

Ira Progoff
in
The Practice of Process Meditation
on
The Depth Beyond the Doctrines

These excerpts from Ira Progoff's book *The Practice of Process Meditation* strike me as a clear overview and helpful framework of how one's spiritual depth grows as one brings deeper consciousness to life experiences. *Depth Beyond Doctrines* is the title of this section of his book, and in this section Progoff explores how one's journey may begin with doctrines from any of several religions, but then drops to deeper levels by meditation and other practices aimed at getting beyond the mind. He includes experiences of the anonymous monk who authored *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a work that speaks of the empirical nature of spiritual growth and identifies phases that people circle through on the spiritual journey. – Gary 4/20/11

Excerpts from pages 30-38...

In each historical religion there is the system of belief, the structure of doctrines that is its identifying content. This is the statement of faith and philosophy with which it presents itself to the world. ... It is the fixed form in which it serves as a stable social vehicle for its believers.

The second aspect of religion is quite different. This is a further level of perception, an *inner reality* of spirit that carries the deeper meaning beyond the stated doctrines. Here there are mysteries of veiled truth to be known. The doctrines that are taught at this level are often couched in esoteric symbolisms that need to be studied long in order to be understood, and longer still in order to be experienced. This second level of religion requires an additional intuitive sensitivity, a developed capacity of spiritual perception in order to be fully comprehended. It deals with a subtle area of truth that needs to be entered into intimately in order to be known. This is the depth beyond the doctrines, the inner wisdom that underlies the outward statements of socially accepted religious belief.

To reach this depth, each historical religion has developed special practices and esoteric teachings which it transmits with careful protection and restrictions to its adherents. These disciplines and instructions are of many kinds. They may be of greater or lesser profundity, sometimes in harmony with orthodoxy, sometimes labeled as heresy by the light of the dogmas of the time. ...

... these religions' eventual goal is to train, develop and test individuals to the point where they know and experience the religion's special truth from within its own terms. ...

The function of meditation in the history of religion is to provide the methodologies by which these inner experiences can be strengthened and sustained. Taking a historical perspective, we must therefore include in our conception of meditation the full range of spiritual disciplines that give access in any form to the depth dimension of religion. This casts a larger light on the relationship between meditation and religion. It also enables us to answer the question whether meditation is always a necessary part of the religious life.

The fact is that meditation is not necessary as long as people are content to participate in their life and in their religion at a surface level. The outward observance of holidays, ethical behavior, good fellowship in community, even social action can take place without the practice of the interior disciplines of meditation. But if outer life is to be participated in with a depth of meaning, and especially if it is to be connected to the larger spiritual reality that underlies social morality, whether in terms of religious belief or a personal philosophy, some degree or aspect of inner experience is necessary. Some methodology of meditation is necessary then to provide a means of reaching the sources and inner meaning of outer behavior. Without it, ethical conduct and religious belief certainly can continue. But if they do not have a means of interior renewal, they soon lose their contact with their source. In time, then, they become dry and blow away like leaves in autumn.

Meditation as a means of spiritual practice is indeed necessary if individual experience is to be connected to the deep sources of meaning and energy in life. A person may make strong statements of faith, but it eventually hinges on a question of fact which no rhetoric can disguise. That fact is the question of the person's experience. What validation does it have? What is its range? What is its depth? Through what cycles of variation and testing has it passed in the continuity of time? How profoundly does this person know the things that he or she thinks or claims to believe? Is he merely echoing what he has heard others say, merely repeating dogmas he has been taught to believe? Or is he among those who have themselves experienced their spiritual knowledge so that their faith is based on a foundation of interior fact?

This is one of the criteria for those who would be the wisdom teachers within a religion or a philosophy. If their knowledge has merely been learned, it will be meager and weak. But if it has been formed in the course of their disciplined

practices, they will have gained access by direct experience to the esoteric depth of their religion's message, and that will be the foundation of their spiritual strength. This quality of experience is true of the great leaders and teachers of a religion, but it applies as well to all who aspire individually to reach a profound inner communion, a private and intimate relationship, with the truth that they have found. For each person, a capacity of inner knowing is essential. It is a capacity that requires more than intellect, and more than conscious desire. It requires a sensitivity to the interior symbolism of life, whether within a particular religion's doctrines or beyond them.

... The nature of religious beliefs is such that, on the surface level, they can be stated by the rational mind and interpreted by means of intellect. But an inner experience of direct, non-rational knowing is essential in order to open the capacities of awareness at the deeper levels of reality to which the beliefs ultimately refer. And these experiences take place only along a track of consciousness that bypasses the intellect. These are the experiences that yield the kind of elusive knowledge upon which spiritual understanding is based, but only to a very limited degree do they follow the styles of reasoning that people are accustomed to use in their everyday life. The experiences of a religion or of a depth philosophy thus require us to have access to an additional aspect or capacity of consciousness. Since it seeks direct knowledge and a heightening in the quality of one's inner being through the immediacy of experience, capacities of consciousness additional to the rational mind are needed to bring it about.

... Meditation is the area of human experience that draws on the multiple methodologies developed during the history of religion to provide a means of reaching and deepening the experience of meaning in life. Primarily these are the methods of spiritual experience that move beyond intellect.

... In its varied forms meditation provides the means of reaching the depth beyond the doctrines. It does this by giving access to the elusive and intuitive knowledge that lies implicit in the deep levels of wisdom where it may be covered by layers of symbolism that have accumulated through the centuries. This is what the practice of meditation is for. It is the inner side of religion at the practical level of strengthening the interior muscles of spiritual awareness. Its purpose is to build the necessary capacities for spiritually meaningful life, especially the ability to reach the depth beyond the stated doctrines – the mystery, the paradox, the symbolism, the wisdom beyond the doctrines – whatever the teachings of the religion or the philosophy may be.

... The criterion of whether a particular method is in fact meditation depends upon whether the goal of the work is to deepen the experience of meaning in life, and whether its procedures move in that inner direction.

... meditation includes all the possible methodologies that we may call upon as we proceed with our interior practice. We may try one and then another, for our commitment is to no single doctrine or method. Our commitment is rather to the deepening contact with spiritual reality in whatever form it presents itself to us as we continue our open-ended work. Whichever techniques we may be using, whatever framework of beliefs we may follow, the essence of meditation lies in its intention, in its commitment to work inwardly to reach into the depths beyond the doctrines of our beliefs.

... We see this expressed as early as the fourteenth century in the classic volume of the mystical spiritual direction, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The anonymous monk who wrote that book was describing to a student the procedures he had found to be most helpful in his effort to achieve unitary experience and to be, in his medieval language, “oned with God.”

... And then there is the practical side of applying the dictum of Saint Gregory that “All holy desires grow by delays.” ... He advises the student not to prejudice any difficulties that may arise in the course of his work. They may be painful disappointments when they happen, but they may also be the carriers of unwanted *delays* that have a valuable and constructive purpose. Only by waiting and by careful observation will the student be able to know what its meaning is and what action he should take. And then, that action will depend on whatever new “stirrings” will arise in him out of the depth of his “naked being” as he is waiting and is observing his inner experience.

... In the empirical mode of spiritual discipline, there is a second aspect that is very important in addition to the respect for facts of inner experience. It is the sense of time and of timing where inner experiences are concerned. We have a good indication of this in the discussion of “delays” that is found in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. There the monk refers to the various phases, the “times” of the inner life. First there is the time of seeking and desire for spiritual knowledge. At that point the interior experience has not yet happened and it is only an intimation of things that may yet come to be. Then there may be “stirrings,” images and understandings by which a grace of understanding seems to be coming to “young spiritual disciples.” It fills them with enthusiasm, and with an exalted self-opinion. Thus their next problem arises in the form of their pride, for they are experiencing pride with respect to their past experiences, and

pride because of their expectations for the future. Thus for inner reasons there needs to be a “delay,” and soon the delay comes.

Stirrings of imagery and understanding may still continue to appear, but their quality, their tone, and their quantity also, are now different. The grace of awareness seems to have been withdrawn. When a person perceives this lack and recognizes its reality, new emotions and fears arise, and they cause the condition to increase. The inner sources seem then to dry out, and the stirrings no longer come spontaneously. A fallow time arrives in the life of the spirit. Increasingly it becomes one of those delays that seem more like an ending than merely a delay. Grace seems to have been withdrawn, and one does not know for how long. Then anger and resentment replace pride. At such time, the monk tells us, “It is often the case that young fools think that God is their enemy, when He is completely their friend.” The fallow time was intended merely as a delay to serve a good purpose. And it still can do that if it is properly understood.

A perceivable movement of cycles takes place in the life of the spirit. We find it not only in the earlier, religiously oriented centuries but in our modern culture as well. The cycles of inner experience form a process that seems to be generic to the quest for truth, wherever persons seek that truth individually at a depth beyond the outer statement of the doctrines.

We can identify this inner process as it moves with its characteristic rhythms and dynamics. It appears that the similarity in the cycles of the process reaches beyond the differences in historical circumstances. The quest for meaning by personal experience is the central factor whether that quest is taking place in a religious society or in our modern secular culture. The spiritual essence of human experience involves an inner process whose effects reach beyond the differences in social conditions. This fact of observation provides us with one very important starting point as we seek to find a method of spiritual discipline that can be practiced effectively in the modern world.