Contemplative Inquiry: Focused attention, open attention

Contemplative inquiry is a progression, moving from object through image to activity, and finally to agency. It starts with humility, finds the path of reverence, cultivates an inner hygiene, and births the silent self. Then we undertake meditation proper. In meditation we move through a sequence of practices that starts with simple contemplative engagement and then deepens that engagement to sustained contemplative inquiry, which with grace can lead to contemplative insight or knowing.

The possible forms and contents for meditation are infinitely varied. Meditations can be word-based, image-based, sense-based, and so on. Each of these has something special to offer us. Here is but one example of the practice of contemplative inquiry. The exercise is on sustained attention and the cultivation of the so-called “afterimage.” Any sense object will do, but for this exercise we will take the sound of a bell. The meditation has three parts, which we perform, and a fourth part that is grace:

- **Object:** Sound the bell three times. Listen intently to its form and timbre.
- **Image:** Even after the bell sound has died away to outer silence, we possess the memory of the bell sound. We can re-sound the bell inwardly. Do so. Listen to its inner reverberation, again and again.
- **Activity:** The third stage is that of silence. Allow the memory of the bell sound to fade, releasing all sound, and opening the attention wide. The appropriate mood for this state is wonderfully characterized in the *Tao Te Ching*:
  
  The Master doesn’t seek fulfillment.
  Not seeking, not expecting
  She is present, and can welcome all things.

- **Agency (Grace):** The fourth phase is not enacted by us, but may present itself in the silent space thus prepared and sustained…This is called the “after-image” phase. During it the inner aspect of the bell sound, or other sense experiences used in the same way, arise in the silence or void.

In contemplative inquiry we move between focused and open attention. We give our full attention to the individual sounds, images, or words we have chosen, and to their associated images and meanings. Then we move to their relationship to each other so that a living organism of thought is experienced. We allow this experience to intensify by holding the complex of meanings inwardly before us. We may need to re-sound the words, to elaborate the images, to reconstruct the meanings, and to feel again their interrelationships in order to hold on to and intensify the experience.
After a period of vivid concentration on the content of meditation, the content is released. That which was held is gone. Our attention opens. We are entirely present. An interior psychic space has been intently prepared, and we remain in that space. We wait, not expecting, not hoping, but present to welcome whatever may or may not arise within the infinite stillness. If a shy, dawning experience emerges into the space we have prepared, then we gratefully and gently greet it: not grasping, not seeking.

Adapted from *When Knowing Becomes Love: Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry*, by Arthur Zajonc.