

'Bhojan-Veechar': A Contemplative Essay

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Abstract

In this paper, I will seek to present both the 'living response' to the question of what contemplation is, as well as the nature of the process by which I arrived at this position. I open with a narrative journey of the challenges, paralysis, and eventual peace-making that was required of me to find alignment between what I desired to do and how to honor the authenticity of the question within my current circumstances through contemplative practice itself. Following this open, I detail the decision to both answer and engage with the aforementioned question by exploring my relationality with 'bhojan' (English translations include 'food' or 'meal') through the use of a short poem to draw explanatory connections between the concept of 'bhojan' and my understanding of contemplation.

Keywords: *poetry, somatic, intentionality, bhojan, contemplative practices*

ARRIVING

It is a result of being in tension with contemplation as I sought to describe its nature that led to the emergence of a 'living response' that encapsulates both a definitive and the container for the definitive. I choose to use the adjective 'living' to denote the ever-shifting nature of the concept, and how its solidification based on one's interpretation will shift again as one engages in its praxis, similar to the relationship between permanence and change that Paulo Freire articulates in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* - contemplation begets contemplation.

This tension arose from a conflict between what contemplation requires of me and what my

current circumstances allow. To avoid a reductionist attempt at trying to illustrate this challenge, I will highlight that the *immersive* nature of contemplation in particular (and what this looks like will follow in the pages to come), was the focal point of tension as my mind, body, heart, and spirit have all been pushed to the brim of their holding capacities during this time of writing. My desire to engage in a contemplative practice in order to ascertain its definitiveness was near impossible when I made an *intentional* effort to do so. This included trying to find a tranquil space outdoors to write, trying to reflect after a long shower – anything that would support my outcome-oriented default to catalyze in this situation of necessity (to complete the assignment). The beautiful irony that this writing

process has proven is that this method can no longer serve me - no matter my desperation to reach an end. It is in the submission to this truth, and the leap of faith in serendipitous unfolding, that I chose not to fixate on the paper itself any longer. It was only by letting go that I became able to receive. It was in the dim lights and tranquil liveliness of my kitchen one evening as I made dinner that it finally *arrived*. Without calling, without warning, but with the familiar warmth of a jigsaw piece falling in place – I knew. It revealed itself as I became attuned – and this reveal also emerged from the recognition that it was what I was doing in that moment that allowed this realization to surface: the glisten of the blade; the aroma of ingredients; the heat waves of the element; the rhythmic repetition of movements; the sound of hot oil - contemplation as *bhojan*.

BHOJAN

A literal and direct translation of the Hindi term *bhojan* – derived from the Sanskrit “*bhójana*” (Wiktionary, n.d.) - results in a singular English meaning: food. This *semantic* understanding falls gravely short of capturing the *somatic* experience of the word and all that it encapsulates in just two syllables. There is a deep-rooted familiarity in the way the word rolls off my tongue, as if to signal the sacredness of its place in our lives and of those before us – connecting us across time and space. Allowing myself to experience the warmth from saying the word out loud helped bring language to all the other sensations this term evokes - synergy, consciousness, care, and transformation. Initially, I presumed this reaction to stem from my recent success in cooking traditional dishes, after having witnessed my Mother perform the art every day growing up. I now move through her motions with my own hands, my own eyes, and my own acute sense of direction. But as I continued to cook more

frequently, it no longer seemed that it was just my ability to recreate the foods of my ancestors that was eliciting this gratification. The rhythmic repetition of movements, decisions, and actions in a set order resulted in a comfortable familiarity over time, which in turn allowed for the arrival – and consequently, *knowing*. No longer hyper fixated on technique, accuracy, and memory recall, my body was able to move on its own accord, allowing my consciousness to synergize with the experience of cooking in its *entirety* - not just as isolated actions taken in sequence. The experience became *whole*, transcending the sensations of my immediate setting. During this time, the decision to choose my relationship to *bhojan* to illustrate my conceptualization of contemplation became clear. To honor and center what I believe to be the somatic and transcendental nature of contemplation, this essay is structured around a poem accompanied by stanza analyses of its imagery and sensory cues; an invitation to you dear reader, to understand as I have, *bhojan* as contemplation.

BHOJAN-VEECHAR

Have you ever

Noticed

The cool echo of a steel pot

Etched with the markings of your

Mother's home

The drops that remain from wash

Under side

Sizzle as they meet the heat of the elements

In cacophony

...

I chose to open this piece with a focus on the action of 'noticing'. Its placement in the beginning of the piece coincides with my understanding of contemplation as a process, wherein the 'beginning' of the experience is signalled by the consciousness of presence, the "fleeting instant of pure awareness just before you conceptualize the...[presence]" (Gunaratana, 2011, p. 132). I would argue that becoming attuned to an already existent phenomenon is a key tenant of contemplation. The 'newness' of the practice that one might experience does not necessarily equate with creation (i.e., novel in the absolute) but rather an emergence of the capacity of the practitioner in being able to identify connections not seen to *themselves* before (i.e., novel as relative to the practitioner), similar to how Wolfram von Goethe asserts that "...every object well contemplated opens a new organ of perception in *us...*" (Kelly, 2014, p. 46). It is this simple and yet profound element of the contemplative experience that is reflected in these first two stanzas. My Mother has used the same pot for years; water droplets on a cooking pot after a wash always appear; but it was my noticing of their clear, somatic presence that revealed itself. Similarly, 'watching' how *jeera* (cumin seeds) and other ingredients used by my Mother simply move through her motions and with the elements led to the *awareness* of my *own* senses. My emphasis of the somatic experience(s) of contemplation is reflected in the attention to these senses of the moment described: fickle, waterfalling, flamed, sizzle, aroma...

*Have you ever
Marvelled
At the way the Earth's colors
Glisten in your hands
The same greens of a deep forest
Ruby reds born of richer soil
The yellow kick up from a scoop of haldi (turmeric)
An ode to clouds of Holi celebration
As life begets life*

*Have you ever
Revelled
In the dance of the light
As it flickers along the edge of a blade
With each cross
Slice, twist, and cut
Like the shimmering surface
Of a beckoning samundar (ocean)
...*

I would argue that contemplation is not just the consciousness of presence. There is an active facet of the practice that distinguishes it from the neutral recognition of *awareness*. Contemplation implies an orientation that builds on this awareness - an engagement of a kind, however subtle, that transcends the initial element of awareness ("being") into action ("doing"). Stanzas three and four of the poem reflect this condition of contemplation that I choose to term 'gentle attentivity'. To 'marvel' and 'revel' as contemplation is to engross in one's awareness with appreciative consideration to that which one becomes attuned. I would argue that 'meticulousness' and other forms of fixated concentration are not synonymous with this form of consideration, as they denote an almost aggressive imposition of perspective - whereas contemplation is characterized by a 'care-ful', purposeful, reception of that which "arises in the moment" (Bai, 2012, p. 324) – or that which simply *is*.

*Have you ever
Breathed
In the steam that curls upwards
Like the dhuaan (smoke)
of a sacred fire
In ceremony
Framing the devotee's face
In a moment of transcendence
...*

My understanding of contemplation has its origins in a fragmented relationship with my cultural heritage. 'Contemplation' was an often-translated term associated with the meaning of scriptures and hymns I grew up hearing, but not truly listening to – because I did not know how. Within Sikh culture, the term "*shabad-veechar*" (Singh, n.d., para. 3) pertains to the *active* engagement with Gurbani (a term used within Sikh culture to refer to the sacred literature as composed by the Sikh Gurus); the literal contemplation ('veechar') of the hymns and sacred teachings of the Gurus ('shabad'). Consequently, I have been encountering the term contemplation for as long as I have been trying to make sense of the meaning, role, and relationship to my ancestral teachings. Stanza five pays tribute to the origins of my acquaintance with contemplative practice within this religious-cultural context. However, both stanzas five and six reflect an homage to the sagacious nature of contemplation as a kinetic phenomenon wherein one embodies a "crossing...onto [another] side" (Merriam-Webster, n.d., Entry 3 of 3) – *transformative*, and *transcendental*. The religious allusion ("sacred", "devotee") and imagery of "hands" and "whispers" in this part of the poem reflects what I believe to be the distinguishing character of the 'gentle attentivity' mentioned above – interconnectedness, or as Thich Nhat Hanh more beautifully specifies, 'interbeing': "You cannot be by yourself, alone. You have to interbe with everything else in the cosmos. That is the nature of interbeing..." (Hanh, 2001, p.120). In the consciousness of that one evening in my kitchen, what truly cemented the idea of *bhojan* as contemplation was my 'gentle attentivity' to the then-current sensations, movements, and attunement as being interwoven across time with the multifarious journeys of other beings. The spices I was sprinkling into the masala were grown

in lands far from my present. They were picked, prepared, and packaged by a mosaic of hands; they *traversed* continental distances to arrive in my own. The cooking in my kitchen is thus not an isolated event – it is part of a continuous phenomenon wherein all that has come before, in actuality, comes into presence at the same time. It is here we can recognize contemplation as Hanh’s ‘interbeing’.

Have you ever

Witnessed

Your heart slow

To the beat of the ground

That lay beneath your feet

In Sukhasana (cross-legged pose)

Poised above your

plate adorned

With so many, many blessings

You sit

It is from the Earth

And with the Earth

That you nourish

Bhojan

In Ayurvedic tradition, there are practices that I believe to encapsulate this holistic experience of *bhojan*, as they not only focus on the type and preparation of food, but also the manner in which it is consumed. One’s positionality to the food itself, the pose in which one sits, and the purpose behind each morsel are all not mere considerations for ‘healthy habits’ but fundamental to the way in which we engage in this Earth-tethering practice we call ‘eating’. In Sikh Gurudwaras, with the exception of Elders and folks with accessibility needs, visitors will sit on the floor in the *langar* hall in rows on long carpets to eat. Thus, within my cultural context, the connection to food has been reinforced as a (quite literally) grounding and humbling experience as we ‘break bread’ with unknown yet familiar faces of those part of the *Satsanghat*. The prayers and hymns sung in the *darbar* hall resound in the *langar* hall while patrons eat and harmonize with the continuous movements of volunteers behind the stoves, karahis (type of cooking vessel), dishwashers, and mountains of donated groceries. The nature of this experience reflects an intentionality – a careful consideration of the relationship between all that is ‘being’, objective, and transcendental. It is within the ‘intersubjectivity’ and ‘interobjectivity’ (as conceptualized in Ken Wilber’s Integral Theory

framework (AQAL)) of these relationships that one may find what I would argue to be a key characteristic of the contemplative experience - *consequential intentionality*.

I termed this concept to address the subtle neutrality that may be implicit in forms of purposefulness that retain a quality of absolute objectivity, where in the action extends only until its mechanistic definition. For example, a group of people may convene to engage in dialogue; here there is action (convening) for a purpose (dialogue). It is very possible that something may organically emerge from this deliberate gathering by virtue of it taking place. However, for it to be *consequential* – that is, for there to be significance and not just a product of reaction - I would argue this gathering cannot just be left to the literal placement of subjects in one space. The conditions for dialogue, and approach utilized to facilitate the dialogue itself, are critical factors that must be inherent to the intentionality that went behind the purposefulness of the gathering itself. In other words, it is not enough to say, “Let us meet here on this day within this time to talk about this topic,”. It is when this ‘intention’ reflects a carefully considered approach rooted in particular values, as well as a prepared set of practices to support that which emerges, that it becomes of consequence. I argue this to be true of contemplation, where, as discussed earlier, there is not just an attunement to what is present, but also an active, purposeful engagement with that presence, with the final piece of this being consequentiality – the intent to arrive at significance, as well as the deliberate effort behind that meaning-making. It is the moving beyond the absoluteness of recognition and action that one witnesses the transformative nature of contemplation - like that which unfolds in the harmonization of the *Satsanghat*, in and outside of the *langar* hall.

The conceptualization of *bhojan* as contemplation, and the use of poetry as a medium to delineate this conceptualization, is unique to my interpretation of, and tribute to, the practice. It is very possible that *bhojan* simply reflects a singular definition to the language speakers of the culture. At the same time, one could argue that the experience of *nourishment* – regardless of the language we use to term it – embodies an inherent, interrelational nature that is evident in each facet of that experience. From the source and practices of food cultivation, to its preparation and finally to consumption, this part of the human experience reminds us of the wisdoms of peoples long past and those still resilient today; there is no duality in relation, only relative synchronicity. Contemplation supports us to carefully attune ourselves to this relationality in an active, transformative, and consequently intentional manner. *Veechar* - as the term for contemplation I grew up subconsciously familiarizing – is conjoined with *bhojan* to form the title of the poem. It serves as both a reference to the poem’s narrative of contemplating my conceptualization of *bhojan*, as well as a paradoxical play where the *bhojan* being described is also the embodied example of contemplation.

What is contemplation, truly, if not the playful, nourishing pursuit of this question in itself?

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- been settled on the stolen and occupied Coast Salish territories of the xwməθkwəy əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səlílwəta (Tsleil-Waututh) nations since she was 4 years old. She has a passion for design-thinking and process-oriented visioning as well as all things project management. She is keen to build her capacity in relation to knowledge mobilization and translation. In her spare time, Simran enjoys the very practice that served as the inspiration for this piece submitted during her time in Simon Fraser University's Contemplative Inquiry & Approaches in Education MEd program – cooking (and all that it encompasses)!

Author Bio

Simran Sarwara (she/her) is an able-bodied, young woman of color and a racialized settler from Ambala, Punjab in Northern India who has