Please skip down to the question at the end!

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I find myself constantly thinking about certain topics that come up -- it's felt like this before when I was writing a lot and I wonder if there's some kind of addictive relationship to writing and/or online writing that's playing out here. Almost anything I read in the chat logs or elsewhere is triggering a knee-jerk desire to respond.

Was reading one of the transcripts from the very beginning of this exchange: http://ways-of-knowing.wik.is/4Trans..._-_Workshop_01 . So many of the responses to this new topic seem to beg for further development and this is probably another reason why I like the presentation + wiki homework format. In any case, the topic introduced was a consideration of how the emphasis of contemplative practice has changed in different times and cultures. Stim started by listing a few differences using Buddhism as an example, and I was particularly intrigued by "4. is more personal than before and in new way. Used to be centered around either "action for others" or deconstruction of self etc., now more friendly to self and applied for reasons supplied by same."

I also see this trend, and it certainly seems to be part of American culture to value individuality and the power of individual action. However, it's not like the people who place care about others at the forefront of their lives have completely disappeared -- instead, they seem taking on jobs in marketing. I don't mean this as a joke -- in my work life, I see people with extraordinary (at least from my point of view) powers for empathy and group harmony being drawn to marketing as a career discipline. Perhaps our culture over-values consumerism, but part of it must also be the notion that through the economic and publishing/advertising engine, one can influence the most people. Meanwhile, traditional disciplines like writing and spiritual investigation seem to be relegated to shy people. Whatever the role of monks in the past, I think in the general population's view spirituality has become a great way to excerpt yourself from society, rather than a way to include more of life as Stim might say. I suspect many people who are naturally inclined toward "compassionate action" are no longer primarily attracted to spirituality groups, or even political action groups (which can seem less attractive because of acrimony involved in certain kinds of debates), but rather to marketing for social good.

That is to say that a group and its practices are defined by the people who identify with it, and it's possible that the reason why spirituality is more "personal" in American life is because of the type of people within that society who are attracted to it, in addition to broader cultural characteristics.

What this means for contemplation in modern life is hard to say -- to my way of seeing things, American contemplation is still changing too rapidly to make predictions (I also would not have predicted girl bands in the 90's or Obama in 2008 so maybe I'm just short sighted). To carry on with the narrower point a little longer, as Stim implies in his intro, a personal orientation does not exclude the possibility of concern for others -- in my own practice, I have discovered more friendliness toward others (and also not-self) through more friendliness toward self and greater understanding of personal habits and needs. At least in this limited way, a different starting approach does not necessarily mean a different result or a loss of important values.

What does feel like more of a loss to me is an estrangement from physical engagement. I often think about

how sitting meditation in traditional cultures was practiced in the context of a natural environment and a much more physically oriented way of life (where you literally did carry water every day!). Sitting is also a physical and energetic gesture (in addition to everything else it might be) and my own sitting practice has been enriched by more external physical forms (tai chi, camping trips, etc). It's possible that for some types of people, contemplation is enough (and maybe second life is enough too); for people like me, however, the lack of physical engagement in modern office work can seem like a limitation, and a limitation in SL too. That is, I appreciate SL for the ways it has enriched my practice, but when I imagine a future where we only sit and talk, I get kind of bummed.

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QUESTION: I'd like to ask a crass kind of question and I don't know how to do it without sounding rude... I'll start by describing the context. Last week, Stim asked how we each see suchness and I felt resistant to responding, partly because I was afraid of how others might react to it. There are things I can say about suchness now that I was not able to say a few years ago, and I couldn't help imagining how the person I was then might respond. I guess I was afraid of sounding like a wacko, but also afraid of saying things that might sound "out of reach" or too technical, or things that might become an object of grasping by the ordinary mind (including my own!). I would like some guidance on how to say things in this second life context, where people have different kinds and degrees of practice experience and come from such different areas of expertise -- should I blurt it out anyway and trust that people are grown-ups? Are there strategies that others might suggest?