

The Experience And The Meaning - D.E. Harding

We had the experience but missed the meaning. TS. Eliot

Introduction

I can't read this well-known line from T.S. Eliot's *The Four Quartets* without adding, mentally, "Or perhaps we had the meaning but missed the experience." We may be suffering from the first deficiency-disease or the second—or possibly from both. And most likely with no clear idea of what's the matter.

Hence this chapter. I propose, having sharply distinguished what I take to be the essential Experience from what I take to be its meaning, to enquire what it is to have either one of them without the other, and what can be done to correct this lop-sidedness. How (I shall be asking) can we recognise and overcome this imbalance? For who wants to live this way—to live (you might say) a half-life? I have the feeling that a man hopping on one or a bird with a broken wing is less crippled, more stuck. But let's see.

The Experience

First, then, let's be clear about the Experience

Three words cover it—*seeing our Nothingness*. It's that simple. Or, to drive the point home, turning our attention round 180° and looking into *What we are looking out of, into our Absence, our Void Nature or Emptiness or Speckless clarity, into our lack of characteristics, distinguishing marks, attainments, you name-it*. It is not—emphatically not—knowing all about Natureless Nature, or understanding it profoundly, or believing in it sincerely, or even feeling it acutely, but seeing it with such finality and such intimacy that we see this Absence which we are and *are* this Absence which we see. But alas, how liable even the most apt words are to complicate what is, after all, simplicity itself.

The awkward fact is that this Experience, which is none other than the substratum of all experience, is impossible to describe. It's as ineffable and incommunicable as the redness of red or the sweetness of honey or the smell of wild violets. Try telling a man colour-blind from birth what purple is. Well, telling him about his Empty Core is even more futile. Somehow you must get him to look in for himself at himself by himself instead of just out at you. Then and only then nothing could be easier or plainer, more blazingly self-evident to him, than his Nothingness, his disappearance in your favour.

However, three things can be said, and need to be said here, about this essential in-seeing.

First, precisely because it's void of all qualities of its own, because there's Nothing to it, it is for all beings of all grades and of all worlds one and the same. There are no angles or perspectives on This, no variations. There are no preliminary or private views or privileged showings, no more enlightened or less enlightened versions of This, no heights to mount to or fall away from, and certainly no religious or spiritual or aesthetic qualities to cultivate.

Second, (and for the same reason) one's "first fleeting glimpse" of one's Nature doesn't differ at all from one's "latest and clearest and most sustained seeing" of that Nature. No matter how brief or how sustained it may be, this Experience is unique among all experiences in that it has no degrees of clarity or intensity or familiarity. It's as if every time it happens happens to be the first time. Like it or not, there's no encouraging upturn, never any progress to plot on one's spiritual progress chart. Either you see This or you don't. Here's the one skill you can't get better at, but only exercise more frequently and for longer periods.

Third, it follows that, whoever and wherever and whenever you may be, your Inside Story is the plainest of all plain tales, and identical with the Inside Story of all creatures. So that to see What you really are is not only to see What they really are but to be What they really are. Beyond all doubt you are me and him and her and it, and all the rest. And at once you have hit on the answer to all the loneliness and alienation in the world. You rest on the Ground of Being and of all loving and caring. Secretly you are healing, along with your own wounds, the wounds of this wounded world.

The Meaning

Notice how the foregoing observations, along with all observations whatever about the Experience, belong to its meaning, and none of them to the Experience itself. And how there's no way through from the one to the other. Not even the most accurate really are can give a clue to What you really are, any more than the letters R E D can give a clue to what redness is. Anything that can be said about the Experience—anything having any content or conveying any information—is light years adrift from the thing itself, and quite incapable of hinting at what it's like. In fact it's like nothing whatever because it is Nothing whatever. Or let's say No -thing whatever, inasmuch as a Nothing keenly aware of itself as Nothing (which This certainly is) is surely more wonderful than the most wonderful some-thing. And there's no creeping or edging up to this wonderful No -thing. Only a sudden, unpremeditated quantum leap will see you over from what's about you to what is you, to your Void Nature.

Of course the three items of meaning which we have looked at so far (the sameness of the Experience for all beings, its unchanging and all-or-nothing character, and its healing power) are only a tiny sample of its inexhaustible significance and consequences, of its practical applications to all the changing circumstances of our life. Here are a few more.

Whereas the Experience of our Nature is served up (if at all) complete in one infinitely generous helping, its meaning is for the most part withheld. Normally it's doled out in dribbles, at other times poured out more generously, but never given in its entirety. The last word about This is never said, the ultimate and all-embracing idea of it is never conceived, the deepest feeling never plumbed. Not that one is complaining. On the contrary, it's a matter of continual admiration and thankfulness that such Poverty should produce such ever-appreciating wealth, that this most negligible and neglected of Seeds should burgeon into this most lasting and prolific of hardy perennials. Thus to have both the Experience and the meaning is to have the best of both worlds. Improbably, you have it both ways: the ever-present and uneventful safety of Home and endless adventure abroad, the Anchor holding you fast to the rock-bottom security of your Ground and high winds and taut sails carrying you forever to new adventures.

One of the most notable aspects of this dichotomy—of the total contrast between the Experience and its meaning—is that whereas the latter is by no means available on demand the former is always available. Once you have hit on the way Home you can take it instantly and at will. No matter how dubious your past or difficult your present or daunting your future, no matter how black your mood or worrying your problems, your right of entry and ease of entry are assured unconditionally. When you most need to go in you can go in—in to the Place you never left. The *meaning* of what you are doing may or may not occur to you; if it does, be sure that it's provisional and partial and far from all there. But also be sure that the doing itself is perfect, forever unobstructed, opportune, natural, and scot-free. How immensely more triumphant this Homecoming is than all the other things you and I get up to!

On the one hand, the meaning of your Void Nature—its implications and applications, its endless complications and connections—have to be worked at assiduously. The meaning takes all the intelligence and energy you can give it, and even so is shy and fugitive, never crystal clear, never quite obvious, never free of contradiction. On the other hand, the Experience of your Nature is

always transparent and complete. In fact, till you see What you are you don't know what obviousness is! Only you-the real You, you as you are for you, intrinsically—are absolutely visible. All else is more or less veiled. Compared with this Sight all other sights are obscure, fuzzy, groping, dim. There's something unique about its obviousness, a sharpness, a surprise, a quiet thrill or frisson that there's no proper word for.

And all this in spite of its unspeakable ordinariness!

The Experience Without The Meaning

So much, then, for our small sample of the endless distinctions between the Experience and its meaning. Let's go on now to discover what it is to have the former without the latter.

"That won't be easy," I hear you saying.

To which I reply: it may prove all-too easy. But let's see.

Look at anyone in the room or at your face in the mirror, and check that you are Empty for it, that at this moment you experience yourself as the Space that's taking it in.

Or look at this picture, (the original article shows a sketch at this point of the reader's hand holding a mirror in from which a face looks out) and check that, on present evidence, the set-up is altogether asymmetrical. Notice how his or her face over there is presented to your No-face here, those two little eyes to your single and immense "Eye" here, that coloured and textured and patterned opacity to this colourless and untextured and patternless Transparency, that smallness to this Immensity.

Notice how you can never for a moment confront anyone, never get face-to-face with anyone. Notice how you aren't a bit what you look like to them -people over there being too far off and in no position to see What you really are where you really are. Notice how you can not only see what you are looking at but also (and much more clearly) What you are looking out of.

Some call It your Original Face, others your Buddha Eye, others the Light that lights all who come into the world, yet others your No-head. But whatever you happen to call It, This is no passing impression or replica of It but the real article, exactly as the Buddha and all the other Seers experienced It.

Go on looking in, as well as out, a few more moments, please...

Why should you bother?

Why because this is the most momentous Experience you or anyone ever had. Because-in spite of its dreadfully boring plainness (you can see It has nothing whatever to recommend it) -this is the sight of a lifetime, of all lifetimes.

"It's a sight that leaves me cold," I hear you replying. "All it means to me is that of course I can't see my own eyes and face and head. So what? What has it to do with the Buddha's full and perfect enlightenment? Or with the enlightenment I'm working towards and hope to arrive at one day - perhaps many years from now, but more likely many lifetimes from now? Yes of course I see exactly what you mean. But again, SO WHAT?"

So there you are! That's it! *There's your meaningless Experience for you!*

We live in a democracy. Put to the vote, your reaction is the right one. Subject to minor variations, it's what the majority of the population as well as the majority of serious seekers -meditators, disciples of the Masters, followers of the great spiritual disciplines-have been telling me over the past few decades. Whenever I got them to reverse their attention and examine the Spot they occupy

(only to discover it's not they who occupy it but the others), their comment has been the equivalent of SO WHAT? I should say that, at a guess, of a hundred who are persuaded to look in and briefly lose track of themselves, not more than five find that their discovery is so surprising and meaningful that it merits cultivation. Even fewer go on valuing and renewing this Insight till it occurs naturally and without prompting, and its life-changing power—its incredible know-how and resourcefulness—are revealed.

But no wonder the essential Experience is dismissed so cavalierly, is so unwelcome and so distrusted. The famous Diamond Sutra has good reason to warn us that, below the surface, we are all terrified of our Emptiness. Till its inexhaustible and breathtaking beneficence and fertility begin to take shape it must seem (to many of us if not to all) not just meaningless but suicidal, mere annihilation.

The Meaning Without The Experience

We come now to the other sort of one-sidedness, which would seem to be even more crippling. A heart without a body can be induced to go on working, but a body without a heart ? Well, once more, let's see.

But first let's be clear about this. We are not going to take samples of people who alas have the meaning without the Experience, or the body (so to say) without the heart. We shall be looking at occasions or contexts, moods, conversations, lectures, books, in which those people have every appearance of being like that. For it's never perfectly safe to argue from what someone says to what he really means by it, from what he's coming out with to what he's coming from, from one occasion or period of his life to the rest of it. People aren't that consistent or simple. Of no-one would I say that he always lacks access to his Void Nature, or to its significance and power, any more than I would say that he never does so and has access to both all the time.

For many years I've admired the writings of a number of contemporary and recent pundits, spiritual experts whose grasp of the meaning of our True Nature is quite wonderful. The scope and thoroughness of their work is such that it reads as complete. In fact I have found little or nothing in it to fault, and much instruction. The only thing I miss is the Experience. Here's a fine yana or vehicle, a splendid chariot and charioteer all right; but, in the unforgettable words of the poet Roy Campbell, where's the bloody horse?

Mind you, I'm not accusing these experts of setting out to put the cart before the horse, still less of trying to do without the animal altogether. I'm not saying that they have no Experience whatever of their Void Nature, but that they fail to lead me to it and rub my nose (what nose?) in it. Worse, they are apt (no doubt unintentionally) to drag me away from it, as from some perilous cliff-edge or poisoned well. More and more thirsty, I find myself invited to a nine-course banquet of meaning without a drop of the wine of Experience to wash it down. Naturally I get indigestion, or worse.

To illustrate these remarks the three well-known teachers I'm about to quote will do admirably. You can probably fill in with others from your own shelves.

My first illustrates how ingenious are the dodges by which, given half a chance, we manage to overlook our Original Face; the subterfuges by which we contrive almost to see into our Void Nature (and even to extract some minor psychological advantages from the ploy) while remaining safely blind to its blazing obviousness. How cleverly—and stupidly—we set up the idea of it to mask the reality, its usefulness to degrade it into a convenient fiction. You could call this the As-if method of evading What's-so.

I quote from a chapter ominously entitled "*The Guillotine Meditation*". "*One of the most beautiful tantra meditations: walk and think that the head is no more there, just the body. Sit and think that*

the head is no more there, just the body. Continually remember that the head is not there. Visualise yourself without the head. Have a picture of yourself enlarged without the head; look at it. Let your mirror be lowered in the bathroom so that when you see, you can-not see your head, just the body.

“A few days of remembrance and you will feel such weightlessness happening to you, such tremendous silence, because it is the head that is the problem. If you can conceive of yourself as headless-and that can be conceived, there’s no trouble in it-then more and more you will be centred in the heart.

“Just this very moment you can visualise yourself headless. Then you will understand what I mean immediately.”

And the punch-line of the joke is that, following immediately on these exhortations to strenuous mind-work, is the solemn pronouncement ‘mind is rubbish’!

My reply is this. I don’t think my head off, I see it off. I don’t fantasise no head here, I find no head here, and in its place an immense Voidness. Non-violent, I don’t behead myself (much less you) but cease denying that, for myself here, I terminate at shoulder level. This is honest and true seeing, taking in what’s given, submitting to the evidence instead of mauling it.

(If you think I’m lying or fantasising when I say I have no head here, you are invited to come all the way here and take a good look. I promise you that on the way to me you will lose all trace of the thing.)

My second case is a well-known guru who saw himself as an antiguru. His favourite topic was ‘the absence of the self’, its ceasing to be, its giving place to the non-self. “We are all afraid of being nothing.” But, he adds, “there is a state of action, a state of experiencing without the experiencer.” It’s our beliefs which cover up ‘the fear of being really nothing, of being really empty’ And so on, in lecture after lecture after lecture, book after book. What (I ask) could be more true, more worth saying or more clearly said, more meaningful?

And more calculated to whet our appetite for the actual Experience?

Well, the following is part of a conversation, on October 9th, 1977, between this teacher (T) and one of his disciples (D) -or should I say longtime associates?

(D) I wondered if we could talk something over together. It’s not a personal matter or a problem, but an aspect of perception I’ve been wanting to discuss with you for several years... It’s to do with visual perception. You have often talked about visual perception, looking at a tree or a cloud, and so on, but mainly as a lead-in to talking about the structure of the mind.

(T) Yes.

(D) When I look at something, and observe the space between it and myself, then here (pointing at his own face), in that moment of attention, I find nothing: it is just emptiness.

(T) I don’t understand those words ‘nothing’ and ‘emptiness’.

(D) I know that ‘nothing’ is not a word to be used lightly.

(T) Then what do you mean by it, sir?

(D) I mean absence, the entire absence here (pointing to his face) of all the qualities perceived out there.

(T) But you can look in the mirror.

(D) It makes no difference. What is seen in the mirror is still absent on this side of the mirror.

(T) I haven't quite got it... What does it mean in terms of action?

(D) I thought we could discuss whether it is true intrinsically.

(T) (Impatiently) I am not interested in intrinsically.

(D) It seems to me that one of the beauties of this insight is that it is always available.

(T) No, I can't accept that.

(D) It seems to me that even the simplest things take on a different significance when seen from this space.

(T) Not space. I won't accept that.

Equally famous and prolific is our third and last exponent of the meaning without the Experience. He was interested, among many other things, in what I was up to, but didn't get it. On one occasion in the 70's, when he was staying with me in England, he hailed me at breakfast with the good news. At last he saw what I was trying to share with him. He had had a vivid dream in which everyone was headless!

Of course I did my best to explain to him that the headless or firstperson Experience is essentially singular, and that second and third persons as such are by no means for beheading. But without effect, notwithstanding the fact that he was the most brilliant and versatile Western writer of his generation on Zen and other spiritual disciplines. Or was his very brilliance the trouble.

Neither The Experience Nor The Meaning

On one hand I need hardly point out that most people are unprepared or unwilling to take the briefest peep into their Natureless Nature, let alone explore its wealth of implications and applications. Liberation is even rarer than sainthood. On the other hand I believe that the welfare of our species, and maybe its survival, depends on liberation becoming a great deal commoner (if not the norm by which maturity is judged) before it's too late.

However I must at once add that, unqualified, the rarity of liberation is a disastrous half-truth. The primary and saving whole truth is that we are all living from our Space and not our face, all doing it right, all firmly and forever established in our True Nature. To be at all is to be Being. In this sense all are awakened. The very fact that you and I don't fall over the furniture, that we take in these black-on-white printed patterns so effortlessly, is proof enough and to spare. Though the fact that we don't yet want to know this good news makes a huge practical difference, it makes no fundamental difference. In the last resort there's no other experience than this Experience. Only our Void Nature is aware. All else is what It's aware of, Its meaning.

Truly speaking, our Source has no meaning whatever. In Itself It is infinitely beyond all that limited and limiting stuff, for nothing that can be said or thought or felt about It is It. Or let's put the matter like this: All right, the essential Experience of our Nature does have this most meaningful of meanings—the Source of all meaning is Itself far beyond and absolutely free from all that proceeds from It. And You are That.

Conclusion

To end on a more mundane and practical note, let's ask which is the better way of beginning the Great Adventure? To go all out for the meaning and risk missing the Experience, or to go all in for the Experience and risk missing the meaning? To work towards awakening one day, or to work

from it now? To practise with a view to seeing into our Void Nature eventually, or to practise the seeing from the start?

There is no 'better way'. It's instinct which settles which way we shall take —instinct which we go on to find good or bad reasons for, to justify as best we can.

My own instinct is no secret. My bank-balance being limited, I'll buy the horse of Experience before investing heavily in the cart of meaning—at least I can get around on the animal. I choose to start with the engine rather than the chassis—at least I can run a dynamo off it to light my darkness.

Correction: 'buy' is wrong. The Experience is gratis, with immediate free delivery of the whole package in a plain van. It's the meaning that I have to buy on the never -never, unipart by unipart.

References

For the Diamond Sutra, on the fear of our Void Nature, see Edward Conze, *Buddhist Wisdom Books*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1958, p. 53.

For "The Guillotine Meditation" see *The Orange Book: Meditation Techniques of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh*, 1980, pp. 75, 76.

For quotations from Krishnamurti see his *First and Last Freedom*, Gollancz, London, 1958, *passim*.

For an early and outstanding example of the work of Alan Watts see his *Way of Zen*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1957.

For Master Han Shan's observations on the two kinds of Zen yogis—those who begin with meaning and understanding, and those who begin with realisation—see Chang Chen-Chi, *The Practice of Zen*, Rider, London, 1959, pp. 94, 95.

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