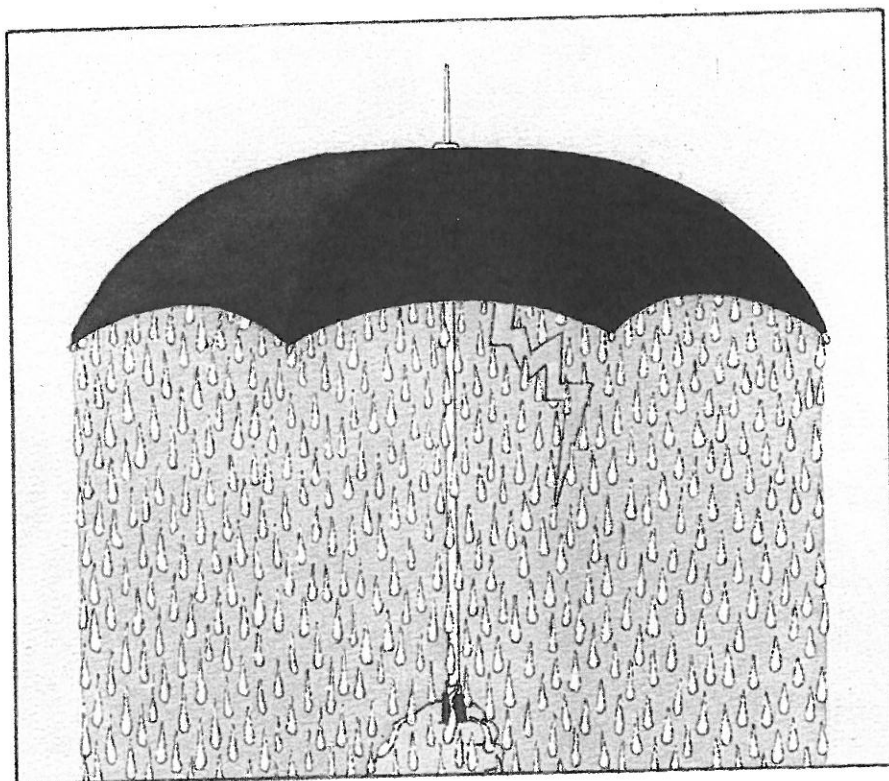


Thoughts Are Not the Enemy

THE ART OF OPEN MEDITATION



Here is what I have come to believe: Just being aware of thoughts in meditation is not enough. We also need to explore the thoughts and emotions that arise within our meditation sittings. While meditating, you might recall, for instance, how you were thinking about a character flaw, such as “talking too much about yourself.” Your uncomplicated reflection leaves you feeling awful about this flaw and wanting to take some kind of action, such as pursuing a program of self-improvement. What if, when it comes up in your meditation sitting, instead of trying to get rid of it or figure out what to do about it, you start exploring the nature of this supposed flaw?

To do this, you need to recollect the

experience in more detail. Say the thought process went something like this: “While I was meditating, I remembered going out to dinner last night with a friend and I couldn’t stop talking about my plans, my hopes, my work, my life. I was very excited and animated, and I thought I was good company, but I didn’t register how my friend tried to change the subject a couple of times. I didn’t ask her anything about herself. What kind of person am I? Am I a self-absorbed narcissist? How am I ever going to have satisfying friendships if I keep acting this way? I must do something about this.”

It is quite natural to get caught up with the feeling of “I must do something about this,” instead of exploring what

was going on before you got to the place of making a decision to “do something.” In this case, the meditator was recalling how she was “excited and animated” with her friend. If I were interviewing her as her meditation teacher, I might ask: “What was it like sitting with your memory of being excited and animated the night before? Did you feel that way in the meditation sitting?”

Her reply might be, “Yes, at first I felt excited and happy when I remembered last night.”

“You said you were talking about positive things in your life. And then you noticed your friend’s disinterest.”

“Yes, it wasn’t until I interpreted her expression as disinterest that I saw something wrong in my behavior.”

I might comment, “It seems like you have been thinking so much about how to change your behavior that you haven’t considered the behavior as a normal expression of your happiness.”

“You mean there is nothing wrong with my taking up all the space when I am with people?”

“That is your perception of what happened and the self-judgment that comes with it.”

“But you don’t see that I have to change it?”

“No,” I might say, “I am not here to tell you what to change or how to change. What interests me is your experience in meditation. Do you recall how the thoughts ended?”

“The thoughts didn’t go on for more than ten minutes. I was feeling some shame, and then near the end, some anger toward myself. Then the feelings softened a bit. My mind relaxed and started to drift off.”

“Did anything happen with the shame and anger that helped them subside?”

“I remember an image of a big bossy

woman looking down at me. She was shaking a finger at me. It seemed like it was her anger, not mine."

"So there was a way you saw that the anger was not yours. Did this perception arise naturally, without your intending it?"

"Yes, it just happened, and the feelings vanished right after that. I hadn't quite noticed that before."

Such meditation sittings are more common in an unstructured form of meditation, where you are not returning to the breath whenever there's a thought. On the surface it looks nonmeditative, and in some schools of meditation, it may be considered an "incorrect" way to meditate. What makes this practice meditation, and not mere ruminating or daydreaming, is that the meditator has adopted a meditation posture with the intention to meditate. In an open meditation practice, the still meditation posture is enough to restrain speaking and acting on the thoughts and emotions that arise.

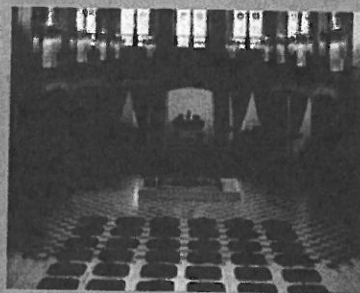
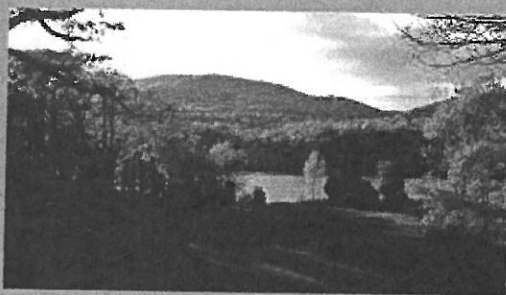
When teaching an open meditation practice, I can't give meditation instruc-

tions beyond the basic instruction to sit in a still posture, allow thoughts and emotions into the meditation sitting, and occasionally, when needed, gently bring your attention to the external contact of your hands touching. Once I start giving additional instructions, no matter how well-intentioned, the student will most likely use those instructions to control or change her experience and will not be open to whatever comes up.

This open approach to meditation is primarily learned through reflecting back on the meditation sitting, which is how it got the name "recollective awareness meditation." After the meditation sitting is over, you may then be able to recall some of what went on during the meditation period, but not all of it. I might explore, as I did in the opening interview, the meditator's judging mind with its life-changing ideas. I might also highlight how she was skillfully able to let go of anger—not by applying any prescribed strategy for getting beyond her anger, but by simply sitting with her experience of it in an

open and gentle manner that brought some movement in the form of an image showing her "the anger is not mine." When she sits again with her anger, she won't necessarily have a new strategy for dealing with it, but she may trust her mind more in meditation; since she has had one experience of her anger dissolving from seeing it as not hers, then maybe something similar can happen again on its own. Gradually, she may make her way toward a deeper understanding of how her anger arises and passes away, not by stopping it, but by exploring it in meditation. ▼

Jason Siff was a Buddhist monk in Sri Lanka in the 1980s. He cofounded the Skillful Meditation Project in 1996. He is the author of *Unlearning Meditation: What to Do When the Instructions Get in the Way* and the forthcoming *Thoughts Are Not the Enemy: An Innovative Approach to Meditation* (Shambhala, Fall 2014).



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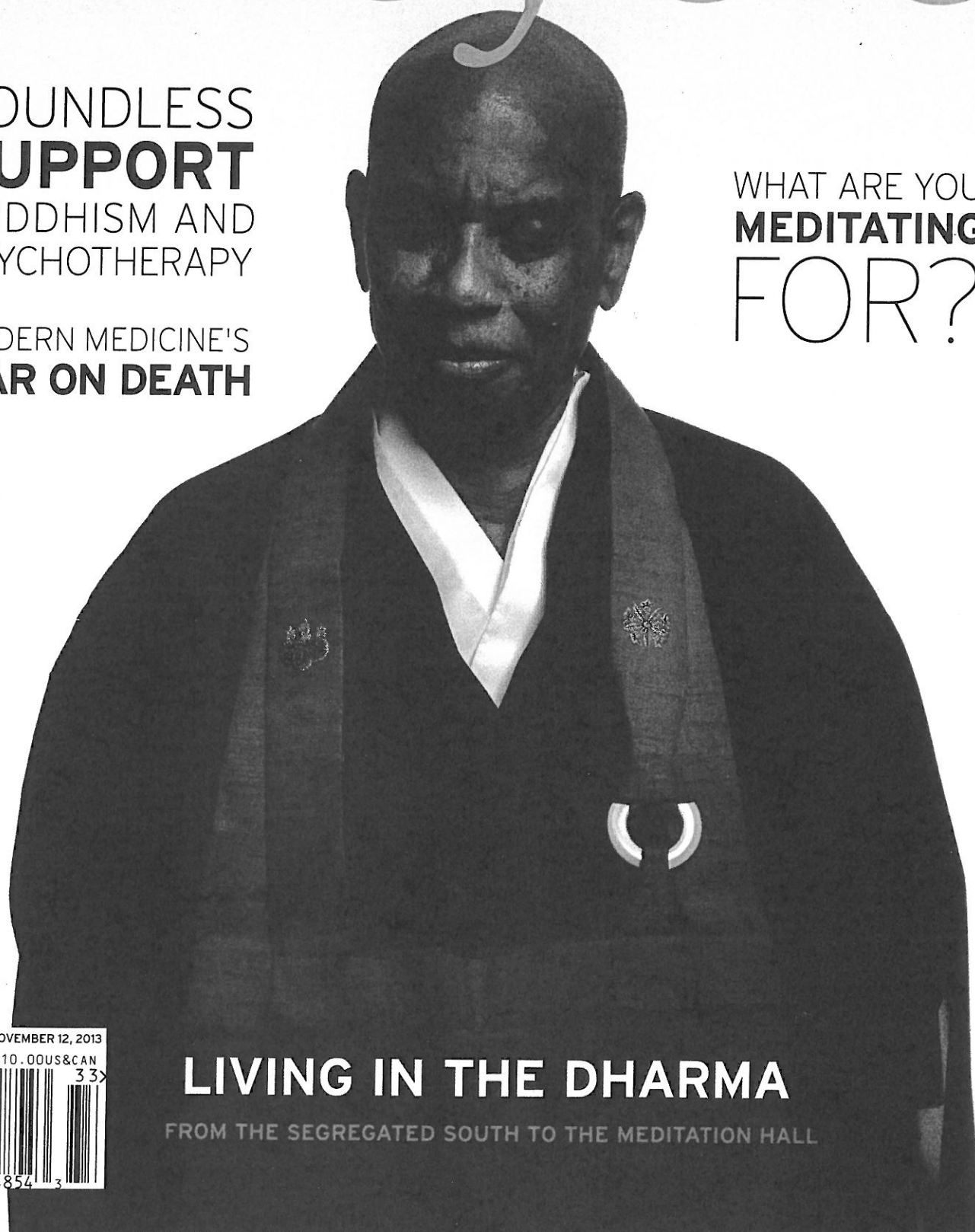
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