PSYCHOLOGICAL CHANGES
IN MEDITATING WESTERN MONKS
IN THAILAND

Douglas Burns

Ron Jonah Ohayv
Copenhagen, Denmark

This is an edited transcript of a meeting between Ron Ohayv and Dr. Douglas Burns, an American psychiatrist who had been living in Thailand for 8 years (as of 1973). Dr. Burns had become interested in Buddhism and meditation as a form of psychological self-therapy and was researching the changes in personality that take place over a series of years in Westerners who had ordained as monks. His subjects were Americans and Europeans who practiced Vipassana (mindfulness) meditation. He expected to have his final test results and their computer analysis, covering 22 personality variables, with 30 subjects and a large control group, completed by late 1977. Because the research was never completed and the data is not available, this interview is merely intended to point toward, rather than quantify, certain trends or changes in meditating monks (see ABOUT THE AUTHORS).

Dr. Burns: In regard to my research, essentially there's two aspects. First, I've been around here for over seven years now, and I have come to know most of the people who are involved in meditation, and have seen what takes place over a period of time. I'm interested in those who look like they've done pretty well, and those who look like they're plodding on with the same general personality and the same problems they had four or five years ago. I know these people individually, have known them for years, and they come to visit me when I'm in Bangkok. I really think the most valuable part of my work is this clinical observation, these impressions. But the point of my research is to correlate my clinical impressions with the test-impressions.
rationale for testing

In order to objectify and document it and abolish any amount of personal biases as much as I can, I'm also giving M.M.P.I. tests, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Test, which is pretty good, because it is based so much on a mid-Western American culture. But in its validity rating, it's applicable to almost any Anglo-Saxon people, like Australians or English. Also I've used it on Germans and French and my feeling is that the results are pretty much a function of their ability to handle the American idiom and slang which occurs throughout the test.

The test consists of 556 questions straight out of a book, about attitudes, beliefs, and preferences, which are all answered true and false. The results are fed into a computer, and it factors out the way this person sees things-by comparing their responses with an average answer and a series of answers-that they appear more or less depressed, more or less dependent, for over 20 different aspects of the personality. Also it is possible to factor out bizarre thought-disorders, psychosomatic concerns, dependency, dominance, maladjustment anxiety, defensiveness, schizophrenia, and so forth.

Ronald Ohayv: How do you compare their tests?

Burns: The ideal situation is to give the test to a person as soon as he comes here with the intention of ordaining, and then sample him again-yearly intervals seem about right. I first started this in 1971, so I'm now into my second repeat, and though some subjects aren't available, I am able to test most of them at 11-or 13-month intervals. I'm comparing data for each person with the whole group of people in meditation. In combination, the results should show the changes in each one, versus the changes in the others. It's also based on who's doing what types of meditation. For instance a person might try 3 months of one sort of meditation during the year, and so on. So it's a very complicated thing: 22 different factors per person, per time, and then the people together.

So right now, I'm just seeing the people, getting to know them, extending the period of direct observation and involvement with them, and secondly, testing them and filing the data away. In the process, I skim through each subject's answers at one year, two years, and three.

Ohayv: How many test subjects are involved?

Burns: It is limited by the number of Western monks who stay in the robes long enough and who are willing to cooperate. When I first came here in 1965, there were about 10 Western
monks in Thailand, and the number has been steadily climbing, but to come down to it, I have only 15 people, plus or minus 2 or 3.

I started testing in July 1971, with 4 or 5 subjects, some more in October, and December, and new ones keep coming along. I give the test all year long. So when a group of them are due for their annual testing, I go up to the place where most of them are, in one general area of the Ubon province, another in Udon, both areas in the Northeast. These are mostly Americans, British, and Canadians. So I found there were 5 serious ones who have been retested, several new, and several who deviate from what I'm interested in. One example of the latter is one who just went back to Germany after 3 months, and is not meditating, so he doesn't really take it seriously.

*Ohayv:* How many in your groups had dropped out?

*Burns:* It's funny. New ones are always coming in, and sometimes I miss someone and get him a year and a half later. Sometimes I think people have left and then they show up. People who drop out of the research do so because they've left Thailand, or quit meditation. However, there are around 40 Western monks now.

*Ohayv:* In the World Fellowship of Buddhists they say between 50 and 80.

*Burns:* Last year they said 40, so there may be others I haven't heard about. But as a large control group I'm using Peace Corps volunteers. It's not an ideal control group, but it seems to be the only thing available: the same nationality, the same general age-group, with basically an ideal, an ideological background of questioning values that makes them want to experience a new culture. If my data shows changes in these Western monks, it could be said that these changes are due to being transplanted into an Asian culture. Since the Peace Corps volunteers are an approximation of the same kind of population, they make a useful comparison group. They are also much more available, and I am testing them in blocks of 50 and 80. I'm more or less the Peace Corps psychiatrist here and I am called when they need a psychiatric consultation. To a new group coming through, I give a lecture on Buddhism, followed by an explanation of my research and testing, and about 213 of the group say "Sure", and about a year later about 2/3 of that 213 is available for retesting.

*Ohayv:* About the monks, have you found that a certain kind of personal background mentality brings Western men here to

---

*Psychological changes in meditating Western monks* 13
ordain? The meditation teachers unanimously say that anybody can meditate. And when I ask them, "But don't you get mostly people with certain kinds of 'defilements' or personalities?", they say no. But there's a wide belief in some circles that only certain people are interested, and are therefore going to get anything out of it.

Burns: If you take just the typical personality profile that comes out on these people, the typical profile of a Western Buddhist monk in Thailand, they are highly diversified. There is not a stereotyped personality. There's all types, from those that look very disturbed on the test, to those that look very well-adjusted.

An easier way to break it down is to ask, "What groups become monks?" Now there's a certain type who study Buddhism and come out here with the definite idea of ordaining, then there's the group that are just world-travelers coming through. Some of them do it as another experience to go home and tell about, and some do it because such world-travelers are often questioning values and looking for the answers to their problems, and they stumble into it. Then there's something in between, the fellow who's going to investigate the East and Eastern philosophy. The classification is not quite that clearly delineated. Some are here to study Buddhism or to learn Pali or Sanskrit, and are not interested in ordaining. Some are in the robes as a way of knowing Thai culture better, something like that, but they're not meditating or doing the discipline. A fair number of Peace Corps stay on after their tour of duty, and occasionally a OJ. gets his discharge and comes straight back. There may be more than 40 people in the robes, but a lot of them are here just to do a study, or for a two-week training; they're not here for the serious training, so I usually don't include them in my study. These are the different ways people come into it.

I have met Western people who are religiously orthodox in their speech, literal, and go right by the Scriptures. They're the Buddhist counterpart of Christian missionaries. There are no questions asked. They get defensive, committed to the system, and don't like people questioning it. Other fellows have taken the ordination, taken the vows, and yet will ask each other, "Do you consider yourself Buddhist or not?", and they say, "Well, if you qualify it this way or that way, yes, I guess I am." And some of these wind up at the same monasteries. But usually one kind of monastery will create an atmosphere which appeals to the more dedicated religious types, and another will attract the more eclectic types.
Ohayv: What kinds of trends have you noticed in these groups since you started giving the test?

Burns: The test factors out different personality facets, and if you break them down again, you find wide-ranging variations and deviations. With only 15 people, and over 20 different traits, I really don't have that much intricate correlated data. If I give a person the test today and he repeats it a week from now, just the frame of mind he may be in will produce a slight shift in the personality measurements. The significance will increase a little bit as I retest them, but there will always be a certain amount of change. The question is, will the same patterns and trends hold over a 2, 3 or 4-year period?

Ohayv: The main thing that interests me in your testing is if and how meditation can change the personality-structure. When you say they're doing better according to the test, are you referring to personality?

Burns: When I say better in the test context, I mean the fellow is less depressed, more self-confident, less defensive, or he just feels not as "uptight." He's happier, understands himself better, has better control over himself.

My feeling as to who does well by this definition is that the really committed ones, the unquestioning, hard-working, just-because-the-Buddha-said-so ones, don't get very far over the years. By the same token, the fellows who are into it as just another way to blow their minds or have another trip, don't get very far either.

But the ones whom I feel have shown the most results are those who have said, "I appreciate Buddhism in its principles of psychological development. I don't really care whether I'm wearing a green or a yellow robe, but this particular type of tradition provides the environment and the social feedback that pressures me to be a little more disciplined with myself. And I'll go along with some of the games of chanting and the particular Thai decorum, in order to work on myself." These fellows are eclectic but dedicated enough to keep working, as opposed to those who keep working and become compulsive, who have religious dedication which is so strong that it prevents them from experimenting, and changing what they need to change.

I could probably count half a dozen whom I think have done well this way, who have something to show for it. But then again these are young people who are ready to question...
themselves and work on themselves, and how much of this would have succeeded in another setting too? This is a question that's hard to answer. The Peace Corps volunteers are not working on themselves directly-this isn't their idea. But what you start believing about other people, and the way you start feeling toward them, can change-if from nothing else than maturing, taking advantage of the fact that you're growing older, to mellow or improve.

*Ohayv:* What about doing better or improvement in their meditation?

_Burns:_ As to depth of experience in meditation, this is a whole different facet. I know of meditative situations which are conducive to it. Also some individuals, regardless of the particular meditation environment, seem to have important experiences. The thing about experiences is that often they're like a drug-experience—they can be very impressive or overwhelming, but they fade into the memory. When a meditator goes back on the street and has to bargain with the taxis, he finds that the same feelings and ways of responding come back. Meditation is an entirely different dimension.

A fellow I knew quite well during most of my time as a monk, stayed on after I disrobed, and went to a place called Wat Vivekosshrom, which uses the very intensive Burmese training technique, and he had some strong experiences. Extreme mood changes, something like astral projections, and intense awareness of the dichotomy between mental and physical experiences. He's a good example because I knew him quite well as a close friend, and we'd been together for quite a few months in a sort of intimate situation, both being monks at the same monastery. He's very bright, a genius I.Q., and not at all prejudiced, not the type to believe things too readily, and yet he went through these experiences, and was still quite insightful. I was about the only person he was willing to see in the 10 months he went through this training, so I feel I have a good close-hand account of it from somebody, as I haven't found the time to drop everything and go there myself for this purpose.

I think most of us at one time or another have had some intense states of tranquility or transcendental states in meditation, though maybe only once or for half an hour every 3 months. Maybe some can turn on once a week or a half-hour a day—it's an individual thing. But both by reading the Scriptures and by observation of both Thais and Westerners, I can see that those who have experiences with deep concentration are often very ordinary human beings. Sometimes they're in a good mood,
sometimes in a bad one, some of them are reasonably decent people and some of them are terribly conceited, and these far-out experiences don't necessarily correlate with what Buddhism is trying to get at.

The Thais say that that is getting rid of the mental defilements, of selfishness, of the ego-centric perception which is part of the human being.

Ohayv: I heard some comments about your work from one of the monks who had taken the test, and to probe a little into your results, I'll tell you what he said. He said you had mentioned dominance in the meditation teachers and dependency in many of the monks who were coming to stay with them. That several of the monks were tending more toward a mixing of sexual roles, becoming more so-called "feminine." And that some were tending toward changes in extreme traits.

Burns: He's got the basic building-blocks, but has not put them together quite right. Two of the factors that I measure on the test are dominance and dependency. I've noticed that some guys are high on dominance, some on dependency, and some high on both, in a paradoxical but nevertheless possible way. Another thing I've observed is a transference-relationship between Westerners and Thai teachers. Some really seem to have parental transference, as if they had a rejecting father, whom they tried to please but it didn't work, and now they're being a good faithful disciple. I suspect in one or two cases that they're trying to establish this same sort of acceptance from the teacher. The particular people I've suspected this of most, however, are not tested, because they have been very defensive, almost cultish. In some cases there is a cult of the particular teacher and outsiders are suspect, as in a small fundamentalist sect, or a close-reigned group where the outsider is viewed with suspicion. There are variations of this here.

Another factor measured is "masculine-feminine" interest-patterns—that's the way it's described in the test. But if a man scores high on the feminine part, it often really means that he has a broad education, like a college degree or beyond, or a broad cultural background and has travelled around. So there is a certain bias in saying "masculine" and "feminine." The fellow who is inclined toward homosexuality, will by probability also start to show an increase on that scale; but so will one who becomes interested in religious, philosophical, cultural, and sociological problems, as opposed to baseball and boxing.

Every one of us who has taken this test, right from the start has been high on that scale. Everything else the fellows vary
on. This is one of the few things that is predictable, that the guy is obviously not just a rough-and-tumble joe from the boxing matches, but has introspective, philosophical-religious thoughts, which pushes that scale up. Quite a few of them, not all, have shown an increase in that direction on their retesting after one year, but some show a decrease.

*Ohayv:* Do you think that a lot of these men are trying to escape sexual troubles when they become monks?

*Burns:* If they have such troubles, I don't think sex per se is really the problem, in spite of the subtleness. Straight biological sex rarely seems to be the issue. The problems that can be dealt with and resolved, and/or the problems that they are escaping from, and therefore not confronting or resolving, are more emotional ... interpersonal relations of love or closeness.

*Ohayv:* But have you noticed in talking with them about their backgrounds, that many have just come from an emotional crisis period? I have talked to several where this has been the case.

*Burns:* I'd say it's not uncommon, but it's certainly not the usual thing, not 50%, but more in the 20% range.

*Ohayv:* Do you recall any individual cases where a monk has changed substantially?

*Burns:* Yes. Especially over a 3-year period, there is an increase in self-confidence for some people. It builds up in several out of a group, but not with everybody. I've noticed a continual drop in defensiveness, and in regard to social introversion, some are continually climbing on that scale, some dropping on it. These differences may correlate with the type of meditation practice.

*Ohayv:* What about extreme traits changing?

*Burns:* On clinical observation, some extreme traits of a negative sort can be further accentuated. Some people become extremely insular, "internalizing," to use a psychiatric word. In Thai values and Thai sensitivity, they become "120% Buddhist." Some become more and more committed and narrow, withdrawn and defensive, as they commit more and more years and nothing has happened. They become dissatisfied with themselves I think, but can't quite admit it.

If you've spent eight years in a little jungle monastery, and
have almost forgotten everything you've learned or believed about the outside world, this becomes your whole reality, almost as if you were a Lao country boy who has never been outside it to start with, and therefore had no other knowledge against which to judge these things. You become brainwashed, confined, provincial, in this very narrow system. Meditation goes astray in many cases that I've heard of. But in the cases I'm speaking of, it's not so much meditation per se, as the extreme commitment to a particular stereotyped notion of what one should be and do.

**Ohayv:** Does this intense introversion develop commonly?

**Burns:** It's rather individual. It depends partly on your own personality and tendencies, but also on the type of practice, the kind of teacher you have, and on the orientation of the place you are staying at. There are other monasteries where the routine is structured in such a way that it's hard to avoid contact with other people. There is meditation, but also group activities, group chores, and meetings. They're not colored by a suspicious atmosphere, or one of reverence and awe, or the idea that this particular place must be defended. In these monasteries people become a little more relaxed; they see their fellow human-beings as less of a threat, and are therefore inclined toward less introversion. Often one thinks of meditation as the practice by which someone sits down, starts working inside his mind and cuts the rest of the world out. But it's much more complicated than that. Even those monks who have the ideal of complete withdrawal, don't do so—they react to people.

**Ohayv:** These monks must get relatively isolated. I've seen that they often stay together in the same wats. And I imagine that they can't speak Thai well enough to be able to really communicate their thoughts to others. This implies a "culture-shock."

**Burns:** There are places where there are a fair number of Westerners, 2 or 3, maybe 5 or 6, and they have each other and communicate together. Then there are places where they're together, but are not really communicating, because they're that type and it's that type of place. They see each other briefly, but don't talk much together. It often depends on what time of year it is. Sometimes, for one or two months, they'll be more or less hanging out at the same place—one or two will be "out," and 4 or 5 will be at the central wat, During the rainy season, everyone is by himself. The abbots realize that it's not too good if they get together all too much.
Ohayv: Yes, they sometimes send them out to the different branch wats.

Burns: Yes. A lot of the fellows are learning Thai, especially in Ubon. Each year just before the rainy season, someone will come by here, and he'll want to get some books or something downtown, and I'll have to tell my servant where to go with him and what to do. He comes back at the end of the season and doesn't need the servant. It's not very good Thai he's speaking, but it's functional. Then I see him the next year and it's better, and the next year again. So some of them are learning Thai and getting social feedback, and some are not. It's very individual.

Ohayv: What about the practice of labeling monks by their dominant character traits, and giving them specific exercises to bring them more into balance psychologically?

Burns: In one of the passages from the sutras which I think most of the meditation teachers here overlook, the Buddha says that, "The practice you take up at any given instant must be determined by what state of mind you're in at that instant.

Sometimes one is angry, sometimes conceited, sometimes drowsy and sleepy and nothing's happening, sometimes over-excited and stimulated, and you have to direct your practice accordingly. To label people as a "lazy-type," or a "greedy-type," or one of the other six types of character is totally missing the point, because almost all of us are at some time lazy or greedy. The meditation wats that I've gravitated to in my later practice were a little more aware of this principle in their philosophy. Their approach was not so much, "Now you do this. Okay, you've perceived this stage, for the next month you have this next practice-experience "z" and go on to "a."

That does not seem to be the way the mind works at all. Consequently that's not the way to deal with the mind. This is, I think, significant. If you find a more flexible place, you'll usually find people are doing better.

Ohayv: Then do you think that concentrated meditation can be recommended as a "trick," in the long run, to change the basis of the personality?

Burns: If you say meditation alone, no. I'm a little cautious about it giving the permanent answer. I think a prerequisite is that the repertoire of habits that you develop and your total life-style must also be worked on, both during and outside of formal meditation practice. Especially with Thais in their way,
and with Westerners in their respective way, you find the thought, "Now I'll spend a half-hour or one hour in meditation," with the idea in mind that it's like an hour studying French, or practicing typing or skiing, and after so many months I'll have some fine result—but without the idea that, "This is going to get carried over into my total way of perceiving life-situations, and my total repertoire of responses."

Again, those places that I think have turned out some benefits from meditation are those that emphasize this synthesis: and the people whom I think have done the best, are those aware of this.

Meditation is a specialized and important part, and perhaps if you're going into the higher levels, an essential aspect of it all, but if you're thinking, "I'll go into meditation, and then I'll walk out the front door and go to a movie, and then run around and have a good time on the strip, then back to the meditation tomorrow"—no, I'm sorry, it's not going to work that way. It's one of the techniques you can use for getting down into you, and into the cold time-Gestalt and space-Gestalt, into the functioning organism that's reacting to this whole sensory world in which one lives. Otherwise, one may find a kind of meditation where there can be some clearly psychedelic trips, or some deep jhana-experiences where you go into a sublime euphoric state and come out of it. Some people apparently do this, but these can be the same nasty people they were two years ago when they started.

Ohayv: So you don't think it's a magic trick that can be exported to the West, taken out of its context of a total change in environment, in activities, in attitudes, and then work by itself?

Burns: I think it can be exported, because I don't think Thai or any other form of Asian culture has any monopoly on this general attitude, frame of mind, and technique of discipline. I think what's exportable to the West is the whole technique of questioning yourself, modifying your impulses, reforming your patterns, letting go of your attachment, and this is just as hard and just as easy in Los Angeles as it is in Bangkok.

Ohayv: What about your conception of Western psychology—has it changed through your knowledge of meditation and being a monk? Have you found out anything new?

Burns: I really couldn't say that. I don't buy certain rather crude psychiatric dogmas, such as you can't be happy or well-adjusted or a complete human being, if you're celibate. But the basic well-established psychological principles of per-

Psychological changes in meditating Western monks
cept, conceptualization, interpersonal relationships, needs of development, self-image, and feedback from other people when you're a child, as to whether you're loved or not (what I see as the core of psychology) have not been influenced that much by Buddhism. But it's a little hard to be totally objective here, because in both Western psychology and Buddhism you can build many cases, different interpretations, and approaches to technique. I'm sure that at many points the particular way in which I interpret Western psychology, the schools which I perceive as valid, is influenced by the feedback I've gotten from my Buddhist experience. Likewise my perception of Buddhism obviously has a strong psychological-psychiatric overlay to it.

Yet I don't find my perception of the human mind at variance with Western psychology. I can explain myself completely and fully to my satisfaction within its frame, without recurring to Buddhism; and out of Buddhism, not fully and completely, but pretty much I can extract what I think is a good psychological foundation. In my Buddhist and Thai cultural experience, and my academic and psychiatric experience, I keep telling myself I'm seeing essentially the same phenomena—human beings responding to a world, whether they're in monk's robes or whether they're shopping at the post exchange—that there's a common denominator behind it all.

Ohayv: About celibacy, many say that somebody who does not have any sexual expression must be sublimating their life-energy, and must be unhealthy. You wouldn't say that?

Burns: No I wouldn't. I've seen too many people whom I thought were outstanding, well-adjusted people, who have never had a sexual experience in their life. You'll probably find some very outstanding, impressive Catholic priests too, and one can argue whether some of this impressiveness is a re-channeling of sexual drive. Both as a monk and a lay person, I've been celibate for long periods of time, and I just don't think it is the issue. There are times when you have sexual feelings, and say, "O.K., this is the feeling I'm in now, I'll ride it out, I don't have to seek any stimulation," and just let it go at that.

I believe that while Ajahn Chah in Ubon never had a sexual experience, he could work it through by, unlike many monks, being able to talk about it. He had images of female bodies, and would get depressed; but now when somebody tells a slightly risque joke, he sees the humor in it. He doesn't have a
reaction formation or puritanism that makes you suspect ne
really has not come to grips with the thing. He talks about it
and is quite comfortable, shows the difficulty and works
through it. When women start getting a little flirtatious, he
does not act like he's threatened. I think it would be o.k. for
most Thai monks, if they'd had sexual experience before, so
that they don't build up a lot of fantasies about what a great
thing it is, so they know the limits and are not afraid . . . to
know that passion takes possession of you, but that at almost
any point you can interfere, if you really need to. I think it's
easier to become celibate after you've had sex, just because the
mystique is gone. I know people who are overly sexual, who
seem sexually well-adjusted, whom I think are getting less out
of life than this Ajahn,

*Ohayv:* In your psychiatric practice, do you use anything con­
ected with meditation? Either concentration, or mindfulness,
or insight?

*Burns:* I don't do it myself. I don't think concentration is
relevant here, whereas insight meditation is. It's a funny
thing-you find patients in psychiatry who are unable to come
to grips with themselves, who talk around the problem, and
seem to want to get someplace but yet don't. The same in
meditation-people who really work and push themselves, and
yet somehow can't get down to looking at themselves. It's
almost moralistic, but one of the key factors is basic self-hon­
esty, both for psychiatric patients and for meditators. Are you
really willing to take a look at what's going on? To stop ra­
tionalizing, stop distorting, and just see what games you're
playing with yourself. Are you willing to endure the shock or
trauma of it, the loneliness. I've seen what I believe was gen­
uine psychiatric success, also in the meditation setting, and it
seems to be a function of the person's ability to be honest with
themselves. I don't know any way to pressure or prod the
person to this.

Meditation is not just sitting down-it's catching yourself.
When the impulses arise, often in life-situations, it's being
aware of them. I say this with a little hesitation because this
may lead to the view that, "You don't need to meditate at all,
just live," and this is often a rationalization for not doing
anything at all. When the patients are here, we talk and ex­
plore, and whether they want to think about it while they're
driving home in the car, or lie on the bed and stare at the
ceiling and watch what goes through their mind, or whether
they want to do the same thing sitting in the lotus position, I
don't think matters much. There are moments when you have to put the immediate sensory world aside, and watch what's going through your head, and whether you do that as a psychiatric patient that your doctor just shook up and told, "Now, look at it," or whether you do it off in a jungle hut or in a monastery, doesn't really matter.

Communications with the author and requests for reprints may be addressed to Ron Jonah Ohayv, Baggesengade 26B 5th, Copenhagen nOON, Denmark.