

MEDITATION AND VOICE DIALOGUE

by Girija Moran

TIME FOR INTEGRATION

I recently attended my second Voice Dialogue workshop and am excited about this system and how it fits in with my work of teaching meditation. I felt inspired to share about this even though it may be premature. I don't know that much about it yet, and have not yet done any facilitation, but I am already using the ideas in my meditation classes.

In teaching meditation, my aims are twofold – facilitating the connection to Essence or the Self and then working on the integration of this powerful connection into our daily lives. The integration part is more at the forefront for me at the moment.

Back in the late sixties, when I was introduced to the idea of a spiritual path, the focus was on the initiation. It was all about receiving the blessing of a great master and waking up to the Inner Self. Baba Muktananda's specialty was shaktipat, or kundalini awakening—the beginning of the journey of transformation. During the 70's he touched hundreds of thousands of people. It was thrilling to live in the energy field of the awakened kundalini for so many years around Baba. As time has passed however, I find that my interest has moved on to the integration of the gift of shaktipat into my life in the world.

Here in northern California, invitations beckon from every bulletin board with announcements of an abundance of spiritual techniques and processes unimaginable in the 60's. Back then meditation was exotic. Here and now most people I meet have tasted a number of different traditions or styles.

DEALING WITH STRESS AS A YOGA

In counterpoint to this array of spiritual possibilities, the difficulties and stresses of life on the planet at this time seem equally abundant. Our situation of being bombarded with reports of suffering from all over the world makes it vital to find a way to live without being destabilized by stress and confusion.

Recently I was asked to teach a class on the Bhagavad Gita for a yoga teacher's training course and in reviewing it, I was struck by the title of the first chapter – the Yoga of Arjuna's Despondency. Indeed the path often begins when we are moved by our despondency at the inherent conflicts in our inner and outer worlds to seek the respite of a spiritual solution. By spiritual here I mean something that has to do with our deeper nature or essence.

At the beginning of meditation practice, the idea of how to deal with external stress may be paramount, but it soon becomes evident that it is the inner anxieties and negative emotions—the mind's reactions—which are the real problem. The Self is obviously not the problem, and being awakened to it does not itself automatically solve one's problems.

EVERYONE KNOWS THE SELF

I remember being incredibly struck by hearing Baba once say, "Everyone knows the Self." It was in the context of a question from Swami Shankarananda about the then named Bubba Free John. He asked for Baba's reaction to Bubba's claims of attainment and said to Baba in a questioning tone, "Baba, he says he is self-realized." Baba matter-of-factly replied that everyone is a knower of the Self. It was his manner and tone that conveyed

to me the idea, “What’s the big deal about that?” Since we are That, it is no great surprise to know it.

I enjoy pointing it out, drawing attention to it, and holding the energy of it while meditating with others. It is one of my favorite ways of being with people and I find it natural and satisfying. Dealing with our “stuff,” our karmic conditioning, however, is a much more challenging process – which is why I am always on the lookout for tools to facilitate the process of developing spiritual maturity.

VOICE DIALOGUE

After Lama Drimed came out of retreat, he began his exploration of ways to help his students grow. Many of them had been doing traditional practice for many years and even decades, but with psychological blocks still largely intact. When he said goodbye to me on the eve of my departure for Australia, he gave me two CD sets on Voice Dialogue by Hal and Sidra Stone.

I had experienced just a foretaste of this work during the Open Space sessions we did during 2008 at the gonpa and while I found it rewarding and refreshing, I was not drawn to the Voice Dialogue process which, from what I had read and heard, involved moving one’s chair to different positions and talking to various sub personalities, or selves. I just didn’t get how it could help me. I felt that I was aware of my different selves already. So at that time it didn’t click. Just recently, however, it did—when I was very generously given the gift of a workshop here in Arcata with Christina Cross, a long time student of Hal and Sidra’s.

The main idea of Voice Dialogue, which was created and refined by Hal and Sidra Stone over a long period of time, is that we have many selves. There are primary selves, a group of which constitute our operating system—or personality. And always, there are opposite energies which are called disowned selves. These are more or less unconscious but appear in our judgments and affect us strongly. When completely disowned, these energies usually attract people into our lives who carry these energies. We then get to react to and interact with these disowned energies in our relationships.

The result is conflict and suffering, in all its variations of anger, fear, sadness and anxiety. If we run away from the difficult people, others arrive to take their place—as long as the disowned energies are kept unconscious.

In the Voice Dialogue system, our various selves or energy systems are brought into consciousness in dialogue. One begins with identifying and strengthening the primary selves and it is only later that dialogue with disowned selves is undertaken. The skill of the facilitator is paramount in providing a safe environment in which disowned, reluctant or unvoiced selves can “come out” and engage in dialogue and relationship with the facilitator.

This system deeply impressed me, particularly when I heard that a facilitator cannot facilitate a self which he or she has not experienced himself or herself and furthermore, that a facilitator must not facilitate a self which he or she has judgments about or does not feel comfortable with. It is crucial that each self is facilitated with an attitude of acceptance and positive regard.

THE MAGIC OF THE AWARE EGO PROCESS

After the dialogue with a particular self comes the magical part, which is the separation from that self and the returning to center. I call it magical because it is here that the Aware Ego Process emerges. It is not another self, but an awareness that one is different from the self which has just been facilitated. When one sees and separates energetically from this self, the trance of that self comes to an end, and with regard to that particular self, there is what is called the Aware Ego Process. When one comes out of the trance of that particular self, one is, at least momentarily, free of identification with it.

During my first workshop I volunteered to be facilitated as part of a demonstration. When I returned to center and separated from the self that was speaking, I had an experience of freedom, of Awareness, of the Self. Nothing was needed to invoke this experience but the separation from that which clouded it – the trance of identification.

THE DOCTRINE OF RECOGNITION

A calm sense of presence was just there as I separated from the ordinary self with had been speaking. Baba's saying "Everyone knows the Self" came to mind in reflecting on this experience. The Pratyabhijna philosophy of Kashmir Shaivism, deals with this moment of recognition. In this system, you only have to recognize once again who or what you really are. There is no practice, no skillful means.

A story told to illustrate this recognition is that of the bride to be. Since it is an Indian story, it involves, of course, an arranged marriage. The marriage is arranged by the girl's parents and she is told of the wonderful qualities of her bridegroom. She longs to meet him and is already in love with him, without ever having met him. During the previous year, she and her family had been on pilgrimage and she had met a number of people casually, including this man. He was just a member of a family group along on the pilgrimage and not significant to her. She was not in any way impressed with him. Fast forward to a year later, when she is now engaged to an unknown man. When the "first" meeting takes place between the prospective bride and bridegroom, she realizes that he is that man she had met a year before, but this time she is very impressed with him and greets him with great love.

This is the moment of recognition in which the actual man and the imagined man are found to be one and the same. This experience is equated with waking up to the Self and discovering that the much sought after Self, the goal of meditation, is the very same self with which we are already intimately acquainted. T.S. Eliot evokes this beautifully in the lines from "Little Gidding:" "We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." It is the knowing it for what it really is that is the essence of the doctrine of recognition.

CONSCIOUS CHOICE

Although it is not the purpose of the Voice Dialogue system to develop a spiritual awareness to aid in the path of meditation, it is the way that it impacted me. I felt that it can be a potent tool in the process of waking up and integrating. The system does not speak about enlightenment, but only about

the Aware Ego Process, and that exists only in relationship with each of the conditioned selves. With each facilitation, we meet and get acquainted with the many selves which represent our karmic conditioning. Each time we separate from a self, the Aware Ego Process is strengthened and one is freer. Voice Dialogue describes the Aware Ego Process as conferring conscious choice.

I find this a wonderful way to describe the goal of the path of meditation. Greater consciousness of course grants greater choice and an expanded view. The Voice Dialogue process can be one of the infinite portals to this goal. As one does the work of separating from all the various trances in our life, one is moving in the direction of enlightenment or freedom.

I also very much like that the goal of Voice Dialogue is defined as a process. It is how I have come to regard meditation and also the goal of meditation – as a constantly expanding consciousness or awareness.

During many decades of living in spiritual communities, I have noticed that they are populated by aspiring yogis and yoginis who practice a great deal of political correctness. One form it takes is to identify with and to emphasize only those parts of oneself which conform to the prevailing norms and values. In aspiring to be a good yogini, I did a lot of pretending that I already was and in denying and repressing the unregenerate aspects of myself.

In Voice Dialogue it is proclaimed that everyone has so-called negative selves, such as controlling selves, weak selves, damaged selves, violent selves, victim selves, perfectionist selves, the inner critic and so on, ad infinitum. Some are ancient selves that we may have come in with. Others arise situationally or in particular relationships. They come in clusters. In contemplating this way of looking at the human personality, I immediately became aware of my various spiritual selves – the striver, the pleaser, the good student, the disciple self and the disowned guru self. None of these selves can be enlightened. One has to awaken from the trance of each and every self to move toward that goal.

I got excited about the work of waking up from and separating from the many selves that people my inner world. One potent tip was that if one is having negative emotions, one is in a self. That made sense and the solution was clear. Facilitate that self, dialogue with it, find out its job or purpose in Girija's life, and then separate from it.

INNER RELATIONSHIP: THE KEY TO OUTER RELATIONSHIPS

In one exercise we were instructed to imagine someone about whom we have strong judgments and to list those judgments. Then we were told that this list describes a disowned self of ours. What an amazing discovery! I contemplated this and tried it on, looking for that part of me that did indeed have those despised and scorned qualities. In exploring this disowned self and talking with her, I found that one of the side effects was that I no longer held the negative judgments of that person and that the person had, at least partially, been freed from my projections – as if by magic. Surely this is of great benefit in relationships!

Once again, it is an inside job! Once again, the problems we experience as being outside are all projections. I can say that I “knew” this, but it was wonderful to experience it viscerally in a particularly well designed technology.

The experience of sloughing off the trance was palpable and liberating. In working with a professional facilitator, I explored a vulnerable child self which I had largely disowned. I much preferred to think of myself as powerful, adult, competent, unafraid, and protected by strong boundaries. It was difficult to access the very young child who had none of these qualities and instead was sad and vulnerable.

As part of the process, there was an inquiry into the more positive qualities of the child – which actually turned out to be the positive gifts of vulnerability. This exploration of the positive gifts is a part of every dialogue with a self. Usually the self is questioned as to what purpose it serves in the person's life, how it has served, how it has grown or changed to meet varying circumstances and what gift it can offer to the person.

The work always involves integrating the energy of each self so that its value and gift can be consciously used. With most disowned selves, it is often just a tiny amount of that energy – a homeopathic dose – that is tried on by the Aware Ego Process and then integrated into it.

In this case, I discovered that the sad and vulnerable child self was the source of the energy of compassion and was a valuable resource – when taken in an appropriate dose and when I was not overwhelmed with identification with it. Working with energetics, which is a key component of Voice Dialogue, one experiments to find a balance point. I found this aspect extremely intriguing and compelling. Dealing with my own energy has been a lifelong challenge and I was eager to learn a technology that offered the promise of further integration for me.

VULNERABILITY AND COMPASSION

I had been teaching the path of the bodhisattva (the path of compassion) and I would often mention that a great meditation master had said that a bodhisattva has a permanently broken heart. This wide open heart is the source of compassion. The desire to close it to protect oneself from overwhelming sadness and grief is the job of the ego or the protector selves. It is the job of compassion or grace to keep the heart open. Eventually one finds the joy and peace in the heartbreak, which is a mystical event.

In the Voice Dialogue system, the protector self and the vulnerable child self stand in opposition to each other. The protector selves are usually the primary selves—but not always. Some people have a vulnerable child as a primary self and the protector selves are disowned, so that there is an issue with poor or absent boundaries. In every case though, it is a matter of bringing in the opposing energies, finding the gift or benefit of each energy or self, and adding an appropriate dose of that energy into the Aware Ego Process.

In teaching meditation, I often do a guided meditation with instructions or suggestions that one connect with the energy of Essence or Awareness (which corresponds to Voice Dialogue's Aware Ego Process) and then, that one let the dramas, agendas and stories of our ordinary outer life move to the periphery. I go on to instruct that the mind will bring up these stories and dramas during meditation and they should be allowed just to be. They are not to be rejected or repressed. My meditation instructions usually follow a format like this.

SEDUCTION BY OUR THOUGHTS

No matter how often I suggest that one let everything be and that one need not reject or repress thoughts, there is the inevitable tendency in beginning meditators to feel that the voices, stories, and scenes that play out in our minds in meditation ruin our meditation or at the very least are a major distraction. The most common obstacle I hear about is along the lines of “I couldn’t meditate because my mind was too active.”

The standard answer is that it is the seduction by these thoughts that is the problem, and not the thoughts themselves. How then, to learn not to be seduced by our thoughts? Here the standard answer is that it is a matter of practice. I am excited at the prospect of being able to offer a technology to practice this, one which might further clarify the process of meditation.

The system of Voice Dialogue provides a way to facilitate a voice or self that wants to be heard. It can be explored, accepted, allowed to express and then acknowledged for its gifts. When allowed to come out, very dark energies often lose the ferocity which has built up over a lifetime of being disowned. There is a great taming power in this work. It is a skillful means for taming inner demons and for liberating and transforming their energy.

The goal of Voice Dialogue is to facilitate all parts of ourselves, to integrate the energies of our selves into our lives, and to strengthen the Aware Ego Process. My insights into how it helps a meditation practice are not really part of Voice Dialogue per se, but an application which speaks to me. It is made clear that the Aware Ego Process is NOT what the Buddhists might call Awareness or rigpa. It is not higher consciousness, but is an ongoing process of awareness. It only exists in relationship to a particular self and not independently.

THE NATURAL STATE

This also was very interesting to me. I had long regarded the goal of meditation as the attainment of a particular state called enlightenment. There was a buried assumption that there is an end state. Later I learned that there is really no end state, no final goal, but just life as it is. The process has no end—just as meditation has no end. It is said that there are infinite selves. As more and more of them are facilitated, Awareness – or meditation—is strengthened. The key is separating from them, breaking the trance, and then carrying the gift to the center, to the overarching Awareness, which contains and holds everything.

The result is meditation in life or what Baba called Sahaj Samadhi, the natural state. It is free, un-entranced, yet not separate or aloof. It is Compassion arising from connection to Essence. It is the union of form and formlessness, of Emptiness and Compassion, of Shiva and Shakti.

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