

Meditation – the Frankfurt school of contemplation¹

The Frankfurt school of contemplation (FSC) was found and is led by the philosopher Peter Lipsett (1991, 2005). His approach has been adopted by several teachers of meditation in Europe. Lipsett provides a practical philosophical approach enrooted in occidental tradition, which encourages critical thinking and offers essential meditation exercises without culture-specific decoration. Following modern epistemology and communication ethics the FSC has enabled a contemporary practice of meditation that differs in central aspects even from western adoptions of eastern traditions.

A contemporary definition

Lipsett (1991) defines meditation as a process within consciousness (“Meditation is more than sitting up straight.”). This process is methodically defined (not just spontaneously occurring), springs from free will (not from drugs etc.) and takes place under basic conditions (e. g. in a defined setting with specific exercises) with the aim of an extension or deepening of consciousness. As an *exercising practice* meditation offers a way leading from a self-serving experiencing to an open-minded experiencing of transcendence and true reality. Exercising practice trains an “intuition for the here and now” (Lipsett 2012), which on the way back facilitates an *executing practice* with a clear concern for individual as well as for social and political questions. *Contemplation* is a special form of meditation. It means meditating in an unfocused silent mode with the aim of an undisguised experiencing of absolute presence. According to Lipsett the specific process of consciousness is equal in all forms of meditation independent of culture and religion (assumption of convergence).

Four intercultural principles

Based on this definition of meditation Lipsett systematically searched Zen, Yoga, Taoism and (because less examined) especially detailed Christian mysticism for universal principles. The four ancient and culturally independent principles he reconstructed are *preparing, focusing, centering* and *opening of consciousness*. These stages do not describe an empirically founded sequence of practical steps, but the inner logic of the developing process, following Kant’s question for the conditions of possibility. According to Lipsett’s reconstruction, the immediate precondition for the experience of transcendence and true reality is the *opening of consciousness* as the peak of mystic ways in general.

¹ Modified excerpt from: Flender, J. (2013). Getting centered in presence: Meditation with gifted students at Hansenberg Castle. In: J. H. D. Cornelius-White, R. Motschnig-Pitrik & M. Lux (eds.), *Interdisciplinary Handbook of the Person Centered Approach: Research and Theory*. New York: Springer (pp. 157-166).

Opening of consciousness. Exercises of this stage train an unfocused mode of consciousness. Even if an awareness of elements remains, attention is no longer bound to specific elements, but directed to “no-thing” (*Nichts, Nicht-Etwas*) or – in equivalent – to “every-thing” without preference. Culturally specific actualizations of this principle are contemplation (Christian tradition), pure awareness or *shikantaza* (Zen), seizing the tao (Taoism) and pacification of all mental processes i. e. *citta-vrtta-nirodha* (Yoga). An opening of consciousness can occur spontaneously during meditation; most often a preceding *centering* of consciousness is required.

Due to the fact, that this process is actually simple, but not easy to realize, other forms of meditation are useful to fulfill an assisting function. These are assigned by Lipsett to the categories of centering, focusing, and preparing of consciousness (→ Table 1).

Centering of consciousness. Corresponding exercises direct attention to one single element of consciousness. Meditation on this stage means to reduce awareness to one single element, e. g. one word or sentence, one icon or one overwhelming emotion (Christian tradition). Other traditions reduce attention e. g. to breathing as a whole or make use of koans (Zen), mandalas or mantras (Yoga). If attention cannot be restricted to one element, a preceding *focusing* of consciousness might be advisable.

Focusing of consciousness. Related exercises reduce consciousness to a limited number of changing elements. They bring the volatile mind into a continuous flow. Examples from Christian tradition are singing psalms together, painting icons or contemplating something, e. g. words from the Bible or one’s own feelings and wishes. The rich Zen tradition comprises the counting of breath, the reciting of sutras and attentive walking (*kinhin*) as well as archery, tea ceremony, ikebana (arranging flowers) and calligraphy. One example from Taoism is T’ai Chi, directing attention towards a prescribed sequence of movements. Yoga also provides a lot of exercises with a focus on the body (*asana*), breathing (*pranayama*), gestures (*mudra*) or conscious action (*satyagraha*). The focusing principle is central also for autogenic training (Wilk 2004), Gendlin’s focusing (Gendlin 1982) and numerous forms of stress relaxation. If a continuous flow of attention is difficult to reach, e. g. because of distinct distraction or fundamental doubt, the appropriate principle of meditation might be the *preparing* of consciousness.

Preparing of consciousness. On this stage consciousness is characterized by a discontinuous change of elements. Related exercises prepare the distracted mind for focusing processes. Examples are traditional and contemporary forms of retreat, many of them including a reorganization of the daily routine with opportunities for reading, ethical reflection, helpful discussions, basic counseling or other activities that facilitate a broad mind for deepening processes.

	Christian mysticism	Zen	Taoism	Yoga
Opening of consciousness	contemplation	shikantaza	seizing the tao	citta-vrta-nirodha
Centering of consciousness	praying by directing attention to one single word, sentence, icon or emotion	reducing awareness to breathing, making use of koans	interruption of breathing, centering consciousness in body (Tan T'ien), focusing on one's own being	mantras, mandalas
Focusing of consciousness	singing psalms together, painting icons, contemplating something	kinhin, archery, tea ceremony, ikebana, calligraphy	T'ai Chi, other forms of Chi-training	asana, pranayama, mudra, satyagraha
Preparing of consciousness	culture-specific forms of retreat; reorganization of the daily routine; reading, ethical reflection, helpful discussions and basic counseling			

Table 1: Lipsett's four basic principles to prepare consciousness for the experience of transcendence with intercultural examples of corresponding meditation exercises

Effects of meditation

In the long run, exercising practice of meditation aims at a pacification of all mental processes. For an opening of consciousness "motivated non-intentionality" is the appropriate attitude: effects become more probable if they are not intended. At the preparing stages effects comparable to those of therapeutic processes occur (Lipsett 1991). Especially at the stages of focusing and centering *physiological* effects similar to effects of autogenic training are possible, e. g. perceptions concerning weight, warmth, heartbeat and breathing. *Emotional* effects are characterized by a typical change between phases of drought and comfort (Teresa von Avila 1979), comprising feelings of aversion, grief or emptiness during drought and feelings like joy, meaning and relatedness in phases of comfort. If both extremes are accepted - and ideally reflected in counseling or spiritual mentoring -, an enduring imperturbability (*Gelassenheit*) can develop. *Intellectual and spiritual* effects are decidedness, centeredness, a quiet mind and experiences of relative and absolute transcendence (*unio mystica*).

Meditation practice at the Frankfurt school of contemplation (FSC)

Lipsett's FSC implements the theoretical framework as a contemporary practice that differs in central aspects even from western adoptions of eastern traditions (e. g. Enomiya-Lassalle 2005). According to modern epistemology and communication ethics (Apel 1993) truth is not understood as something fix, that can be conveyed e. g. by an outer master; it rather is considered to be a question of finding and following one's inner master within helpful relations. Critical reasoning is considered to be necessary and encouraged to stretch for its own limits. Instead of a master-student-model the FSC favors a mentoring model with a facilitating teacher for a limited time.

Exercising practice within the group takes place in a formally minimized setting. Without a master to be honored or special rituals to be mastered the individual exercise calls for exclusive attention. Complementary mentoring and intellectual reflection are recommended. Mentoring includes counseling not only of spiritual-intellectual, but also of emotional processes; in certain phases it can be identical with person-centered counseling. Reflection can be done e. g. in workshops that reframe meditation in mystic, psychological, theological or philosophical terms. A center of reference is the mediaeval German mystic Meister Eckehart (1979). The spirit at the FSC neither is a “cold” training of consciousness nor a culture of mindful benevolence, but characterized by an alert struggle for truth, truthfulness and rightness. These “indispensable” (Apel 1993) principles of communication are the living center of FSC – not shared feelings, experiences or a common Guru. As Buber puts it: “True community does not come into being because people have feelings for each other (though that is required, too), but rather on two accounts: all of them have to stand in a living, reciprocal relationship to a single living center, and they have to stay in a living, reciprocal relationship to one another.” (Buber 1996, p. 94).

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October 2014