

*The “black bile”*

One answer to our query can be found in the Mittler Rebbe’s writings, which deserves to be quoted at some length:

I heard [about] this matter explicitly from the mouth of my father [R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi], who heard it in the House of Study from the Maggid [of Mezrich, successor to the Baal Shem Tov] [namely that]: No one can truly receive the secrets of the Torah, and the apprehension of the true depths of the Infinite such that it becomes stably set in his soul, unless he has the natural, essential melancholy, that is rooted in him specifically from his youth... True, natural “brokenness” [Yiddish: *tzu brochenkeit*], to the extent that he genuinely detests his life, continuously, hour by hour... Then...in *hitbonenut*...he is given a true revelation in his soul, so long as his heart worries within him...Then his sighing, and his above mentioned natural melancholy will be transformed into joy and pleasure--only due to the Godliness that palpably rests on his soul (*Tract*, p. 169).

Thus, one answer to the question is clear: one may transcend motives inherent to living one’s life when one can seriously question whether or not it is worth living. The person who is not merely transiently “dysphoric,” but who suffers rather from a protracted, pervasive, dispositional anguish (“to the extent that he genuinely detests his life, continuously, hour by hour...”), is, not surprisingly, the prime candidate for being motivated towards the different manner of life opened up through meditation. Also older more seasoned *hasidim*, those who have

accepted “...every bitter taste” for the sake of their spiritual goals, and whose motivation has settled onto these goals rather than things such as “...honour, fine garments and fine foods”--- these too are considered to have great potential for deep meditative work (*Tract*, pp. 179-180).

With respect to the melancholic types, the Mittler Rebbe considers and rejects the thesis that such a pervasive depression could be something physiological, declaring that “...it is not in its nature [i.e. of the natural soul/psyche] to become depressed except in the face of some tangible bodily lack...” (*Tract*, p. 168). When no such lack is apparent, and the depression is “ethereal, general, and essential [Yiddish: *essentzia*]”, so one may infer that this melancholy has nothing to do with “bile” *per se*, but rather is function of “...the bitterness of the soul at the imprisonment of the physical body,” and that meditation is the appropriate response (*Tract*, p. 168).

This pervasive melancholy or “black bile” (the literal translation of “*mara shechora*” in the preceding quotation, and throughout the Hasidic literature) thus emerges as a major pre-requisite for consummate meditative work as understood in the Chabad tradition. It is painful, it is unpleasant, but it nevertheless bodes well for meditation. I have not seen in any of the literature reviewed for this dissertation a parallel to this emphasis on depression as a pre-requisite and facilitator of depth spiritual work. The usual emphasis is on depression as a way station along the path, as in the classic “dark night of the soul” (see Hunt, 2007), or on meditation as treatment for depression. Indeed, we know that meditation can help with depression (Ivanowski & Malhi, 2007; Salmon et al., 2004), but has anyone considered the idea that depression can help with meditation? The question seems deserving of exploration by interested psychologists, to extend

our understanding of the apparently complex system of relationships between mood issues, spirituality and meditation.

The Mittler Rebbe presses his point here, going so far as to state baldly that the naturally cheerful, sociable individual (the “white bile”, *mara levana*, personality) will get nowhere in meditation (*Tract*, p. 169)! Whatever genuine experiences the latter has will be transitory, and ultimately the non-melancholic meditator will “walk in darkness,” and succeed only in “fooling himself completely” (*Tract*, p. 169)! In his commentary *ad locum*, Hillel Paritcher softens and qualifies his Rebbe’s statements (Hillel, 1868/1991, p. 171), noting that even the naturally outgoing cheerful type also has a deeply unconscious (“*be-he-elim meod*”, “very concealed”) latent melancholy, which can be “brought out from hiddenness [*he-elim*] to revealedness [*gilui*],”--namely brought to conscious experience--by an intense introspective process “at set times.” Here we are even trying to *induce* dysphoria to facilitate meditation!

The reference to “set times” relates to the optional midnight prayer service of traditional Jewish liturgy, the *tikkun chatzot*, which is designed to invoke a state of bitterness and anguish at the Exile in general, and one’s personal existential isolation from God in particular.<sup>1</sup> This bitterness is intended to then fuel the absorption into study and contemplation that is meant to follow upon the midnight service. Thus, a person lacking the natural depressive disposition who nevertheless wants to meditate must first induce the mood of the *tikkun chatzot* service--basically a state of existential angst informing a spiritual longing--as an essential pre-requisite to authentic involvement in meditation. Later generations of Chabad have de-emphasized these requirements,

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<sup>1</sup> Some key references regarding the *tikkun chatzot* prayers are to be found at Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1796/1981, pp. 192-193, 198; 1996, p. 370) and Hillel (1980).

and have even discontinued the midnight service altogether.

Altogether, I think that we can speak in Chabad of a kind of “meditation-readiness,” expressed in the Kabbalistic terminology of whether or not an individual is a “vessel” (“*kli*”) for meditative insight (*Tract*, p.169). I see this as analogous to the current idea of “reading readiness,” meaning that some children are simply not ready to read, such that the pedagogic efforts expended on them--however ingenious or high-tech--are essentially wasted efforts. In the absence of certain pre-requisites (neurological, emotional, motivational), even if they are made to decode certain syllables, they will not really read on their own. The child must be ready--in Hasidic terms, must be a “vessel”--for reading. Similarly, the existentially or spiritually referenced depression, the *mara shechora*, at least on some latent level, constitutes an important element for consummate meditative work as understood in Chabad.

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