“The mirror is originally clean”:
Simultaneous interpreting as a form of dynamic

An interpreter discovers a translucent state of mind on the river of language.

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Although it is difficult to generalize about meditation, a varied and multifaceted phenomenon, it seems to share some striking similarities with simultaneous interpretation.

Sri Aurobindo referred to meditation as “...the easiest process for the human mind, but the narrowest in its results; contemplation more difficult, but greater; self-observation and liberation from the chains of Thought the most difficult of all, but the widest and greatest in its fruits.”

In one form or another and under a variety of names, meditation is known to most human cultures as a practice that changes your state of mind and brings greater awareness, be it through the elaborate rituals of some schools of Buddhism, dances by the primitive fire, or modern meditation in the West.

So what about those similarities between meditation and simultaneous interpretation?

1. Both are psychological techniques that alter your state of mind. Both are flows of consciousness, introspective processes with no tangible results. Of course, you can call the final interpretation a tangible result, but the process of generating it is intangible and hidden from the listener.
2. Both require a certain distance from the object of meditation. Just like a yogi meditating on a riverbank, an interpreter is sitting on the bank of the “river of words” observing it. If you jump in, get too involved, you will drown.
3. Both require knowledge and mastery of certain awareness-building techniques. Both are skills and require constant practice.
4. Both have objectives and their own revelations.

The ability to enter a very peculiar flow/state of consciousness is one of the signs of a professional interpreter. The flow is usually the same every time. It’s established after familiarization with the topic/speakers/conference setting and can continue uninterrupted for the entire day. Similar to the division between Purusha and Prakriti in Hinduism, it is an intentional division of consciousness into active and passive parts. The interpreter identifies with the passive part and watches or observes the interpretation unfolding in the active part of his consciousness. To a large extent, such a division removes psychological stress from interpreting and allows you to see yourself acting “from the outside.” It also helps you suspend judgment and real time evaluation of your work, a step required for successful interpreting because such judgment would interrupt the
flow and potentiate unnecessary self-correction. The same thing happens in meditation when the meditator shuts down outside inputs and his own reactions to them, or simply observes them arise without reacting as in transcendental meditation. As a result, an inner space, a field where the interpreter is operating, is born - the creative domain of the interpreter, his mental playground.

Identification with the object is a characteristic of both meditation practices and simultaneous interpretation. For the meditator, identification occurs when he identifies with the object of meditation, be it an idea, an image or even a physical object as in trāṭaka meditation. Similarly, the simultaneous interpreter concentrates on and identifies with the stream of the speaker's thought and its inner logic (making anticipation/probability prediction possible) and/or on the speaker himself, trying to create an image of that person in a different language/culture. This identification --- combined with temporarily shutting down any evaluation/judgment – results in relative depersonalization and stepping outside of the ego, thus making more creative expression possible by using devices not usually employed by this particular ego. The interpreter takes on the shape and color of the speaker without blindly copying him or sounding like a parody.

What is the purpose of that interpreter’s meditation then if not a mechanical, automated flow of well-rehearsed and familiar ways to handle interpretation?

To answer the question we need to ask another one: What does “dynamic” mean? Even though we are sitting quietly in our booths for hours, no one will deny that we are involved in a very intense process of understanding, digesting and expressing information flows – a process not dissimilar to taxing physical exercise. Boxing, fencing or rowing come to mind, but we can also consider of the less confrontational disciplines, e.g. Eastern martial arts such as aikido, judo, karate and other schools in which winning at all cost is not the goal.

Even the slow movements of tai chi, if done in lightning succession, can become lethal, but winning is not defined by sheer physical power. There is no notion of “enemy” in the traditional “Western” sense, no adversary or nemesis. The person you engage with is a partner, a kind of “mirror” that reflects your own state of mind as well as your errors and blunders. If two partners are evenly matched, the fight can continue forever through mechanical repetition of motions and previously learned movements. Partners serve as mirrors for each other; they teach each other and grow in mastery. The party that “wins”, however, introduces an element unexpected or unanticipated by his partner. It can be a move, a distracting gesture or an illusion, anything that breaks the other person’s concentration, his flow of meditation. His attention lapses and the final strike is made.

Early in their careers some interpreters treat their craft as an adversarial process. The speaker and the text are enemies to be conquered by huffing and puffing, by hitting and blocking. The reasons for that are many: lack of skill or experience, stress, unfamiliar situations, etc. Even more seasoned interpreters can break down and blame it on a difficult speaker instead of looking inside. This usually happens due to a certain degree of psychological immaturity and denial. Shifting to a non-adversarial paradigm and seeing the speaker and text as a “mirror”, a partner, brings attention back to yourself, allows you to see your own weak spots, not in a self-denigrating masochistic way but simply as areas that need attention.

Like a good martial arts master, a well-trained simultaneous interpreter can continue interpreting “forever”, within the constraints of his physical and mental apparatus of course. The process is almost mechanical and based on solid skills and experience. However, this represents only apprenticeship level. Many stop there, considering their evolution complete; they easily get bored by the familiar or routine, by interpreting the same topics or people. The easiest solution would be to seek a new topic or add a new language, to “entertain” oneself and find new “fodder” to chew on. Or to “turn on” the ego and try to “embellish” output with idioms and unnecessary transformations of the original until it is disfigured beyond recognition.
But another interesting solution is to observe the flow of the words of the speaker and note how the speech is “trying” to offer us hidden gems: unusual expressions, hidden connotations, personal idiosyncrasies, anything that challenges us and makes us go beyond our comfort zone. These are opportunities for progress that play the same role as unexpected moves in karate: they test our concentration and the integrity of our flow of consciousness. We cannot address all of them sufficiently, if only due to time constraints. In one Star Trek episode Lieutenant Worf does not shoot a drone, he simply hits it with the butt of his gun. We too have to use “brute force” at times: literal translation, omission, compensation, etc. However, there are singular moments of extreme clarity when we experience something akin to satori in Zen Buddhism: a revelation, a solution to a difficult problem comes to us from above, logic becomes nonlinear and effortless, and it feels as if somebody else were speaking instead of us or through us.

When we encounter a problem that cannot be solved by technique alone, we can open up to the above and the solution comes. Such glimpses are scattered in the texture of interpretation. They are not very common but are its highest achievement. Like a Buddhist monk, we can only hope to receive more quiet revelations and enjoy them when they come. We move from meditation to self-observation, to the Thought and that Something that lies beyond both the Interpreter and the Thought. The interpreter mind is in the Flow, empty and directed upward. "The mirror is originally clean and pure. Where can it be stained by dust?" [iii]


[iii] Taken from The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Partiarch.

More on meditation
Wikipedia: Meditation.
The Fifth Patriarch and the Three Turnings.

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