

MEDITATION & MARXISM

By Ian Brown

But, as with everything, there was the contradiction. On the one hand, I wanted to escape. On the other, I wanted to confront, to immerse myself in social reality, to see life from the other side. I was never completely comfortable with the idea of 'escaping'. It depended what you were escaping. Drugs was one example.

One Saturday, on a balmy Fall evening up on the roof, the topic came up with Mary Herron: "Do you want a toke?" asked Mary, holding out a fat joint of grass.

"No thanks, I don't really like doing it ... plus I've had bad experiences the last couple of times."

Mary thought for a moment and then said: "Hmm, you might be better off with something like meditation or yoga. Maybe I should introduce you to my brother. He's coming down from Edinburgh next week."

"He lives in Edinburgh," I said, interested.

"Yes, he's at the University. He joined up with S.I.M.S. up there about a year ago."

"What does that stand for?"

"Student International Meditation Society," I think. It was started by the Maharishi, you know, George Harrison and all that bunch."

Of course I knew who she meant. The name immediately conjured up the image of the laughing, giggling, irrepressible, long-haired yogi who had been in the news so much. For a second, I flashed between this image and that of another long-haired, bearded man, albeit one with a much more serious expression - the man I was reading so much about, Karl Marx. It seemed to me, on reflection, that meditation qualified, like religion, as an 'opiate of the masses'. More contradictory images flashed through my mind: students putting flowers in the barrels of soldier's rifles, and a guru on a hill contemplating the flower in his hand. Wasn't meditating just another way of escaping from reality? And as for George Harrison and all those rich weirdos who'd flown to India to see him, most of them were into drugs - 'Lucy in the sky with diamonds' and all that rubbish.

Although not saying as much to Mary, I rejected the idea.

About a week later, Mary called me down from my room one evening.

"Ian, I'd like you to meet my brother."

"I hear you're at Edinburgh University," I blurted out, immediately struck by the fact that the guy in front of me did not look at all like a hippy.

"Yes, I'm studying Philosophy there."

Nor did he have the air of an intellectual, or 'a philosopher'. He spoke slowly and calmly. There was a quiet air of authority about him, and no trace of pretension. We talked for a while about various things. He told me about meditation without trying to sell it to me. The more we talked, the more I felt drawn to him. Here was someone who was British, but who was also somehow 'classless'. There were no tell-tale traces of wealth, privilege, or superiority. His hair and clothes were non-descript and his speech was devoid of any cultish mannerisms, and yet he had poise, composure, strength.

A week later I attended my first meeting at the S.I.M.S. centre. The technique of meditation was explained to a small group of us. Then we were encouraged to ask any questions that we might have. I said that I didn't want to become someone who sat on a hill in a blissful state all the time and never acted in and on the world. To this, the 'initiator' replied that meditation didn't take you away from any particular interest. Rather, by calming you and clearing you, it made you more effective and

efficient in what you did. So if, for example, you were a political radical, you would simply become a better political radical through meditating, more decisive, better able to put thought into action. The man was very persuasive. I decided to pay the £20 initiation dues and proceed.

Each of us was then taken aside individually. When it came to my turn, I was asked a few questions including my birthdate. Then I was told that I was going to be given a 'mantra', that had been selected personally for me by the initiator. I was told that this mantra was mine and mine alone, and that I should tell anyone what it was. The mantra was then whispered in my ear and I was told that this was the end of the initiation and that I was free to go.

I soon found out that meditation was not a panacea, but it certainly helped in the area of calming the mind. As I got used to the daily practice, I could feel how it slowed my whole metabolism and produced a deep, steady pattern of breathing. Meditation seemed to help restore the deeper rhythms, to allow the instinctual wisdom of the body to effect its healing. I loved the way that the repetition of the mantra slowly soothed the rapid-fire chatter of the mind.

But still, despite the ear plugs and meditation and forays to the roof, there was a need for a more total escape. I kept returning to the idea that somehow there must be a way to rent a cottage in the country. There had to be some kind of magazine or paper that advertised such places. I started to make enquiries and eventually found out that, indeed there was such a periodical. It was called 'Dalton's Weekly' and was available at most newsagents. I went out right away and bought a copy. There, county by county, were all kinds of listings. I quickly realised that the further the location from London, the cheaper was the rent - which of course made sense. In the end I found a listing for a farm cottage in Devon for £15 a month. As it happened, Stewart, one of The Cut's occupants, had recently completed his B.A. at L.S.E., and, like me, wanted a place to escape to so that he could write. I told him about the cottage in Devon and asked him if he would like to go in on the deal with me. Without any hesitation, he said 'yes'.

Two days later, I hitch-hiked down to a place called Bradworthy in North Devon. After veering further and further away from the main roads, I located the cottage just outside a sleepy little village with one pub. It couldn't have been better. The 'cottage' was in fact one half of a large farmhouse. There were two bedrooms, a kitchen, a bathroom, and a living room with a large wood stove. And there was silence, utter silence. I paid the first month's rent on the spot.

Back in London, the question became how to survive economically, now that I had two homes to support. I had to make sure that my income would cover the £14 monthly rent for my room in The Cut, as well as the £7.50 rent on the cottage in Bradworthy (my half of the total) and my share of the bills in both places.

I needed part time work, a job that would allow me to work for a while, make enough money to cover expenses, then let me disappear for a few weeks to Devon. But it also had to be a job that I could resume at will, when I returned to London. This seemed like too much to hope for. But right away, Stewart said that he'd heard of an agency called 'Rentastaff' that employed people on a casual basis. Shit jobs, admittedly, and at shit wages, but at least they were short-term, in plentiful supply, and allowed the freedom to come and go.

A few days later, I went to the agency which was located beside Charing Cross station, within walking distance on the other side of the river. This time there was no interview, no Miss Bedsocks, no potted plants - just a dingy office, and a line up of men who looked like they'd stepped out of a photo about The Great Depression. Behind a counter, a couple of sleazy looking guys asked a few brief questions and then handed out cards with addresses on them.

On my card were the words,

ANNING, CHADWICK & KIVER,
West Thames Street, London Bridge:
Wanted immediately, I de-stapler

I was told that I should start the next morning.

* * *

Entering another world, another time zone. The global village of Notting Hill, the radical chic microcosm of The Open Space, the ivory tower central nervous system of L.S.E., the gasworks urban blight of Kensal Rise, the arterial noise of The Cut, and now another chamber of London's organism to traverse, to explore, to be engulfed by.

West Thames Street. The world of Victorian dockland. Jack the Ripper territory. Narrow empty streets, hemmed in by hulking red-brick warehouses pitted with grimy broken window-panes. A world, seemingly forsaken, awaiting only the execution of the wrecker's ball.

The sign said, 'Anning, Chadwick & Kiver'. The first impression I received as I entered the building was of an unbearable stench that made me want to throw up. Someone at Rentastaff had told me that Anning, Chadwick & Kiver was a fur warehouse, so I figured the smell might have something to do with the curing process. This turned out to be the case. As I was led to my workplace, I was taken through a large room where the curing of the skins took place. The smell was so overpowering that I had to hold my breath. There were quite a number of workers and as I looked around I realized they were all women. For the first time in my life I became the object of catcalls.

"Allo darlin', comin' to work with us, are you then? Goin' to get the fur flyin', is that it? You can get my fur flyin' anytime, darlin'"

White-faced, sallow complexions, hollow-eyed, curlers-in-hair Cockney ladies. The genuine East-end article. Desensitized, and yet still alive and perky in their resilient beings.

Leaving them behind, I was taken into a room full of already cured furs.

"Your job, until the Persian Lamb show next week, is to take the staples out of all these price-tags. This is all you'll need."

And with that, I was handed a long-handled screw-driver and shown a corner of the room that contained stack upon stack of Persian Lamb skins.

For the rest of the week, that was my job - for nine hours a day, 'de-stapling' furs with my screw-driver.

The following week, there was the big Persian Lamb show. About four times a year, there was a show that featured one particular kind of fur such as mink, sable, fox. These shown attracted an elite group of international buyers, whose itinerary took them between the major selling centres such as Montreal, Leningrad, New York, Stockholm and London. The buyers struck me as cartoon caricatures of 'Capitalists' - fat, cigar-smoking, pin-stripe suits, fur-collared overcoats, loud and autocratic in manner.

For the three days of the show, my job changed from de-stapler to 'go-for'. I had to bring certain selections of furs to display when directed to by a particular buyer. It was a bit like doing a practicum for 'Exploited Labour 101'

"Boy, bring me lot 597, and hurry up about it!" said a cigar-chomping Capitalist.

The Marxist literature that I had been reading began to take on a much deeper meaning.

I felt like I was in a time warp. This was Dickensian London. I couldn't believe it was 1971. If only places like L.S.E. did have practicums like this. And the first people to experience them should be

the arm-chair Marxists like Swingewood, followed by the arm-chair Zen Masters like Steuer. Think of the thesis titles one could create: 'Zen and The Art of Curing A Fur' or 'The Sound Of One Fur Dying'.

I trudged back and forth all day with sets of Persian Lamb skins. 'Hey boy, get this, get that', 'Yassa boss, massa, right away'. By the end of the day I could hardly contain my anger. I started thinking about Blair Cunynghame; yes, dammit, I'd been right to challenge him. There's no way I should feel guilty about that. Capitalism was a death culture built on exploitation of people, of animals, of the land and its resources - driven by greed and lack of caring for inequities and inequalities. Fuck it! Why did the workers take it?

On Friday, I picked up my weekly pay check for £13 (which worked out to about six shillings an hour). A couple of pints of beer an hour is about what I was making, and that's about what was needed to keep going. At least I was getting the rent paid off.

As I practiced my meditation in the evenings, I kept reminding myself of what the initiator had said - meditating and feelings of anger were not necessarily contradictory. I just had to find a way to channel my anger.