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*Scientific and Spiritual Perspectives on Meditation*¹

*'Beyond the Brain IV' Conference
Ripon College, Yorkshire, August 23–26, 2001*

Perhaps one or two of us who attended previous *Beyond the Brain* conferences at St John's College Cambridge may have anticipated something a little less memorable at Ripon. After all, what could match the Bridge of Sighs and the uncomfortable benches in Hall? We would have been wrong. Evensong in the Cathedral, followed by an exclusive organ recital; a beautiful tree-strewn campus (sadly to close after our departure); Taizé chanting in the Chapel, led by our very own maestro; a visit to Fountains Abbey, still spiritually throbbing; morning movement to suit all tastes on green and undulating lawns; food and accommodation agreed by almost everybody to be of a high standard. All these helped frame the networking, the book tasting and buying, and of course the presentations and workshops themselves.

But what of that content? Once again our Programme Director David Lorimer had chosen both topic and speakers with pertinence and discrimination. Most of the delegates, it emerged during the introductory evening, meditate regularly, and all of the speakers brought their own experience to bear on what they shared with us: all had walked the talk.

Psychotherapist Andrew Powell's thoughtful and often moving presentation set meditation in the context of his own very wide yet personal vision of the place of the spiritual in the cosmic scheme, in which the material is nested within the spiritual, or quantum, in turn nested within the ultimate, or virtual, realm. Polarity, in particular good and evil, is inevitable in the material realm, since at least for us humans it is created by the choices we make as we collapse the quantum wave function in the spiritual realm. He usefully reminded us to take account of

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the state of mind of the meditator: secure personalities can only benefit from meditation, which may bring them 'to the threshold of the Godhead'; those whose early experiences and other factors have led to an anxious, depressive or borderline personality may suffer damage unless proper support is provided.

'Why meditate?' asked neuropsychiatrist Peter Fenwick as he began his talk; 'For the sake of our children,' came the answer as he ended. His somewhat circuitous path between took us through aspects of the nature of scientific enquiry, and described the most recent findings of brain research into attention, epilepsy and the neurophysiological effects and correlates of meditation. It included a brief experiential exposure to the use of the after image as a meditative focus, and an extract from one of Beethoven's Last Quartets. He asked the question: 'Is consciousness only in the brain?' and indicated that his own answer would be, 'No.'

Clarity, up to a point, one might expect from a talk on Zen and the brain, and that is just what we got from neurologist James Austin, author of a book with that title. Most of his talk comprised a lucid account of the path of Zen, in part movingly illuminated by his own experience of *kensho*, a glimpse of enlightenment. He emphasised the need to transcend 'I, me, mine', which implies that the upper reaches of the path he diagrammatically illustrated are not traversed by an ego, rather experienced by a centre of consciousness. Then in his last few minutes he talked about experiments with neurotic and 'laid back' rat mothers, which enable us to tentatively identify the brain centres involved in meditative states. This theme did not sit easily with the earlier topic, a contrast related perhaps to his tantalising though playful reluctance either to sign up to, or to deny, that something to do with awareness can exist 'beyond the brain'.

So for me these last two speakers provided much fascinating and locally important information and report. However, fissures in their presentations suggested that a central problem was being skirted.

Peter Russell stated it clearly, together with, in my view, the conditions for its solution. In a characteristically beautiful illustrated presentation he took us first over familiar ground: the development of science following Descartes along a path which left consciousness to the Church, which in turn largely disowned it and which now finds itself on the cultural margins. During the past fifteen years the mysterious but welcome upsurge in consciousness studies means that we can no longer evade the 'hard problem': how can mere 'matter in motion' give rise to conscious experience? As long as scientific materialism continues to dominate the mind of our culture, this problem is not just hard, it is impossible. Even to get a handle on its solution requires, Peter told us, a 'metaparadigm shift', to a view in which it is consciousness, not matter, that is primary. This requires a transformation of the scientist. Meditation can play a part in this, especially in fostering the realisation that 'the world is in me, not me in the world'. Perhaps Thomas Merton was right when he predicted that the bridge that would bring science and spirit together again was consciousness.

For Peter, meditation came almost as an afterthought to the core of his talk. Arthur Zajonc, professor of physics, began with it. Like many at twenty years old, Arthur was asking perennial questions: 'Who am I? How can I serve the world?'

In an internally contrasted yet integrated presentation he described first in intimate detail how he began to find answers through his discovery of Goethe and Steiner, and of the Grail story. 'Beginner's mind' led to rewarding meditation using Steiner's methods, and to insight into the significance of the Grail Question, of second chances taken. Then, after a song from Lucinda Drayton, he changed mode, and gave us a brief though penetrating account of Goethean science and its contemporary relevance. Like Peter, he sees that only the transformation of the scientist can lead to true insight, true knowledge. Meditation may provide a basis for that transformation, in which using Goethe's beautiful phrase a 'delicate empiricism' can lead to a merging of subject and object and thus to true beholding and participative engagement in the phenomenon. We must not slay the experience with the word.

Sister Jayanti, Director of the Brahma Kumaris, spoke with simplicity and purity about the use of the brain and the mind as tools to attain simplicity and purity. She reminded us that in her tradition we live in the 'Age of Iron', when silence and contemplation can and must lead to action to lift the darkness.

Fittingly, she was followed by Elizabeth West, formerly a nun and presently an inter-faith worker. She stressed how important it is in our current need for us to contact and nurture the mystical and contemplative traditions, both our own, and through our own, those of others. Through meditation and by being open to the truth wherever it is found we may, like the Christian mystics, find alongside wisdom and compassion a tolerance that can, for example, allow a knowledge of Buddhism, yoga and gnosticism to enrich our understanding of the Gospels. After all, if the Eastern traditions have better maps, we should use them. Resurrection is a spiritual event, available to everyone. Her warm and open presentation, which set out frankly some of her own painful and enriching life experiences, clearly resonated very positively with many in her audience, especially as it came from one still firmly within the fold of the Church.

Guy Claxton, psychologist, gave us a characteristically playful yet profound exposition on mindfulness: how to acquire it, the benefits, not least equanimity, that flow from it, and its correlates in the brain. More than that, he pointed up our fuzzy thinking regarding the role of the unconscious, and sketched a plausible and empirically based model of the brain-mind, or 'briam'. Guy makes one with James Austin, though, in falling back from the question implicit in the overarching title of the conference: what if anything of this lies 'beyond the brain'?

Guy spoke of equanimity, Alan Wallace, physicist and Buddhist monk, of eudaimonia. He pointed out that we in the West have developed an outward looking technological science that cannot even detect consciousness, let alone investigate it. We have no science of consciousness, so we assume wrongly that no-one has it. This led into a stimulating and beautifully delivered exposition of Indian and Tibetan Buddhist inquiry into the nature and science of consciousness. Natural mind is prone to distraction: as William James observed our average attention span on an unmoving object is three seconds. So we must train the attention, pay attention to attention. Only when we have refined the tool can we investigate the nature of reality, and that means developing more than a

nodding (!) acquaintance with meditation. Such an enterprise needs though to be related to our mode of life, our patterns of behaviour. Well-being, eudaimonia, a flourishing way of life, a refusal to embrace our mental afflictions — all this both fosters and will follow our efforts to refine our mental perception and attention. Some may find the method of onepointedness controlling or constraining, so alternatively we can use the release model: allow the mind to relax into the luminous field of mental events, when stability and continuity of attention will arise. As we progress, clarity and vividness will emerge, leading to meditative quiescence and bliss. Now the mind is serviceable, malleable, not compulsively driven, a tool (if we wish) with which to investigate consciousness. What was metaphysical has become experiential. Widely practised, this would represent a noetic revolution. Are we on the brink of such a revolution?

Those who attended will know how much fascinating, varied and moving material I have left out of this personal account: Warren Kenton on the Kabbalah; Jonathan Shear on third-person research into meditation; Ram-Prasad Chakravarthi on philosophical analysis in classical India; Bisong Guo on Daoism and Qigong; David Fontana on transpersonal psychology. Buy the tapes and hear what you missed!

However, beyond the content and the setting something more should be said. This time the SMN had co-sponsors. The Infinity Foundation had paid for the speakers to come together to exchange views and get to know each other for a day or so before the conference opened. From this I believe flowed the unusually friendly and supportive atmosphere on the platform, which of course rubbed off on the delegates generally. The Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group of the Royal College of Psychiatrists and the Transpersonal Section of the British Psychological Society also partnered the SMN in presenting and chairing the conference. In 1995, when the first *Beyond the Brain* took place, neither group existed. Times are changing . . .

Although no audience is satisfied by the time allowed for its participation, at least it did not have to choose between parallel sessions, and speakers generally kept, or were kept, to time, so some stimulating exchanges took place. As a consequence perhaps, one or two speakers spent too much of their time setting the scene, retentatively holding off from coming to their central point, so that eventually they must rush through the climax of their talk in a way which satisfied neither themselves nor the audience.

A passionately delivered contribution during the final plenary from Sarah in the audience struck a chord with many. Too much head, not enough heart, too masculine, too much *jnani*, not enough *bhakti*: the devotional aspect of meditation largely ignored. An issue for all conferences of this sort, though the balance here was better kept here than at some I have attended.

The head and the heart: most of us at this conference believe that its topic is not just to do with intellectual curiosity, or with feeling good. We believe that meditation, and the proper understanding of consciousness that lies behind and beyond it, *matters*. Since September 11, it *matters more*. We must hold on to that.