

# “Just a Swinging Door” – Examining the Egocentric Misconception of Meditation

Antti Wiljami Saari and Jani Pulkki

Volume 20, Number 2, 2012

Contemplative Practice, Education, and Socio-Political Transformation (Part One)

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1071827ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071827ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

ISSN

0838-4517 (print)

1916-0348 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Saari, A. & Pulkki, J. (2012). “Just a Swinging Door” – Examining the Egocentric Misconception of Meditation. *Paideusis*, 20(2), 15–24.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1071827ar>

Article abstract

Various kinds of contemplative practices have been a part of the western philosophical tradition since the Age of Antiquity. Today, however, philosophy as a way of life has ceased to be an integral part of academic practice. The capability to gain knowledge or understanding is believed to come out of pure intellectual endeavor, without exercising the mind and body holistically. This has created a blind spot for philosophy, where no profound pedagogical and moral transformation of subjectivity can be articulated. Furthermore, meditation practices have often been understood as egoistic, apolitical activity. Our purpose is to suggest that this understanding is due to the liberalist and Cartesian tradition of subjectivity today widely proliferated in education. However, through an analysis of a meditation exercise in breathing, it is possible to deconstruct these notions and open novel vistas for thinking about the relationship between truth and subjectivity in education. A simple breathing exercise can dissolve the dualisms ingrained in occidental philosophy and culture - which has many socio-political implications for educational theory and praxis

© Antti Wiljami Saari, Jani Pulkki, 2012



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**Érudit**

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

## “Just a Swinging Door” – Examining the Egocentric Misconception of Meditation

---

ANTTI SAARI & JANI PULKKI  
University of Tampere, Tampere, Finland

*Various kinds of contemplative practices have been a part of the western philosophical tradition since the Age of Antiquity. Today, however, philosophy as a way of life has ceased to be an integral part of academic practice. The capability to gain knowledge or understanding is believed to come out of pure intellectual endeavor, without exercising the mind and body holistically. This has created a blind spot for philosophy, where no profound pedagogical and moral transformation of subjectivity can be articulated. Furthermore, meditation practices have often been understood as egoistic, apolitical activities. Our purpose is to suggest that this understanding is due to the liberalist and Cartesian tradition of subjectivity which has widely proliferated in education. However, through an analysis of a meditation exercise in breathing, it is possible to deconstruct these notions and open novel vistas for thinking about the relationship between truth and subjectivity in education. A simple breathing exercise can dissolve the dualisms ingrained in occidental philosophy and culture – which has many socio-political implications for educational theory and praxis.*

### Introduction

Contemplative practices have not been an internal part of modern academic philosophy. Very often a meditative turn towards one's own interiority in a search for truth and wisdom is seen as an expression of an egoistic style of life obsessed with self-improvement. Thus it is not so much an articulation of a truly passionate philosophical practice, but a self-centered project of an individualistic age (Foucault, 2001, pp.14-15; cf. McMahan, 2008). Moreover, the popular exoticism that comes from “oriental” wisdom traditions is merely something marketable as so many escapist techniques for a temporary dropout from the rat race. As Slavoj Žižek (2001) wryly remarks, if Max Weber could write anew his classic essay today, he would name it *The Taoist Ethic and the Spirit of Global Capitalism*. Thus occidental adaptations of Buddhism and Taoism are yet another form of “opium for the people” (pp. 12-13). Žižek seems to think that these forms of oriental wisdom are but an instrument in a therapeutic culture that uses psychological techniques for normalizing individuals. If all this were true, contemplative practices would hardly have any critical potential for challenging the existing political order. Quite the reverse, it would only buttress individualism and the feeble state of collective commitment characteristic of modern societies. This complaint, however, relies on certain notions of subjectivity, truth and spiritual development that are themselves put in question in contemplative practices. This is done through direct personal experience of meditation, which does not relate to common categories used in occidental philosophy.

In this article, we will first outline the contours of a western philosophical trajectory where the pedagogical relationships between truth and subjectivity have been drawn. Starting from ancient

philosophical practices in the care of the self, we show how the formation of the modern Cartesian subject in philosophy precludes any form of personal transformation in relation to truth. Furthermore, the liberal individualist tradition naturalizes “subjective rationality” (Horkheimer, 2004, pp. 3-6), which serves only egoistic interests. These philosophical ramifications of subjectivity could easily cast a shadow over any form of contemplative practice. However, by using the example of a meditative breathing exercise, we will show how contemplative pedagogy can deconstruct any stable notion of an egoistic subject and bring forth a truly transformative relation towards one’s self.

### Care of the Self in Ancient Philosophy

In *l’Hermeneutique du Sujet*, Michel Foucault recounts the history of the interrelations between subjectivity, truth, and philosophy as a pedagogic practice. In Socratic philosophy there was a famous call: know thyself! (*gnothi seauton*), carved in the temple at Delphi. This knowledge of one’s self entailed eschewing the world and turning towards one’s own soul. The practices of self-knowledge, however, were subjugated to a more general art of the care of the self (*epimeleia heautou*), which encompassed not only soul searching, but also the various practices of reading, speaking, writing, meditating and even eating, through which a human was to be transformed to be favorable to truth (Foucault, 2001, pp. 4-13). The care of the self could be seen in both stoic and Epicurean and cynical philosophy. This care of the self survived well into medieval times, whereupon it assumed the guise of Christian asceticism (Foucault, 2001).

Foucault (2001) notes that there is a particular upward spiral at work in ancient contemplative practices. By doing spiritual exercises (for instance, meditating on one’s own mortality) a philosopher can internalize the truth of the exercise to the extent that his subjectivity becomes transformed. This transformation, in turn, would make the subject able to internalize new kinds of truths (pp. 17-18). Pierre Hadot (1995) concludes that ancient philosophy was practised as a way of life, not just as theoretical thought detached from mundane concerns (p. 265). Furthermore, this means that philosophical practice was also pedagogical in nature. In Plato’s *Academia*, for instance, philosophy was a communal form of life, including the dialogue between the teachers and the students (pp. 60-61).

### The Formation of Cartesian Subjectivity

Charles Taylor (1989) perceives in St. Augustine a significant articulation of reflexivity, whereupon man’s interiority becomes an object of knowledge *sui generis*. In Augustine’s thinking God cannot be known immediately, but only by a turn inward: contemplating how the objects of knowledge appear in the human soul. Thus, the first person position becomes an inevitable starting point in the search for truth. Still, this persona is always understood as inadequate and limited in relation to the context of infinity. By knowing one’s self, humans can become aware that one’s self is dependent upon something higher. The journey within is also an upwardly mobile voyage towards eternity and God (pp. 121-135).

In Descartes’ (1637/2003) skepticism, this turning inward assumes a radical form. Only by looking into one’s own thoughts could a human gain an epistemological certainty. What is particularly noteworthy in this Cartesian epistemological tradition is that the truth demands of the subject a certain gaze – finding the base that already exists in one’s soul as a clear and given representation. This is evident in Descartes’ famous *Cogito* argument (p. 23). Furthermore, the human mind and language are radically detached from the outside world and from one’s own body, which no longer have any value, end, or meaning in themselves. The subject creates his or her own goals and ends, and constructs instrumental knowledge accordingly. Taylor (1989) posits that this results in the modern procedural reason and atomistic, objectivized self only too familiar today (pp. 141-163). Here, knowledge is no longer a path towards God or a noble, embodied Truth, for henceforth knowledge is rewarded only with further knowledge, which no longer demands that a

man make a radical change of subjectivity in the form of care of the self. This ontological and epistemological rupture breaks the barriers to modern progress: whatever knowledge for whatever ends. Truth and knowledge are thus detached from the tradition of the care of the self, where man had to train the self to be receptive to truth, and where truth could radically improve and ennoble human existence. The subject is now able to attain knowledge as it is and truth can no longer save or transform it. Knowledge is only bound around representation, and henceforth philosophy becomes the relationships between the representations and the objective world (Foucault, 2001, pp. 17–20; Taylor, 1989; cf. Rorty, 1980, pp. 59–60).

This philosophy of an alienated subject also finds its way into the expert knowledge of education, where the Cartesian subject as disengaged and knowing mind has hegemonic status. These ideal minds are able to reason and master knowledge, but have no clue as to what purposes knowledge and understanding should be used for. Moreover, this abstract mind without a body cannot relate to social surroundings, emotions, or corporeal existence (Martin, 1994; Bai, Scott & Donald, 2009, p. 320). Thus it is no wonder that contemplative practices in the West can so easily be understood as techniques that improve one's control over the self and over the world. Contemplation operates within the confines of the Cartesian subject as a conscious and rational being wholly transparent to him/herself. This idea of the subject in control is further bolstered by the notion of the individual in liberalist tradition.

### Cynical Individuality and the Liberalist Philosophy

The liberalist conception of human beings stems from the seventeenth century social contract theorists, such as Hobbes and Locke. Liberalist thought emerged in the age of Enlightenment to pursue emancipation from feudal and religious oppression and inequality with emphasis on equality, freedom, individuality and private property. Now this political ideology has become the “Zeitgeist” of our time, shaping our view of the world, morality and subjectivity. In his Zeitgeist analysis, Charles Taylor (1985, ch. 7) introduced the concept of atomist individualism to characterize the priority of individual rights over society expressed in social contract theories. Atomistic thinking affirms the individual as self-sufficient, self-centered, rational, and autonomous from society. The main thrust of Taylor's criticism is that the capacities for autonomy cannot arise regardless of society and a socially constructed horizon of significance (Taylor, 1985). Instead, the liberalist concept of autonomy arises by adopting a certain kind of identity (Taylor, 1985, p. 209; cf. Taylor, 2003), as explained below.

Modern freedom as a principal goal of various liberal theories was attained by separation from older moral horizons in which things in society and in general were deemed significant as a part of the “great chain of being”. Even though “the larger order” restricted people, it also gave meaning to their world. Discrediting these (e.g. religious and societal) moral orders, referred to as the “disenchantment” of the world, meant that the purposes of life, as a part of this chain, were lost. This loss of purpose is linked to the narrowing of our horizons as we are confined to our own private atomistic selves (Taylor, 2003, pp. 3-5). This paves the way for a social order that cultivates and feeds on egocentric interests. Nowadays, if religion is something that teaches us what is important in life, the major religions of our time are consumerism and capitalism (Loy, 2003, p. 88). In a disenchanted world consumerism is, according to Marglin (2009), a “primary means of solving existential problems” (p. 222).

One of the key factors for molding our rationality in the west is the mainstream economic theory, essentially influenced by liberalist thought. Its most famous proponent was Adam Smith, whose starting point was a calculating and self-interested individual (see Marglin, 2009, pp. 59-60). In fact, today a stubbornly complacent human being seems self-evident to many economists (Sen, 2009, p. 45) and is part and parcel of modernity (Marglin, 2009). Instead of delving into this criticism of *homo economicus* we describe the basic cynicism implicit in Smith's liberalist conception of man, which has played a decisive role in the making of our pedagogical relation to ourselves – namely, the way we relate to the cultivation of our selves.

Smith states, in a famous section of his *Wealth of Nations*, that he has not seen much good

done by those who have intended to promote the public good. Smith summarizes his line of thought by saying: “by pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it”. By the “invisible hand” an individual seeking to promote his own interest promotes an end which is not a part of his intention, that is, the public interest (Smith, 2002, p.166; cf. Smith, 1982, part IV, ch. I.). Whereas, according to Cicero (44BC/1913, book III, sect. 26) for example, the interests of the individual and society were basically one and the same, in (economic) liberalist thought this structure is unravelled. There is a radical break in relation to previous moral philosophy where the right kind of intention of an individual was considered vital to the moral significance of an act.

After this well known economic twist there is no necessary continuity between the morality of an individual and the social whole. From a moral perspective this structure is confusing, because in the private sphere selfishness and greed – today’s economic virtues – are still often considered vices. Because of this, cynicism comes to be a kind of a coping mechanism which helps us address the cognitive dissonance between individual and economic “virtues” (cf. Sennett, 2002).

Hobbes can also be considered a prominent figure in the rise of atomist-cynical individuality. Prior to his work, the thinking about community relied on the assumptions of mutual dependence, power, affection, and reciprocal obligation (Marglin, 2009, pp. 80-81). Hobbes asked instead, what would hold a society together if it consisted of independent, self-interested individuals. This way Hobbes, before Locke and Smith, marked a transition point from the medieval to a modern concept of society and provided an important stimulus for the rise of the atomist individual (Marglin, 2009).

From the perspective of moral education, the cynical mind qualities are erosive. Moral subjectivity requires some opposite qualities to cynicism, like trust, belief in some rationally justified moral ends, and a balanced state of mind. Cynical mind remains in a state of mistrust regarding moral motives and possibilities of achieve morally respectable results, thus eroding our moral capabilities. In fact, liberalist thought in its classical formulation did not suggest that the rational self is well-balanced in his/her desires or consistent in his/her actions to begin with (Sennett, 2004, p. 111). In liberalist moral psychology of traditional empiricism the full capacity to choose is a given assumption, not something to be developed (Taylor, 1985, p. 197).

Thus, we can trace the contours of a pedagogical seam in occidental philosophy, where a pedagogical relationship to one’s self is instrumental by nature. One is able to achieve knowledge autonomously without the transformation of subjectivity. Knowledge correlates with the mastery of the self and of the world. Losing this mastery would mean a loss of personal freedom and even one’s sanity. Thus, the “monophasic” (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006, p. 232) way of thinking about human consciousness becomes naturalized. Western psychology and education take the normal state of mind (being aware and in control of one’s conscious and autonomous self) as the healthy and inevitable one. Altered states of consciousness would mean abnormality and loss of control, not wisdom. This can also lead us to a grave underestimation of the possibilities of developing and transforming our psychological and moral capacities as human beings (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006, p. 237). It is also related to a possessive form of individualism – where subjectivity is built around the idea of ownership (cf. Balibar, 2002) – that the critique of “egoistic” practices of meditation can be understood. Meditation practices, as they have arrived from eastern wisdom traditions, are seen only as a way of self-mastery, of being more effective at work, sleeping well, getting rid of addictions, and so on. However, we wish to turn this critique around and examine meditation as a form of contemplation that deconstructs rather than bolsters the notion of ego and its self-mastery. This also relates philosophy to a first-hand experience and practice of learning from one’s self (cf. Grace, 2011). As an example, we will take a breathing exercise used in Zen Buddhism.

### ***Zazen* as a Breathing Exercise – Cultivating Humanity**

The ancient contemplative practices have been ignored in western academic philosophy and pedagogic culture. Yet contemplative philosophy has had its revival as the eastern contemplative traditions reached the west during the 20th century. However, the western Buddhist tradition, in

which meditation and mindfulness play a central role, is not purely “oriental”. It is more like a hybrid tradition with roots in both the European Enlightenment and Buddhist enlightenment and in Romanticism, transcendentalism, the Pali canon and the clash of Asian cultures with western colonial powers (McMahan, 2008, p. 5).

Before describing meditation in greater detail, it is useful to remind the reader that meditation does not require particular religious beliefs, but it makes sense purely as a practice for developing the capabilities of the human being. *Zazen* is today used throughout different cultures and creeds, and according to Shunryu Suzuki (1995, p. 115), it is not wise to become attached to particular forms of learning, because wisdom is not something to learn, but something emerging from our mindfulness: “One’s breath, after all, is hardly attached to any particular creed” (Ho, 1987, p. xii).

*Zazen* is a Zen Buddhist term describing seated exercise for clearing the mind and cultivating human character (Suzuki, 2006, p. 19). Of course, there are many meditative<sup>1</sup> practices in the Zen tradition, but here we concentrate on following the breath. Until recently, hardly any attention has been paid in the occidental academic philosophical tradition to how we practise philosophy as corporeal beings, and how one’s thought is entangled with the body.<sup>2</sup> However, in Zen practice, one must pay specific attention to the body. Timo Klemola (2003) explains that practices like *zazen* do not involve observing and disciplining the body as if from the outside (as in looking and evaluating one’s body through a mirror), but quietly listening to it from the inside (pp. 1-2; cf. Bai, Scott & McDonald, 2009, p. 329).

In *zazen*, a person is often seated facing a wall. Postures vary: one can sit cross-legged (lotus posture), in a *seiza* (straddling a pillow and resting one’s weight on the pillow and knees) or seated on a chair. What is crucial is that the back and the neck are in an erect position and the whole body remains still. The eyes are lowered, almost closed. The pelvis is pushed slightly forward so that the pit of the belly can move freely with the breath. In a breathing exercise, the attention is focused on the lower abdomen (known as *tanden* or *hara*). Breathing exercise can be done either by counting inhalations and exhalations (from one to ten, then starting over again), counting exhalations or inhalations, or just following the breath (Sekida, 2005, pp. 60-65; Kapleau, 2001, pp. 15-16; cf. Hanh, 1987, pp. 82-83). The purpose of this exercise is to become one with the breath (Sekida, 2005, pp. 64-65; Osaka, 2002). The main idea of maintaining this posture is that it is conducive to calming the body, quieting darting thoughts and strengthening concentration (Sekida, 2005, pp. 38-42; Kapleau, 2001, p. 12). Eventually, breath will become smoothly circular as inhalations and exhalations flow naturally, and breathing itself will become a source of pleasure: as the breathing calms down so does the mind (Osaka, 2002; cf. Sekida, 2005; cf. Beck, 2007, p. 43). Thus, it becomes evident that the breath is something that connects the mental and the physical, the conscious and the unconscious, the voluntary and involuntary (Kapleau, 2001, pp. 12-13; Hanh, 1987, pp. 23, 38).

During the practice, thoughts, fantasies and feelings are prone to arise in the mind (Sekida, 2005, pp. 61, 63). One must not try to control them, not seek to see them as problems to be solved. Furthermore, the meditator should abandon the distinction between good and evil, because this only creates struggle within (Hanh, 1987, p. 39). When these discursive thoughts arise, the focus is

---

<sup>1</sup> Although *zazen* is not meditation in the literal sense - as meditating upon an idea or an object (Kapleau 2001) - we use the term ‘meditation’ for its established status in our language tradition. Furthermore, there are of course various forms of *zazen* in addition to breathing practice. Especially in the Rinzai school, Koan practice (i.e. meditating on a parable or a question which is thought to bring the practitioner beyond the discursive intellect) is an essential part of zen training, while the Soto –tradition favors the use of *shikantaza* (‘just sitting’, that is, not attaching the mind to anything particular, but merely being aware of the moment). In this article, we focus on breathing practice for the sake of simplicity and because it is a fundamental practice shared by various Zen traditions.

<sup>2</sup> Although Merleau-Ponty (1968), as well as Lakoff & Johnson (1999) have emphasized how our mind is embodied, they do not see philosophy as an embodied practice *per se*. Recently, however, there has been a growing interest in examining meditation as a philosophical exercise (see e.g. Thompson, 2001; Varela 1999; Klemola, 2004).

gently brought back to the movement of the breath. Nor should one evaluate one's practice – when one starts evaluating, he/she is no longer practicing. Thus, we should not try to stop thoughts, images and emotions from appearing, but to let them fade out by themselves (Suzuki, 1995, p. 34). Moreover, one ought not to try to attain anything (Suzuki, 1995, p. 47). And herein lies the intellectual paradox: calming the mind and living in the present could be easily understood as a yet another outcome to be strived for. However, at the level of actual breathing practice, one merely lives in the moment without the aim of accomplishing anything. Every moment is understood as perfect and lacking nothing. This is quite the opposite of the western Protestant work ethic, as pointed out by Max Weber (1904) where the toil and trouble of life are endured with the promise of later reward. In *zazen*, ideas of reward distract our attention from the practice of following our breath, thus, hampering the exercise that should bring the focus of attention to the present. Following one's breathing in *zazen* "is at the same time a means and an end, the seed and the fruit" (Hanh, 1987, p. 14).

### Just a Swinging Door – Beyond the Dualisms

These guidelines for *zazen* practice speak volumes of the way certain cul-de-sacs in the Cartesian understanding of the pedagogic subject can be bypassed. Practice focused on breathing can enable us to see things as they are. Suzuki writes: "A mind full of preconceived ideas, subjective intentions, or habits is not open to things as they are. That is why we practise *zazen*; to clear our mind of what is related to something else" (Suzuki 1995, p. 88; cf. Watts, 1989, p. 147; Suzuki, 2006, p. 3). This may sound confusing given an epistemological body-mind problematique, where the problem is how to get from the representing subject to the realm of the world represented (e.g. Rorty, 1980). However, this is not the purpose of zen practice. "Seeing things as they are" refers to the ability to accept life as it is and to be present in the moment without evaluation or planning and worrying of the discursive mind.

Breathing practice also enables new kinds of control and autonomy. This does not mean that one has to master one's own body and mind, or to control one's own environment – quite the opposite. Control in Zen practice means learning to focus on one's own bodily being and to let things be as they are (Suzuki, 1995, p. 33). "Control" is achieved by clearing the mind of its excess content and by letting go of the constant effort to control the outer world. Observing the breath and content of the mind without judgment (King, 2009, pp. 27-32) suffices. In the liberal tradition, the notion of freedom is often thought of as freedom to act according to one's own (rational) interests, desires and needs without external coercion (cf. Berlin 1958). However, the control in terms of breathing exercise enables one to be free from blindly following one's own whims and to act intuitively, without the mediation of discursive intellect. Our (moral) actions usually spring not from rational-cognitive deliberation (know-what) but from capabilities that are already adopted, embodied and lived (know-how) (Varela, 1999, pp. 3-7). Proper intuitive action is thus based on an awareness and insight opened, quieted and cultivated by meditation (cf. Hart, 2004). This way, immediate perceptions are guided by cultivated intuition and wisdom of non-discursive nature.

Klemola explains that in our culture we relate to our bodies as passive carriers of our conscious thoughts. In this bodily territorialization, thoughts are situated in the head. Through contemplative practice such as *zazen*, we slowly learn to identify ourselves with the breathing body, with its center in the lower abdomen. This can evolve into a "pure consciousness," a bodily awareness without the ego. Pure consciousness also involves the blurring of the limits of the body – for these limits are not objective by nature, but merely experiential (Klemola, 2002). Shunryu Suzuki (1995) refers to this pure consciousness as the falling away of the conscious ego and the limits of the body during a breathing exercise:

When we practice *zazen* our mind always follows our breathing. When we inhale, the air comes into the inner world. When we exhale, the air goes out to the outer world. The inner world is limitless, and the outer world is also limitless. We say "inner world" or "outer world," but actually there is just one whole world. In this limitless world, our throat is like a swinging door.

The air comes in and goes out like someone passing through a swinging door. If you think, "I breathe," the "I" is extra. There is no you to say "I". What we call "I" is just a swinging door which moves when we inhale and when we exhale. It just moves; that is all. When your mind is pure and calm enough to follow this movement, there is nothing: no "I", no world, no mind nor body; just a swinging door. (p. 29)

Thus, the simple breathing exercise can come to deconstruct the Cartesian "I think, therefore I am" (Descartes, 1637/2003, p. 23). There remains only the consciousness of existence, a notion that "there is"; there is only the movement of the breath in and out, like a swinging door. There is no dualism of mind and body, and hence no gap to be closed. Furthermore, as the limits of the body become blurred, the chasm between the self and the other, between self and society, starts to dissolve, little by little. There is no longer any alienation to be experienced (cf. Foster, 1988, p. 47). This can lead to a new bodily basis for moral action. As the aforementioned alienating dualisms are overcome, room for intuitive, immediate and selfless morality can slowly emerge:

With the mind settled in the hara, narrow and egocentric thinking is superseded by a broadness of outlook and magnanimity of spirit. This is because thinking from the vital hara center, being free of mediation from the discursive intellect, is spontaneous and all-embracing. Perception from the hara tends toward integration and unity rather than division and fragmentation. In short, it is thinking which sees things steadily and whole. (Kapleau, 2001, p. 17)

Thus a hermeneutic spiral in the pedagogical relation to one's self is reinstated. As one learns to focus on the breath through exercise, one can in turn learn to see one's affinity with one's bodily existence and the world in a new way. This can give deeper significance to contemplative practice, which can expand to enlighten ever-new areas of one's daily life.

### **Egocentric Misconception of Meditation**

From the point of view of liberalist individualism, it may seem only natural to consider meditation as a selfish activity. Indeed, stress reduction, powers of concentration, stamina and effective job performance can be enhanced by meditation. This kind of egocentric thinking is today widely considered virtuous for its economically stimulating effects. However, the view of meditation as primarily selfish activity is not found in the Zen classics from which *zazen* meditation originates. The individualist concept of man in the west, as described above, implicitly distorts the overall picture of meditation (cf. McMahan, 2008, pp. 191, 198). Such thinking about ethics as economically selfish activity that is not dependent on one's own will to do good (Hayek, 1988, p. 19) has led to, among other things, the underestimation of the potential of meditation as a device for personal and social moral development.

Western political thought traditionally opposes liberalist individualism and communitarianism. It might seem that the Zen-Buddhist meditation practice depicted above represents a form of communitarianism that accentuates the oneness of humankind. Yet Buddhist philosophy transcends this opposition altogether. In its basic approach, individual and social values cannot be separated (Loy, 2003, p. 78), as meditation has always been both a communal as well as an individual endeavor (McMahan, 2008, p. 191). The idea that meditation is a technique to foster personal autonomy in a western sense is a rather recent development (McMahan, 2008) advanced by the new age spirituality of "disengaged subjects" (cf. Taylor, 1989).

The liberalist *Zeitgeist* of our time is based on the freedom to pursue individually chosen ends. Locke anchors his conception of political power in the need to protect property, as "every man has a property in his own person" (Locke, 1690/2010, §3, §27). According to "possessive individualism," an individual avoids such dependent relations to others that one has not chosen. A possessive individual is the sole proprietor of his/her skills and owes society nothing for them, which is understood in terms of market relations between people (Balibar, 2002, p. 300). This way, cynical, atomistic and possessive thinking about the individual encourages us to interpret meditation as primarily a self-interested activity alienated from other people and society. Meditation can also be



seen, and this is according to our view a more sensible perspective, as a means of both self and societal improvement through education.

If the liberal individual is confined atomistically “within the solitude of his own heart” (Tocqueville, 1840/2006, sect. 2, ch. 2), this closing is not found in Buddhist philosophy, where all things are seen to be fundamentally interconnected. Personal insight about this interconnectedness can be achieved by meditation (Hahn, 1987, pp. 48-56; Loy, 2003, pp. 5; cf. Fromm, 1970, pp. 138-139). Whereas a liberal individual “has a property in his own person”, Buddhist philosophers talk about no-self and avoid clinging to one’s own ego, which is seen as the root of many problems. No-self is the function of our interdependence, because we are not separate from the “other” to begin with (King, 2009, p. 19; cf. Merleau-Ponty, 1968, pp. 142-143). According to Buddhist thought we become attached to our self and this distorts our perception of reality. Instead, a liberal individual takes pride in acting upon one’s own autonomously chosen ends (cf. McMahan, 2008, p. 196) that are in fact often adopted from a culture and society molded by a consumerist media landscape (cf. Loy, 2003, p. 88). Thus, liberalism overestimates the individual possibilities to be free from societal influence and to be self-sufficiently rational (cf. Anderson & Honneth, 2005; cf. Marglin, 2009).

### Concluding Remarks

As Hannah Arendt (1958, pp. 105-106) notes, the notions of endless accumulation and progress have become a crucial part of the social imagery of modernity. The idea of amassing wealth, property and control over nature while accelerating consumption has not really left room for political action and the development of character in relation to truth. Infinite economic growth and finite natural resources are not compatible, as the father of the degrowth-movement Serge Latouche (2010) has stated. As such, the individual worldview promotes scarcity (Marglin, 2009, p. 222). Without the virtue of moderation, we are not satisfied even when we have exhausted the natural resources of the earth, and the consumerist-capitalist paradox between finite resources and unlimited desires can become a formula for strife (Loy, 2003, pp. 82-83).

Societal changes to address these problems are of vital importance, but they alone are not enough. Intellectually oriented, fact based “objective knowledge” is insufficient in education to solve many of our problems (cf. Suzuki, 2006, pp. 10, 141). Meditation, as a method of dissolving the ego, can be considered as an educational tool for addressing the roots of many social and environmental threats. Dissolving the ego means to strip one’s cultural, social and psychological conditionings that have created a false ego of delusions and endless cravings (McMahan, 2008, p. 195; Foster 1988). Through meditation, the barriers to moral development can be slowly reduced and new prospects for human development opened.

Critical pedagogy must moreover overcome the disbelief and mistrust inherent in the basic cynicism of the liberalist conception of the human creature in order to open new approaches to educational practice. Critical pedagogy can be genuinely and constructively critical only when reality is perceived the way it really is, when the mind is calm and clear of anger and aggression that may easily arise from facing the injustices of the world. Human consciousness obscured by continuous thoughts, desires and emotions, gets in the way of effective political action and clear political vision. The simple practice of following the breath is an example of how we can begin to clear our minds, thus enabling pedagogical sensibility with embodied wisdom to emerge from our mindfulness.

### References

- Anderson, J. & Honneth, A. (2005). Autonomy, vulnerability, recognition, and justice. In J. Christman & J. Anderson (Eds.), *Autonomy and the challenges to liberalism: New essays* (pp. 127-149). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Arendt, H. (1958). *The human condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bai, H., Scott, C. & Donald, B. (2009). Contemplative pedagogy and revitalization of teacher

- education. *The Alberta Journal of Teacher Education*, 55(3), 319-334.
- Balibar, E. (2002). 'Possessive individualism' reversed: From Locke to Derrida. *Constellations*, 9(3), 299-317.
- Beck, C. J. (2007). *Jokapäiväinen Zen*. [Everyday Zen: Love and work] Helsinki: Basam Books.
- Berlin, I. (1958). Two concepts of liberty. In I. Berlin, *Four essays on liberty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Retrieved from [http://www.wiso.uni-hamburg.de/fileadmin/wiso\\_vwl/johannes/Ankuendigungen/Berlin\\_twoconceptsofliberty.pdf](http://www.wiso.uni-hamburg.de/fileadmin/wiso_vwl/johannes/Ankuendigungen/Berlin_twoconceptsofliberty.pdf)
- Cicero, M. T. (44BC/1913). *De Officiis*. (W. Miller, Trans.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Retrieved from <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2007.01.0048%3Abook%3Dpos%3D3%3Asection%3D1>
- Descartes, R. (2003). *Discourse on the Method and Meditations*. New York: Dover. (Originally published in 1637).
- Foster, N. (1988). To enter the marketplace. In F. Epsteiner (Ed.), *Path of compassion: Writings on socially engaged Buddhism* (pp. 47-64). Berkeley, California: Parallax Press.
- Foucault, M. (2001). *L'herméneutique du sujet: Cours au Collège de France. 1981-1982*. Paris: Gallimard Seuil.
- Fromm, E. (1970). Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism. In E. Fromm, D. T. Suzuki & R. de Marino *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* (pp. 77-141). New York: Harper Colophon Books.
- Grace, F. (2011). Learning as a path, not a goal: Contemplative pedagogy—its principles and practises. *Teaching Theology and Religion*. 14 (2), 99-124.
- Hadot, P. (1995). *Philosophy as a way of life: Spiritual exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Oxford & Cambridge: Blackwell.
- Hart, T. (2004). Opening the contemplative mind in the classroom. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 2(1), 28-46.
- Hayek, F. A. (1988). *The collected works of Friedrich August Hayek* (Vol 1). London: Routledge.
- Ho, M. (1987). Translator's preface. In T. Nhat Hanh *The miracle of mindfulness: Introduction to the path of meditation* (pp. vii-xiii). Boston: Beacon Press.
- Horkheimer, M. (2004). *Eclipse of reason*. London & New York: Continuum.
- Kapleau, P. (2001). *The three pillars of Zen: Teaching, practice, and enlightenment*. New York: Anchor Books.
- King, S. B. (2009). *Socially engaged Buddhism: Dimensions of Asian spirituality*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Klemola, T. (2003). Some notes about the possibility of "bodily ethics". Paper presented at IAPS-Conference, Gloucestershire, England. Retrieved from [http://files.kotisivukone.com/finevision.kotisivukone.com/tiedostot/bodily\\_ethics.pdf](http://files.kotisivukone.com/finevision.kotisivukone.com/tiedostot/bodily_ethics.pdf)
- Klemola, T. (2004). *Taidon filosofia—Filosofian taito*. Tampere: Tampere University Press.
- Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1999). *Philosophy in the Flesh: The embodied mind and its challenge to western thought*. New York : Basic.
- Latouche, S. (2010). *Jäähyväiset Kasvulle*. [Petit traité de la décroissance sereine]. Helsinki: Into Kustannus.
- Locke, J. (1690/2010). *Second treatise of government*. Retrieved from <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/7370/7370-h/7370-h.htm>
- Loy, D. R. (2003). *The great awakening. A Buddhist social theory*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Marglin, S. E. (2009). *The dismal science: How thinking like an economist undermines community*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Martin, J. R. (1994). *Changing the educational landscape: Philosophy, women, and education*. New York: Routledge.
- McMahan, D. L. (2008). *The making of Buddhist modernism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968). *The visible and the invisible*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Nhat Hanh, T. (1987). *The miracle of mindfulness: An introduction to the practice of meditation*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Osaka, K. (2002). Breathing in Zazen. In T. Maezumi & B. Glassman (Eds.), *On Zen Practice: Body, Breath & Mind* (pp. 41-42). Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Rorty, R. (1980). *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*. Oxford: Blackwell.

- Sekida, K. (2005). *Zen training: Methods and philosophy*. Boston & London: Shambhala.
- Sen, A. (2009). *Identiteetti ja väkivalta*. [Identity and violence] Helsinki: Basam Books.
- Sennett, R. (2002). *Työn uusi järjestys, eli miten uusi kapitalismi kuluttaa ihmisen luonnetta* [The corrosion of character: The personal consequences for work in new capitalism]. Tampere: Vastapaino.
- Sennett, R. (2004). *Kunnioitus eriarvoisuuden maailmassa* [Respect in a world of inequality]. Tampere: Vastapaino.
- Smith, A. (1982). *The theory of moral sentiments*. Retrieved from [http://oll.libertyfund.org/index.php?option=com\\_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=192&layout=html](http://oll.libertyfund.org/index.php?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=192&layout=html)
- Smith, A. (2002). *The wealth of nations: Representative selections* (B. Mazlish, Ed.). New York: Dover Publications.
- Suzuki, D. T. (2006). *Zen Buddhism: Selected writings of D. T. Suzuki*. New York: Three Leaves Press.
- Suzuki, S. (1995). *Zen mind, beginners mind*. New York: Weatherhill.
- Taylor, C. (1985). *Philosophy and the human sciences: Philosophical papers 2*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, C. (2003). *The ethics of authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Thompson, E. (2001). Empathy and consciousness. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 8(5-7), 1-32.
- Tocqueville, A. (2006). *Democracy in America* (Vol 2). Retrieved from <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/816/816-h/816-h.htm#2HCH0023> (Original work published in 1840)
- Varela, F. (1999). *Ethical know-how: Action, wisdom, and cognition*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Walsh, R. & Shapiro, S.L. (2006). The meeting of meditative disciplines and western psychology: A mutually enriching dialogue. *American Psychologist*, 61(3), 227-239.
- Watts, A. (1989). *The way of Zen*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Weber, M. (1904). *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. Retrieved from [http://www.ne.jp/asahi/moriyuki/abukuma/weber/world/ethic/pro\\_eth\\_frame.html](http://www.ne.jp/asahi/moriyuki/abukuma/weber/world/ethic/pro_eth_frame.html)
- Žižek, S. (2001). *First as tragedy, then as farce*. London: Verso.

### About the Authors

Antti Saari has recently worked as a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Tampere, School of Education. He can be reached at [anttiwsaari@gmail.com](mailto:anttiwsaari@gmail.com)

Jani Pulkki is a doctoral student at the University of Tampere, School of Education. He can be reached at [jani.pulkki@uta.fi](mailto:jani.pulkki@uta.fi)