it more suitable for Westerners.

Charles T. Tart: One of the interests we share is how you take the spiritual wisdom of the East, the deep knowledge, and put it into forms that make it efficiently accessible to Westerners. Obviously people can take an attitude that "These are the traditional, sacred forms: what was good enough for the Buddha should be good enough for me. If I struggle enough maybe I'll get it." As Westerners we are concerned that some of the traditional forms may actually be almost inaccessible or misleading to people in our culture. We want to transmit deep spiritual knowledge as efficiently as possible.

You have been trained in the traditional spiritual methods in the East in considerable depth, and I know that you have had to make many modifications in these methods in your attempts to share some of what you learned with fellow Westerners. So I would like you to talk about specific steps you have taken to adapt the Eastern technology you learned, using the knowledge that's behind it, so that it will come across in a form useful for Westerners.

Shinzen Young: I remember quite clearly where the point came in my practice, in my teaching, where I made a conscious decision that I was going to start to experiment and Westernize. That was about 8 years ago.

CTT: How long had you been back?

SY: About 12 years.

I took a cue from Buddhist history itself. As you probably know, there are three cultural regions where Buddhism has spread, Southeast Asia, Eastern Asia and the Tibet-Nepal area. Within those three there is a convenient correlation between geography and history. The early form of Indian Buddhism is preserved in Southeast Asia, the middle forms went into Eastern Asia, and the later forms of Indian Buddhism went into Tibet and Nepal.

Out of the three, Southeast Asia (Theravada) and the Tibetan-Nepalese tradition (Vajrayana) pretty much represent a preservation of Indian forms. There has been, of course, some modification to fit into the cultures there, particularly in the case of Tibet. There you had the Tibetan shamanic influence, which easily combined with the Vajrayana Buddhism imported from India. But Southeast Asian Theravada and Tibeto-Nepalese Vajrayana are still basically preservations, with some amplification, of Indic forms.

In the Eastern Asian cultural area (China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, what used to be called the Far East), however, we had much more modification and change. That modification took place primarily in China. The situation Buddhism encountered in coming to China was quite different from that of either Southeast Asia or in Tibet. In the two latter cases, it came into basically tribal cultures. But China was already an ancient and distinct civilization when Buddhism was introduced there some 2,000 years ago.

At a certain period the Chinese started to Sinify the imported tradition, to make Buddhism into a Chinese form. I think that happened when the Chinese had produced enough developed meditators that they were comfortable with modifying tradition. I took a cue from that. I thought, "Buddhism coming into the West is equivalent to Buddhism coming into China: it is encountering a highly developed civilization." In fact, we have a lot of things the Chinese didn't have. Because the pace of cultural change here is much faster, we can expect that it's not going to take centuries, but perhaps just a few generations for Buddhism to become rather highly modified here.

CTT: Now that is a big difference isn't it? When it went into China, it went into a very stable culture. Here it's coming into a rapidly changing culture.

SY: That's correct. What took centuries in China may take just decades here. So I took my cue from that. I consciously thought about the differences between my culture of birth, American culture, and the culture of Asia, where Buddhism is now embedded.

CTT: What were some of the main differences you saw?

Factor I: Egalitarianism vs. Hierarchy

SY: First, Asian cultures are highly formal and hierarchical. American culture is quite informal and egalitarian. So I thought that a teaching style that would work here would not separate the teacher and students. You probably notice that I don't sit any higher than the students. I mean that both literally and metaphorically. That is an egalitarian kind of thing. As to informality, when I sit down to give a Dharma talk there is a chatty quality. When people come to me for interviews, they don't bow, they don't do anything in particular. There's just a couple of people sitting, talking, sharing the practice. I actively try to encourage that.

By the way, I should say before we get more detailed, that in no way do I feel that the Westernized form of Buddhism is better than the Eastern form of Buddhism. Even for Westerners. There are going to be some Westerners who really want the ambiance and the energy that goes with the traditional forms. Especially those who are drawn either toward Zen or Vajrayana are going to derive a lot from the ambiance associated with those traditions. On the other hand, there are a large number of people who

would like to get on with the work of enlightenment, and not have to have as a prerequisite for that the mastering the use of chopsticks or chanting in Sino-Japanese.

You know, you'll starve in some Zen centers unless you can use chopsticks really well!

CTT: I am reminded of a traditional story I've heard about the Buddha when he went to visit a king. The king was very interested in Buddhism and wanting to get enlightened, so the Buddha started to tell him about the rules of the monastic life. But the king said, "No, wait a minute. I like being a king, and I do the job well, and people need my services. I don't want to give up being a king." The Buddha supposedly worked out a different set of practices for someone who wants to continue being a king. That is rather parallel to the American situation in many ways: we like our rich lives.

SY: Different strokes for different folks.

So I don't think that what I'm doing in consciously westernizing traditional practice represents an improvement in any absolute sense. I wouldn't want anyone to think that I was implying that one should come to this and not go to a very traditional type setting. I think it very much depends on the individual. I know some Easterners that prefer Western teachers and many Westerners who do better with completely traditional approaches.

CTT: I think you're quite right to emphasize that point. There is a distinction in Buddhism between the absolute and the relative levels. On the absolute level, truth is truth. It is on the relative level that we may talk about the "efficiency" or the appeal of various approaches. Clearly there are individual differences, as well as cultural differences in what works best. That is very important. For some people, the traditional Eastern approach might work well. But my suspicion is that it is not the way for the majority of us Westerners.

Factor II: Practicality Without Doctrine

SY: A second deliberate adaptation of the teachings to Western culture involved pragmatism. Westerners want things that are practical, so I decided to teach something that is simple and really works. That led me to emphasize the meditation aspects, because that is practical and gets down to the nitty-gritty.

Then I noticed that people have all sorts of belief systems in our culture. They have different religions, or may lack any religion. I wanted to develop an approach that would cut across belief systems as much as possible, so that people wouldn't think that they had to become "Buddhists" in order to do Buddhist practice.

So I boiled it down to the very basics of (a) developing concentration, and (b) of using this concentration ability to observe. This is something that a person with any belief system can benefit from. So what I teach is practical and without a big emphasis on doctrine.

I am quite aware that some people would say that this approach is pretty dangerous because the belief system is related to the experiences that you have. They would argue that people should be indoctrinated into a Buddhist belief system if they are going to practice Buddhist type meditation. I think it is a judgment call. I just decided that I was going to de-emphasize doctrine and see how that worked, experiment with it.

CTT: Let me push you a little bit on that. From my research on altered states of consciousness, it is quite clear that the influences brought to bear on a person in an altered state can be extremely important in shaping the content of the experience. Not absolutely: some experiences have a certain inherent quality and content in and of themselves. But the set, the setting, the events of the moment and, particularly, the belief systems and expectations the person brings to the experience can have tremendous shaping influence when their consciousness shifts into a different mode.

So let me make the traditional argument even more forcefully: perhaps there is something inherently dangerous about shaking loose our ordinary habit patterns, our ordinary mental moorings and opening people up to many other possibilities unless you have already given them a quite thorough belief system, a set of expectations designed to make certain desirable events highly probable. Perhaps meditation will induce or reinforce quite negative things in people if their expectations have not been set up to protect them. So perhaps you are doing something dangerous by not being sure that people are thorough believers in a Buddhist view. I'm thinking particularly about the morality inherent in Buddhism as a religion as an important protective element.

SY: In point of fact, it is a relative, not an absolute de-emphasize of the formal belief system in my teaching. There has to be some appropriate belief structure in a person as a foundation for meditation. I deliberately picked what I consider to be the minimal belief structure necessary, but one that would be sufficient to keep a person out of trouble. What that boils down to is that I describe the entire path, everything that we will do, in terms of four aspects or practices. We might call them (1) character development, (2) concentration development, (3) insight through observation, and (4) the development of habitual loving kindness.

I would argue that it does not take a conversion experience, a great leap of faith, or abandoning your present belief system to see the value of these four practices. As for the morality, I do not go into great detail. I just tell people that basic morality is not to take life, not to take what is not given, not to lie, not to do sexual practices that are harmful to people, and that the basis of Buddhist morality is not to harm others. That's that. Everybody believes in these basic precepts, more or less!

No one can argue with the value of having a focused mind, as opposed to having an unfocused mind, even for the achievement of secular tasks. Then I say that as the person tunes his or her focused mind towards ordinary experience, insights will begin to come. Negativities will also come up; these should simply be observed until their force dies away. That leads to an natural state of love and good will. Well, what I've just presented to you is a belief system, but it is so universal and so minimal that just about everybody, from a Marxist to a Moslem should be able to accept that.

CTT: I could ask for more depth on this but let me bring you back. You were describing the important differences between our culture and Eastern ones. What are some others?

SY: OK, let me review a moment. The first thing I decided to do was to make the teachings informal and egalitarian. The second was to minimize doctrine so as to get the broadest possible base, to be practical. The most practical thing in Buddhism is meditation.

I should also say this: Buddhism is rather unique in the world's spiritual traditions in that it is the only religion in which you do not have to buy the whole package. If you become a Moslem, for example, it means you buy the whole Moslem package, the whole belief system. Buddhism encourages people to take whatever works for them. For example, somebody may see the value of developing concentration or compassion but may find it impossible to believe in many lives, rebirth. All traditional Buddhists believe in reincarnation, and the Buddha himself definitely believed it, but if a person does not believe it, they can still take other parts of Buddhism, like the concentration and compassion, and use those, and that is fine. As experience grows, one may want to buy more of the package.

Buddhism may not be a religion in the usual sense of the word. Buddhism is more like a medicine, I would say, than a religion. It is something with a practical goal, the relief of suffering.

Also, Buddha is the only major spiritual figure who denied the role of authority per se, including his own authority. He said you should accept something because it is logical to you or it agrees with your direct experience and you have found it useful. You do not have to accept it because it is in some old book, or even because he, the Buddha, said it. There is a very famous sutra (scripture) the discourse to the Kalamas, where he talks about that.

CTT: Yes, there was an excellent translation of that sutra in a recent issue of Inquiring Mind:

"Do not believe in anything simply because you have heard it.  
Do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down for many generations.  
Do not believe in anything because it is spoken and rumored by many.  
Do not believe in anything simply because it is found written in your religious books.  
Do not believe in anything merely on the authority of your teachers and elders.  
But after observation and analysis, when you find that anything agrees with reason, and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it."

SY: Creativity and experimentation are what I find most exciting in the teaching of meditation. The Buddhist tradition gives me permission to do this. I am in no hurry, I will be spending the next several decades exploring this. Every retreat I lead is a little different. I keep questioning. What techniques will bring the deepest experience to the most people in this culture?

CTT: Can you flesh that out by giving a couple of examples of traditional techniques you had learned in Eastern culture that turned out not to work well? And then a couple of techniques that you have modified through experimentation to a form that you have found does seem to work well?

SY: I have to think what would be representative in that way.

CTT: I almost started to tease you by saying "Remember your failures as well as your successes," but, actually, once you are in the experimental mode, there are no "failures." You experiment to find out what happens. If you try certain techniques and they do not produce much in the way of results, that is new knowledge that you have gained. In principle, that is just as useful as finding you get results from some other sorts of techniques. I think of this experimental mode as quite Western, but perhaps

when Buddhism was first introduced into China that experimental mode was quite popular for a while. But then, once some techniques that seemed to work well had been found, experimentation probably largely died out and Buddhism got more tradition bound. Anyway, what did you find?

Factor III: Don't Push Concepts, Draw Out Experience

SY: OK, here is an example. When I first started to teach, I would have people meditate, having them observe some aspect of experience like their body sensations. This is basic Vipassana practice. Then I would ask them to try to see how it was all impermanent, insubstantial, that there was no ego inside of it. You could take any aspect of experience and I would say, "Look real carefully, you'll see this is impermanent, empty, and there is no self inside it. It is just happening, a spontaneous event in nature."

Impermanence and emptiness are very fundamental insights in Buddhism. But people would just sort of look at me; it would go in one ear and out the other. I would say, "Can't you see? It is all impermanent; it's constantly changing." It did not register too well.

I changed strategy. I would say "Now, I would like you to observe the sensations in the body very carefully. Note each time there is any fluctuation in the sensation. For example, it might change its shape or its intensity or its flavor or quality. Each time that happens I would like you to mentally note the fact that a change has taken place. Every single time." Then they would sit down and pretty soon they would be noting "Change, change, change" Eventually my students would say, "Gee, its constantly changing. There's nothing solid there at all!"

So what I discovered was that if I asked people to look for certain things, traditional Buddhist concepts, I wouldn't get the results. If I gave a valanced, biased description, where I said "Can't you see that it is this as opposed to that?", people wouldn't see it. But if I did it without an agenda, then people got it right away.

When I teach someone or when I want to guide someone in meditation, I have a whole agenda inside myself, a whole planned sequence of experiences I am going to take that person through. But when I present the practice, I give no hint whatsoever that there is any experience preferable to any other. It took me quite a while to develop that completely unbiased language, that draws the experience out of the person. That is an example of an important result of my experimentation.

CTT: That is a particularly interesting example for me. For years, every once in a while during meditation, I have looked for impermanence and I have never found it. What I suspect is that impermanence is not a distinct experience per se; "impermanence" is a concept you use to describe a general theory about reality based on the actual experience of observing continual change. You can see continual change, but you can't see impermanence.

SY: Yes. That is all that impermanence means.

CTT: When I look for impermanence, it is like I can look for a sensation in my knee or my neck or my heart, and then I am looking for a sensation I call impermanence, but I can't seem to find that one. There is a big cultural difference here. Easterners in a Buddhist culture are exposed to the idea of impermanence from birth, but we are not

exposed to that, and it is difficult for us to grasp. In fact, I have always tended to take it personally: I must not be meditating correctly if I can't experience impermanence.

#### Factor IV: Terminology

SY: There is another specific way that I consciously decided to Westernize the practice, again taking a hint from what happened to Buddhism in China. When Buddhism came into China, it interfaced with the native Chinese systems that already existed there, Confucianism and Taoism. Of those two, Confucianism and Taoism, the one closest to Buddhism would be Taoism. In particular, Taoist spiritual terms were used to express Buddhist concepts. That was not always completely successful, but it did help in some ways.

I can give you an interesting historical example. It is said that the Buddha attained "enlightenment." The actual Sanskrit word, bodhi, means "awakening." Bodhi is not just any awakening; it is a really big awakening.

Although there are words in Chinese that mean awakening, and early Chinese Buddhists sometimes used those for bodhi, they needed a term that would convey the absolute nature of bodhi. So they translated "The Buddha attained bodhi" into Chinese as "The Buddha attaining the tao." This is the Taoist word for the ultimate, the way, the path.

The place where a Buddha sits when he or she attains enlightenment is called "bodhi mandala," or the circle of awakening. This was translated into Chinese as "tao-ch'ang." By extension, in China Buddhist temples were called tao-ch'ang and in Japan, by a further extension, the term was applied to places for martial arts training. In Sino-Japanese pronunciation the two characters are read dojo.

So dojo, a word which is now known by anybody who does judo or karate or Aikido, is actually a Japanese extension of a Chinese term to include a place of martial arts training, not just mental or spiritual training. But that Chinese term, tao-ch'ang, contains within it a little bit of the history of the Sinification of Buddhist vocabulary in China. Properly, that is one of the reasons why the attitude of respect is so strong in martial arts dojos, why you bow when you go into a dojo. There is still some memory of what that word literally means, that this is a place of enlightenment.

If Buddhism found that it was convenient to cloak itself or express itself in Taoist vocabulary to reach the Chinese masses, what vocabulary should I draw upon in the West? What is comparable? Well, it seemed to me there were two areas. I have used them both. One is psychology and the other is the hard sciences, particularly mathematics and physics. In teaching meditation I draw heavily on the vocabulary of psychology and science. I hasten to say, however, that I am not part of the Aquarian movement that says "Oh, this proves Buddhism is true because what it teaches is so similar to what quantum physics says."

CTT: Yes, you might analyze that kind of fuzzy thinking as "I cannot really understand physics and I cannot really understand Buddhism, therefore they are the same."

SY: Better still, why is it that people who cannot understand physics or understand meditation can understand them both? This is a New Age joke! They can not understand either one separately but why can they understand both at once? There is a koan for you!

I am not trying to validate Buddhism by showing that it is similar to science. I simply point out parallel situations in science and the meditative experience to help make the meditative experience more comprehensible.

Let me give you an example of how science may provide metaphors for meditation. Physics teaches us that we may look upon events in terms of particles (things, entities) or waves (movement, process). To acknowledge only one of these viewpoints is to miss the real situation. Now consider one's "sense of self" ---the moment to moment perception of "I am." When it comes to this, most people are absolutely limited to the particulate paradigm --- self as fixed entity, separate particle. Meditation provides an alternative mode of experiencing the self, the self as a fluid process, an interactive wave.

In physics and engineering, the wave paradigm is effective in some applications, while the particle paradigm works better for others. So it is in life. Sometimes, as when planning or reflecting upon one's conduct, we must fixate the self. Other times we need to let it dissolve in order to complete and liberate the self through merging with people or objects. Furthermore, we need to be able to rapidly shift between these two modes of self many times during the day. Most people are one-sided, always experiencing self as particle, unfamiliar with self as wave. The result is suffering and incompleteness.

Before we go any further, I would like to elaborate on one other point related to the aspect of practicality. It deals with why I teach the form of meditation called Vipassana, as opposed to either Zen or Vajrayana. This was not because I felt that it was in some way superior or because Vipassana is closer to the original Buddhist traditions. I decided to teach from the Vipassana tradition because (a) it is the easiest of the traditions to divorce from its cultural trappings, and (b) it is linear and step-by-step, perhaps to a fault. Vipassana can be flow charted! I have indeed flow charted my entire procedure of teaching Vipassana, reducing the whole thing to looping and branching relationships, with standard flowchart templates.

Factor V: The Importance of Support in Practice

CTT: If I asked you what were the most important things you have learned in teaching meditation in the West, what would they be?

SY: If I were to try to distill my 15 years of experience as a meditation teacher, to report what stands out in my mind, I would emphasize two things. These are at the core of my efforts to develop an effective approach.

The first observation is this: When individuals who really want to grow and change, who really want to become free from suffering, are exposed to a presentation about how Vipassana meditation works, most of them want to pursue it. They say, "Yes, this makes sense, it is very rational, I can see how it is a step by step development. The underlying premise is consonant with my basic belief system, and it is something that I would like to do."

The great majority of people that I come in contact with, have a reaction like that. That is observation number one.

Observation number two is this: of those people, only a tiny fraction actually persevere with the practice.

What has come in between? What is the problem? I think the problem is that they do not get the constant reinforcement that they need in order to keep the practice up. They do not get it from the culture, they do not get it from their social milieu.

In the past, people have traditionally gone to monasteries for this kind of training. Those that do not know much about monasteries may think of a monastery as primarily a place where you go to get away from things. I think of a monastery, however, as a place you go to get reinforcement for your practice. So it seems to me that what people need, especially in the West, is a structure that is going to reinforce their initial desire to do this practice.

So how can someone involved in family and career get support even remotely comparable to that of a monastery? What I would like to see is the creation of a new kind of profession --- "meditation facilitator." This would be a kind of coach or sponsor who mentors the new meditator through the first critical year of his or her practice. The new meditator would see the facilitator on a regular appointment basis, not just to discuss practice, but also to get personalized, interactive guided meditation sessions. The facilitator would also communicate frequently by phone in order to reinforce meditation in daily life. The facilitators would be trained by senior teachers, and receive monetary compensation for their work. They would work on a sliding scale so that no one was ever denied this service because of lack of funds. This would provide a "right livelihood" for people who are on the path and would like to spend their days helping others, but are not interested in training to be psychotherapists or counselors.

Let me tell you how I got this idea.

### Psychotherapy and Meditation

A number of years ago I taught a class just for psychotherapists on meditation. I taught them meditation from three perspectives. One, a therapist, being a human being, can benefit from meditating, because any human can benefit from meditating. From that point of view, the class was not meditation for therapists but just meditation for humans.

The second perspective was the advantage for the therapist of being in a meditative state while they conduct therapy. Such a state creates the attentional focus and emotional dispassion that is a good psychological milieu.

I discovered two things as a result of teaching this perspective. For one thing, many therapists (judging from the sample of those who took my course) were already in meditation or something like a meditative state anyway, when they did their professional work. For another thing, at the very early inception of Western psychotherapy, Freud had emphasized a special, unfixated attentional state, which he called "evenly hovering awareness." He felt that it was absolutely pivotal to the success of the therapeutic process. So the advantage of a meditative state for the therapist was already known in the West, although it seems to have been downplayed after Freud. Perhaps its nature and importance were not really understood.

The third thing I taught them was that for some clients, but of course not all, could be guided by the therapist into a meditative state, talk about their issues and do their therapy in that witness state. I showed them ways of guiding clients into meditation.

One result was interesting and unanticipated. These psychologists and psychiatrists from my class started to come to me and say, "Shinzen, I would like to have a private, guided session with you? Can I make an appointment and how much do you charge?" I sort of freaked out, because I would never have thought of myself as charging for teaching meditation, or working on a weekly appointment basis. I had strong misgivings about taking money for teaching the Dharma. But I was in an experimental mood, and I wanted to see what would happen.

CTT: What was the Buddha's traditional hourly rate?

SY: Yeah! As I said, I am always interested in experimenting, so I asked around and I found out the cheapest going rate for any kind of therapy was about \$40 a session. So, with a straight face -- it was hard to maintain it, but I did -- I said, "I charge \$40 per session, and yes, you can make an appointment. I will see you every week for the next two months and then we will reevaluate the usefulness of these sessions." Because people would be paying to see me on a regular basis, I figured I would give them their money's worth. Traditionally a therapist works for 50 minutes, but I figured I would give my "clients" their money's worth; I would stay with them for at least an hour and a half, and meticulously guide them in meditation.

I would give them a focusing technique and after a little while have them report what had happened. Then I would access my own past experience in meditation, what I had done when phenomena like that had come up. Several possible strategies would present themselves. I would pick the one that I thought suitable for that person and suggest that they try it. After a few minutes I would get feedback and see whether to reinforce that procedure or try a different one.

So I started to relate to meditators as though I were a therapist, and I discovered that I had keyed into an important archetype of the culture.

People that came for these sessions did so well in their meditation! They just skyrocketed in their retreats and in their sitting. It really worked! I think it worked for two reasons. It worked because Westerners need that type of meticulous one-on-one personal coaching. It also worked because I was keying into an archetype of the culture. The Buddha with his psychic powers and his renunciation, his orange robe and begging bowl certainly represent an archetype for ancient India. "Therapist," a paid professional that one sees weekly for life guidance is an archetype in our culture.

CTT: Summing up, what characterizes the serious lay practitioner, both Eastern and Western? What else is a part of practice than a formal meditation period? What distinguishes one of your serious students from other people besides the fact that they may sit down for a fixed half hour each day to do something special?

SY: When you begin your meditation practice, you experience meditation as one of your activities during the day. Somewhere along the line, a figure-ground reversal takes place, and you begin to experience all of the activities of the day as happening within meditation. So actually only your body leaves the cushion in the morning, not your mind. It seems as though you are literally meditating all day. So the events of life are surrounded by a tremendous sense of peace and presence, focusedness.

In addition to that, you carry with you a basic beneficence that comes through the pores of your being. It influences the people around you, in subtle, if not overt, ways. You feel that every single thing you do, even the most casual activity, is in some way purifying the environment around you. We have that phrase in Buddhism, "the pure

land." You create a pure land around you, a kind of heaven on earth, in small but tangible ways, in every single thing you do. So life takes on a subtle magic quality. That is the fruit. It is the same, East or West. In fact, it is the same regardless of what tradition you meditate in, Buddhist or non-Buddhist, if you go all the way with it. Although I am a Buddhist clergyman, I am not interested in taking people who are, for example, Christian, and getting them to be Buddhists. I am much more interested in taking somebody that is Christian and providing them with the skills to take Christianity to its ultimate.

## References

Brunton, P. (1987). Reflections on my Life and Writings. Volume 8 of The Notebooks of Paul Brunton. Burdett, N.Y.: Larson Publications.

Gates, B. (1989). Reflections on the suttas. Inquiring Mind, 6, No. 1, Summer 1989, p. 4.

## Copyright Detail

You may forward this document to anyone you think might be interested. The only limitations are:

1. You must copy this document in its entirety, without modifications, including this copyright notice.
2. You do not have permission to change the contents or make extracts.
3. You do not have permission to copy this document for commercial purposes.

Charles T. Tart. Transpersonal psychology, parapsychology, consciousness, hypnosis, psychology, mindfulness.

Dr. Tart would like to thank the many publishers whose kind permissions have made the online library possible.

All articles, papers and books are Copyright © to publishers and/or authors as noted. All rights reserved.

All other website content and writing is Copyright © 1996-2006 by Charles T. Tart. All rights reserved.

All web site images/layouts etc. are Copyright © 1996-2006 by Webmaster Palyne Gaenir. All rights reserved.