



The Spectacle of Meditation

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“Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.”

- Guy Debord, ‘The Society of the Spectacle’ (1967)

Where before it was seen as a religious practice, meditation is now common-place and indeed, has become a commodity. There are apps, courses, websites, classes and books associated with ‘proper practice’ around every corner. Many claim to offer benefits in everyday life such as: understanding your pain, lowering your stress, connecting better, improving focus, reducing brain chatter [1]; others simply give steps and largely instruct the participant to focus on the breath [2], with no goal other than attainment of the by-products of practice. Is this *really* meditation, or is this merely the image of meditation, the representation of what was once directly lived?

If we look at any ancient text and search for what meditation is, from Buddha sutras to Hindu epics, we do not find a list of physical benefits. The ‘List of Benefits’ is a method modern society utilises in order to sell to a mechanically educated populus. The Western schooling system largely educates children and teenagers out of feeling and into reasoning (thus aiding in the creation of a mental health epidemic), and so adults are plagued with reasons to consume to assist with the continuity of the capitalist economy. With this, meditation and its benefits are therefore firmly limited within the realm of consumerism and physicality. You buy into or invest in meditation, and these listed benefits are your dividends. Meditation is marketed almost as another form of income.

Upon simply looking at what is promised, we can see a world, a society, in which these future benefits are in fact the antidote to the affliction of their opposite. There is, it turns out, little understanding of our pain, there is high stress, there is lack of concentration, there is ‘stolen focus’[3], and there are, for many, consistent internal monologues tumbling forward at all moments of the day. But there is, we must admit, something dubious about peddling the cure to the disease you created. On the other hand, we can’t deny the fact that offering the cure is better than forgoing it altogether as a way to appear consistent. But, the

whole picture is stranger than that. The *way* in which meditation is being offered is transforming *what* is being offered.

After Nietzsche stumbled upon God's dead body, the West looked Eastward for a new salvation. A new object to replace the deceased saviour-god. 'The Society of the Spectacle,' easily comparable to capitalism, has now begun to absorb and integrate meditation as a part of itself, as it does with anything that has the power to overthrow it. Note how rebellion quickly becomes fashionable, and so becomes an idea that can be traded, sold, and marketed. It does this by reflecting what is directly lived and deifies the reflection over the reality. In other words, by making a "graven image," an idol of it. Here you may see, though clearly not similarly reasoned, the radical Islamic resistance to graven images of God. Perhaps once, this was the reason for it - to prevent the direct experiential reality of total union from becoming a mere coin in the trade of mortal ideas.

Debord remarks, "The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as *instrument of unification*... the unification which it accomplishes is nothing other than an official language of generalized separation."^[4] There is now an ego trip one can pay for, that according to the laws of the consumerist society, then endows the purchaser with the right to assume the role of 'yogi' (from the root meaning 'union', a yogi is therefore one who has become this union), or even, more bizarrely, 'an expert yogi' or 'expert meditator'.

Of course, we understand what is meant by this with reference to the language of the society. 'Expert' is a title that claims long-standing experience, perhaps even data- or evidence-derived expertise in a particular intellectual discipline. But the reality of meditation does not lend itself even in the slightest to the generalised separation of modern cultural linguistics anymore so than the experience of the colour blue is in any way translated by the spoken word for a colour-blind listener. In the old Eastern texts discussing the reality that gives existence to the illusory world of separation, the language used by the deities or by wise sages is routinely paradoxical and contradictory. "It moves, and yet it moves not," It is both opposites and it is neither, and it is not an 'it' at all. This total union, this reconciliation of all opposites, this direct experience of living vibrancy, is meditation, and yet, even that is saying too much.

The end of suffering, self-realisation, and transcending mind and matter are the trinity of meditation. All three exist simultaneously and *that* is meditation. But this cannot be given by a spectacle of ideas, only promised, and it is the promise of something it cannot deliver that causes it to perpetually push the result further and further into the future. This is the ‘growth ad nauseum’ mindset indicative of capitalist economies: ‘grow because growth’. There is no permission in this trinity for generalised separation and representation of experience. The trinity demands nothing less than direct experience, for no second-hand knowledge or symptom-first approach will bring about the end of one’s own suffering, a realisation of the truth of one’s own self, and the direct experience of knowing oneself beyond the confines of the supposed delineated mental and physical phenomena.

Upon the immediate transcendence of mind and matter, one transcends the spectacle altogether and the spell of images and representations as viable stand-ins for direct experience is laughable. In Zen Buddhism it’s known that ‘Satori’ or ‘Awakening [to the truth]’ is often accompanied by mellifluous laughter. The direct experience immediately relinquishes any and all goals sighted toward the accumulation of representations. Even ‘Buddhahood’ or ‘Enlightenment’ itself is dropped as a goal, as any ideas associated with those words are bound to be representations rather than the actuality that is sought.

In the material pursuit we may say that gold represents wealth, success and luxury, but is not itself wealth, success or luxury, yet, the pursuit of gold continues. It seems an obsession with representing or symbolising living reality has developed and as such, a mindset has evolved in tandem that covets the unattainable: the direct experience of a symbol as the reality it represents.

In the Diamond Sutra, we read time and again denouncements of anything being attained or offered, *“As far as I have understood the lord Buddha’s teachings, there is no independently existing object of mind called the highest, most fulfilled, awakened or enlightened mind. Nor is there any independently existing teaching that the Buddha teaches.”* [5] So here we see, roughly 2,500 years before Guy Debord and the Marxist and Situationist criticisms of Capitalism, the direct recognition that the image-making and symbolising mind creating ‘generalised

separations,' individualised and fragmented realities to be owned and identified with, is an error to be avoided when in search of truth.

Then, it can be seen that the *way* in which meditation is being offered from within the spectacle means *what* is being offered is routinely an idea to be captured and claimed as one's own, as if it would significantly affect one's inner experience. As if, in fact, it was possible to own a symbol at all.

Spending time being mindful of the breath will have calming effects on the physical system. Again, there is no denying that the by-products of mindfulness practice includes a calmer disposition, but there are many who practise their 10 minutes, 1 hour, 2 hours, however long on their cushion, only to become dependent upon the sitting to feel any calm at all. Mindfulness practice as means of striving for physical benefits to assist in the goals of worldly attachment, will inevitably create an attachment to the practice. It will be looked upon as *giving* something to the practitioner. But, as the trinity begins to breathe in the space of meditation, the realisation is not of a person who benefits or does not benefit, but of a pristine peace that is one's own self-nature. External factors that were seen as vital to influence desired states of happiness or sadness, anger, self-worth, value, status, fall away. All objects, mental or physical, that symbolise anything about oneself, are known intuitively to represent only what we project out of ourselves and invest into them. Meditation returns to the source all that has been invested elsewhere, and in that moment, the source is seen as infinite and universal - as far as words can carry us in the explanation.

So there really is only one way meditation can be offered from within the spectacle:

- 1. To be given freely or by donation:** this prevents projected gain and so the game of profit is not played with this sacred, universal human practice.
- 2.** It must be **offered** not as a way to accrue benefits to assist in better functioning within the spectacle, but **as a way to transcend** it altogether.
- 3. It must focus on direct experience** of one's own nature with, as they say in Zen, no dependence upon words.

Don't forget to pick up my new book on the benefits of meditation for £45, join my weekend seminar for a mere £1,299, or come and volunteer to serve at my ashram which only costs you £30/day... **I'm joking of course.** Though, these prices are taken from real world examples of offerings by 'enlightened people'. Just be mindful of whether or not you are being sold an image, or given tools to go beyond the limits of your ordinary sense of self. If I were to recommend any meditation course, I would recommend, for those sincere about the trinity as described above - and not just by-products, the 10-day silent vipassana course offered around the globe by Dhamma.org. The link to the website is in the references below[6]. I get no commission, this is not an affiliate link in any way, and they operate by donation only.

I appreciate your time. Thanks for reading.

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References

[1] <https://www.mindful.org/how-to-meditate/#what>

[2] <https://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/mental-wellbeing-tips/how-to-meditate-for-beginners/#7-steps>

[3] Hari, J (2023) Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention; Bloomsbury; ISBN: 9781526620217

[4] Debord, G (1967) The Society of the Spectacle

[5] The Diamond Sutra is worth reading in its totality, but an example of this point is clear in chapter 7.

<https://diamond-sutra.com/read-the-diamond-sutra-here/diamond-sutra-chapter-7/>

[6] <https://www.dhamma.org>