

allen ginsberg: meditation and poetics

(lecture held on the occasion of the september academy organised by vienna poetry school, 9 sept. 1993, österreichisches filmmuseum)

can you hear me clearly? can everybody hear?
i'm happy to be here and have something very specific to say.
and what i say i will improvise from some notes but it will be composed on my tongue
not on paper.

the subject is meditation and poetry. the occasion also is a showing of films of an early beat cinema with spoken commentary by jack kerouac called: "pull my daisy"¹ in which gregory corso, poet, and peter orlovsky, poet, play. i also play - and the painter/maler larry rivers and musician -friends - participate and a great woman painter also is the mother in the film: delphine seyrig who went on to become very famous is also in the film.

that's only one half hour. but then i must warn you! the next film by bob dylan is four long hours!

so what i would like to do is to discuss meditation. then discuss poetry. then talk about the synthesis or the mutual space that they penetrate or interpenetrate and then refer that to the films that we will see.

it is now 25 minutes after 8 pm and i will stop at 5 minutes before 9 - so that you will know what the score is.

we will begin with meditation.

it would be foolish to talk about meditation unless we have experienced what we are talking about. how many here have some experience of a practice of meditation? (ein kleiner teil des publikums hebt die hand). and how many do not? (ein grösserer teil hebt die hand). so most do not!

so instead of my bullshittin perhaps we could take 5 minutes to establish the ground and the space that we are talking about. the mental space!

i will give you about 3 or 4 minutes description of the practice of sitting meditation - which you can do where you are in your chairs - as it is done traditionally in buddhist schools, both tibetian and japanese zen style: sitting. and then whatever i say after that will make more sense.

if you can be patient for those five minutes or so then when you leave this theatre you will have a trick that you can take home and use for the rest of your life also.

so: if we can sit a little bit forward on our seats. with the spine straight. top of the head supporting heaven. not leaning back not slumping forward but awake in the posture of being awake. hands on thighs. eyes open! tending toward the horizon not necessarily looking at me but maybe the desk or something or at a 45-degree-angle

¹ pull my daisy (usa, 1959) 29 minutes. director: robert frank, alfred leslie; spoken commentary by jack kerouac; with allen ginsberg, gregory corso, peter orlovsky, larry rivers, delphine seyrig, david amram; music: david amram; song: sung by anita ellis

down as if the light is too bright. eyeballs relaxed and eyes open please! for this particular style of meditation related to poetry. because we are not escaping the world! so please leave your eyes open! in the first row especially! (laughter in the audience)

please open your eyes! okay!

eyeballs relaxed. not starring at a point to bring a picture into your brain. but let the optical field rest where it is. perhaps you will have some slight awareness of the periphery of the optical field. something like stan brakhage cinema.

so : mouth closed. belly relaxed and shoulders relaxed.

the first question is : now what?... do you do?

so the traditional practice is to pay attention to the breath. in this case so we don't get to hung up on the breath. just on the outbreath: from the breath going out from the nostrils till the breath ends. wether shortbreath or longbreath it doesn't make any difference. you don't have to control your breath. it's just a question of being aware of the breath while you are breathing.

so you're not adding anything or controlling anything. all you're doing is: becoming aware of what is already happening.

let us try two or three breaths that way!

.....

now the next question rises: what happens when you forget that you are breathing and drift off into thought or into daydream or subconscious-gossip or memory or thinking of the future?

so the traditional suggestion is to take a friendly attitude toward your thoughts. not to try to stop thinking. don't try to stop thinking! the point is: not to stop thinking because it is the nature of the mind to think!

if you take a friendly attitude toward your thought. notice your thought. acknowledge your thought. say hello to your thought. look at it a moment and then switch your attention back to your next outbreath.

as you become aware of thinking you'll find: it is possible to be conscious in the thought to notice it acknowledge it and then the next opportunity the next outbreath goes with your attention back to the outbreath.

so you don't have to push your thought away!

you don't have to fight your thought but you don't have to invite your thought in for coffee either. you can let thought take care of itself and bring your attention back to your outbreath.

let us do that for - say - two minutes!

.....

patience. if you have a problem remembering your breath sometimes you can count: one... two..

up to ten... and if you lose track after three or four or five... you can go back to one... it is a selfbalancing mechanism...

in sanskrit this form of meditation is known as:

'samatha' (just sitting)

and it is basically the same sort of meditation as is practiced in zen-buddhist shrine rooms sitting rooms in japan or in tibetian buddhist temples. and: in naropa-institute and in many different kinds of tibetian or buddhist or japanese varieties or schools of meditation.

then the question is: what happens?

nothing happens! it is very boring! you won't get any spiritual advancements!

so you might sit there until you realize: there is no nirvana! there is only the pain of being in a body and having to live with yourself and having to put up with yourself. having to relate to yourself all by yourself in the solitude and that may be the great disillusionments.

but on the other hand it has the advantage of introducing you to your own mind and to the new sense of having a mind. and to the continual mechanical production of thoughts of the mind.

but it also relieves you of the necessity to constantly talk back to yourself. you don't have to do anything about your thoughts but let them go and go on to the next breath or the next thought.

in the course of that you might find that you become more and more familiar with your own thought-productions. and so this turns out to be useful in poetry.

but before we get to the poetry i'd like to sing the basic text - philosophic text - that is the backup or basis behind this kind of meditation. in english it is called: highest perfect wisdom and it says that there is no nirvana no accomplishment and no wisdom. there is nothing to be gained. therefore you can all relax! there is nothing to be learned!

so this is called: * great (in sanskrit) prashna paramita. prashna - wisdom/ paramita - highest perfect wisdom.*:

(allen ginsberg sings / a capella):

"thus i have heard

*avalokitachvara

downglancing lord of compassion

bhohisatva

practiced deep highest perfect wisdom meditation

when perceived the five fields of consciousness

all empty

relieved every suffering

* shareputra

students form is not different from emptiness

emptiness not different from form

form is the emptiness

emptiness is the form

sensation

recognition

conceptualisation

consciousness also like this

* shareputra

this is the original character of everything not born not annihilated not tainted not pure

does not increase does not decrease therefore in emptiness no form no sensation no
recognition no conceptualisation no consciousness
no eye no ear no nose no tongue no body no mind no color no sound no smell no
taste no touch no object of touch
no eye no world of eyes until we come to also no world of consciousness
no ignorance also
no ending of ignorance
all the way through to no old age and death
also no ending of old age and death
no suffering
no cause of suffering
no nirvana
no path
no wisdom
also no attainment because no non-attainment

every bodhisatva depends on highest perfect wisdom
because mind meets no obstacle because of no obstacle no fear gets born
gone beyond all
topsy-turvy
absolute attained nirvana
past present and future every buddha depends on highest perfect wisdom therefore
attained supreme
perfect enlightenment
therefore i know highest perfect wisdom is the great holy mantra
the great untainted mantra
the supreme mantra
the incomparable mantra
is capable of a swaging
all suffering
true because not false
therefore he proclaimed highest perfect wisdom mantra and proclaimed mantra says
*tayata *

gathe
gathe*

paragathe
parasam gathe
bodhi swa*

gone
gone
all overgone
all gone sky high over the top
wakened mind
suggitations*

saraputra*

this is how a bodhisatva*

comes to know the highest perfect wisdom
then buddha said:
excellent excellent
highest perfect wisdom is accomplished exactly like
that"

....(applause)....

next step! next step!

...then is given the opportunity to observe the mind. wether by the medium of painting, music, poetry, flower-arranging, swordsmanship, tai chi, kondo, or sitting practice or meditation or all of them allied. brother and sister forms of examining the space around. becoming aware of the space around you and becoming aware of the space inside you and what passes through that space in the form of thought and images.

what i've set out to do was to write a gradum of "parnassus" a "creative road to parnassus" by means of using slogans in the maoist form or taoist form or tibetean form.

eastern thought teaches by slogans that seam to link logically one after another to some conclusion of compassion, which is the ultimate result of sitting with yourself suffering the fact of being in a body knowing you're going to die and then everybody else is. that your intestines are rumbling. that your feet hurt that your bones ache and that you're getting old or you're growing into puberty one or another...

the situation is that we have the mind that far out of control that we are constantly producing thoughts, memories, future projections, prophecies.
so how do you work with a chaos or that complication or that continuos stream of undifferentiated thoughts or different thoughts?
shakespeare suggests that - as buddha does - the interesting thing to discover is that consciousness is discontinuous. it's not a continuous stream of consciousness where one thought follows another thought and there's a gap in between and we really don't know where the thoughts come from or how they link.

in that sense there's a kind of chaos. in that one minute we might be thinking about frankfurters and the next minute we might be thinking about "renaldo and clara" and the next minute we might have to think about going to pee-pee.

so in writing then - rather than attempting to impose - your fixed marxian or catholic or hegelian idea on your thoughts - perhaps you might just take them as they come and write them down as they come in the order that they come.

so the first slogan is : first thought best thought!
this is from a * yogian prankhpa (a tibetian lama)

and he also says as i said in the meditation: "take a friendly attitude toward your

thoughts, even if it involves sleeping with your mother! just observe it! you don't have to do it! you just have to observe it!

one of the presidents of the united states (john adams) once said: "the mind must be loose rather than fixated or solidified.

so charles olson, the american poet, in his essay "projective verse" said: "one perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception". one thought does lead to another thought.

and as shakespeare said: "every third thought shall be my grave".

shakespeare was aware of thought number one, thought number two, thought number three... and that is in one of the last plays of shakespeare, the speech of prospero in the tempest.

philip whalen, an american poet, who is now a zen-master in san francisco said: "my writing is a picture of the mind moving".

so we have the notion of surprise mind because we never know what we'll be thinking in one minute. it will rise on its own, so the mind is a complete surprise so

*yogian trungpa the founder of naropa-institute therefore said: "magic is the total appreciation of chance". magic is the total delight in accident. the total pleasure in surprised mind. the appreciation of the fact that the mind changes. that one perception leads to another and that in itself is a great play of mind. you don't have to make a further order - in order to create a work of art.

but then there is the problem that the mind maybe very contradictory. one minute perhaps you want to sleep with your mother and the next minute you might want to sleep with your brother. so walt whitman said that that was allowable and he also said: "do i contradict myself? very well. i contradict myself! i am large! i contain multitudes!" ...because he had a democratic mind!

and john keats said a very similar thing in a letter to his brother, quoting a phrase which is known by many poets in english: "negative capability".

in this letter he said, he was at a dinner with a group of boring academic poets and he was thinking: what is it that made a man genius like shakespeare? and in this letter he said to his brother: "what quality went to form a man of achievement? especially in literature?: 'negative capability'! that is : when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. without insisting either black or white but having both: black and white!

or as the poet gregory corso says: "if you have a choice between two different things: take both!"

since the mind is discontinuous and one thought follows another.

if the form of your poem follows the form of your mind, then you have a poetry.

something like ezra pounds "cantos" or kerouacs prose. or certain poems like "the wasteland" which are in a sense collage or tapestry of different thought.

or one thought moving on another so you have a sort of modern form and creeley, the poet robert creeley, said to charles olson in a letter: "form is never more than an

extinction of content. if the content or subject matter is the movement of the mind. if a poem - if the plot or theme of the poem - is the nature of the mind and the movement of the mind then you have an open field for poetry in which any thought will be appropriate follow from another."

something like spontaneous speech or something like collage.

or frank lloyd wright, the architect, said: "form follows function."

here i'm defining the content and the function - or the theme of a certain kind - of modern poetry and film. as a mirror of the activity of the actual mind during the time of writing. which was kerouacs idea, also. that the prose or the poetry should include everything that goes on in mind of the writer during the time his pen is touching the paper until it picks up from the paper.

so the question then is : how can you include all those thoughts? well you can't include everything. you can only include what you can get down on paper. so whatever the process then is self-selecting!

maybe this notions might be too "ephemera" or transitory thoughts. but there is an interesting poem by louis zukovsky. two verses that say: "nothing is better for being eternal. nor so white as the white that dies of a day."

it's also kind of a yiddish - he was a jewish poet : "nothing is better for being eternal. nor so white as the white that dies of a day."

aah..... from that point of view you might also notice that ordinary mind includes eternal perceptions. in that the most vivid perceptions may come simply by not searching for perception but simply by observing your own mind.

so the process then for poetry would be: "to notice what you notice!". just as you are noticing your breath. the extra awareness of noticing what you see, hear, smell and feel.

and the english phrase that is equivalent to that is: "catch yourself thinking!" it's an idiomatic phrase. i don't think there is an equivalent idiom in german for: "catch yourself thinking" or "wake up to your mind and catch yourself thinking".

then for the poet: "to observe what is vivid".

then the question rises: "how do we know what is vivid?" and the answer is : "if it's vivid it's vivid. if it's not vivid it's not vivid!"... (laughter in the audience...)

so the slogan there is: vividness is self-selecting."

it's like falling of a log! you don't have to work so hard to find something vivid. if it's vivid it's there. if it's not vivid you wouldn't remember it anyway.

so we have from william wordsworth (the english poet) the notion of: "spots of time." luminous moments or moments of "epiphany". or moments which are memorable and which recurre over and over in memory and from another tibetean lama:

*gallagh rinpoche (my present teacher) - he has a very interesting phrase: "my mind is open to itself".

so there is no problem of dredging up some great symbols from your unconscious. we are all constantly thinking and talking to ourselves (especially when we go to bed at night in the dark. lying there with our eyes closed in the thick fog of silence. each on his bed spoke to himself alone making no sound.)

so this is the ground. we still have a good deal to go on the path and the conclusion but i don't think i have the time now. so i would like to relate these notions that i have been proposing to the films that are coming on the screen next.

the first one is : "pull my daisy".

it was made by the photographer robert frank, who is well known i think as a stillphotographer

for his book: "the americans". he is from switzerland, german speaking and he liked jack kerouac a lot. he liked that american spirit "on the road" because that was very much his own subject matter. they met in 1958 and decided to do a film together. so they hired myself and gregory corso and peter orlovsky and larry rivers and david amram as actors. delphine seyrig also! – ah, do you remember the name of the lady painter who come to me in a while?

the film had as his basis - at the beginning - a scenario by kerouac in fact the act one of a play by kerouac which has never been published. detailing an afternoon in the life of his hero neil cassidy (or dean moriarty)² when a local excentric spiritualist bishop comes with his mother to visit his wife and family and the strange poets allen ginsberg and gregory corso and peter orlovsky are there in the living-room. and how everybody gets along.

so since there was not much dialogue written. we improvised our activity and that was robert franks genius as a photographer. he told me that it is all a matter of chance. "photography is an art for lazy peole. it just happens by chance." and that fits in with the: "magic is the total appreciation for chance".

that's the key to robert franks photography and the key to this film.

the chance-moments of gesture or communication that are invented on the spot.

so this is one of the first films made without any script. without a specific plot.

a situation? yes! a theme? yes! but not any specific action. we had to improvise that and then jack kerouac went into a recording studio. watched the film twice. drank a good deal of alcohol and improvised the soundtrack.

he did it twice. watched it twice. improvised twice and then frank and alfred lesley - who made the picture - combined the two speeches and so you have a very charming soundtrack in kerouacs own voice. kerouac had a very beautiful voice and was really good at a sort of a tippy improvisation. and so you get a very good taste of that here.

the other film : "renaldo and clara"³ is similar in construction to this modern form of following chance accept much more deliberate.

what he (bob dylan) did was shoot 110 hours of film on the "rolling thunder review" which anne waldman and i and peter orlovsky travelled. he carried with him a copy of "pull my daisy" as inspiration. and what he did was: direct a view scenes. set up

² jack kerouac : on the road , 1957

³ renaldo and clara (usa, 1977). 235 minutes. director: bob dylan; script: bob dylan, sam shepard; camera: david meyers, paul goldsmith, howard alk, michael levine; cutter: bob dylan; songs sung by: bob dylan, allen ginsberg, joan baez; actors, actresses: bob dylan, sara dylan, joan baez, allen ginsberg

some scenes along with sam shepard. set up occasions. provoke activity...
but then he had this mess of film... so : how do you put it together?
i visited him while he was assembling the film, cutting it and trying to find out what to do, and i saw what he was doing and then he explained it to me.
and then he asked me to interview him about it a half year later and so i had a long long interview which i taped and wrote down - which i don't have here unfortunately, but i remember the geste cause he explained to me the structure of the film.
when the film opened in america it was rejected.

though i understand it was much more accepted in europe because there was a more sophisticated sense of art and film - for which i must congratulate you - but dylan was very disillusioned because he spent a lot of money and worked for two and a half years and he thought he was painting his masterpiece in this.

his explanation of the structure is as follows: it is not collage but more like tapestry. a weaving. what he did was: look at all of the scenes and put them on file-cards and divided them into colors: blue, red and other. since he is also a painter he was interested in the color sequences.

secondly there are several symbols that travel through much of the film. the rose as the symbol of the feminine and the hat as the symbol of the masculine.

the subject matter is a question of identity or non-identity.

bob dylan naturally - like all of us - has a problem of identity.

"who am i?" the classic old question!

with him it is even more difficult because there is such a solidification of his identity and other people's minds. although i think he feels that he has no identity - like any sensible person. no permanent identity! no inherent identity! so the film is constantly questioning his identity so there are several other people and actors in the film who play the role of bob dylan or he plays perhaps some masked wonder.. (laughter)...but he is not shure.. as well as joan baez is somebody else. his wife is somebody else. and i am somebody else. however he has a "gamete" of themes which he put down on file cards also: the poet, rock'n-roll, death, marriage, children, god, prayer, music, american indians...(what else.. ya remember what are the themes we had..)⁴.. sex...naturally!... "music"⁵...?.... endless music... yes! it's all done during a big long tour... and there's an archieval element also..but...

....but having listed all of the basic themes then looked at all of the scenes to see... so...what dylan said was: we looked through all of them a hundred and ten hours and if there were any scenes that we said: "what's that? how did that happen? we took that!" (laughter in the audience)... something that was so strange and surprising that it blew their minds while they were watching the playback: those were the ones that were selected. then they were arranged in a sequence of colors then they were rearranged and arranged in the sequence of these themes following up on the themes from one to another.

so that is more like a modern painting. or more like ezra pounds "cantos" than a film with a linear plot.

although because it has this very basic theme of what is identity and who is bob dylan or who is allen ginsberg or is anybody there....

⁴ question put to anne waldman

⁵ anne waldman

it does have a coherence that is quite beautiful but if you are looking for a straight forward linear oldfashioned story-line it doesn't have that. it is more a composition like tapestry.

so if you relax your mind and allow that to be, then the film maybe will become very enjoyable.

there are several hooks from one scene to another. each scene is hooked into another. as for instance you see a truck riding in the rain and an american indian logo on the side of the cab and then you here dylan sing a song about an american indian and then the next scene will be in an american indian reservation.

so from one scene to another there is some hook or maybe the hat travelling from hand to hand or the rose from nose to nose...

thankyou

transcribed by christian m. katt. revised by ide hintze & juergen berlakovich

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