

Meditation has no name

Meditation is the Buddha's greatest gift to the world. The Buddha made this contribution over 2500 years ago, and we can still benefit from it even today. This is a true transmission of the calm and clear mind that anyone who is open enough can receive.

Before the Buddha's time, meditation was mostly a secret teaching by exclusivist gurus. Not everyone was allowed to learn it. Only those of the higher social classes would be taught by such priests.

With his awakening, the Buddha opened the door of salvation to all beings. He taught anyone who came to him, from any class, or no class (the outcastes), the religious or the non-religious. As such, Buddhism is the first open religion, not a tribal system. The reason for the openness of Buddhism, especially its meditation, is a natural one. An open mind is a healthy mind. Conversely, a closed mind tends to be fearful, stressful, even paranoid.

Buddhist meditation works so well that during the last 50 years or so, mind scientists have made great progress in learning about it and using it to learn about our brain, the mind and healing. Meditation is often used as a complementary therapy especially in cases where long-term treatment is needed. Meditation helps to significantly speed up the healing process. And in some cases, such as stress management, even using meditation alone can be effective.

Due to its efficacy, meditation is now openly used by professional psychotherapists and the healing professions. We have, for example, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, and Breathwork. The reasons for such professional labellings are partly because the meditation methods are selective and modified in terms of the therapist's needs, and to distinguish one therapy method from another.

The New Age groups have Zen Yoga and Transcendental Meditation. Religious groups and guru-centred groups have their own exotic names. Such labellings are clearly to attract followers and clients. Understandably such groups use impressive publicity and media advertisements. The point is that a "named" meditation is understandably self-limiting.

Early Buddhist meditation, on the other hand, has no name, and it comprises some 30-40 types of meditation. Even the popular word "meditation" is a modern one, which may give the wrong idea that prayer is involved. However, we can still use this word, bearing in mind that prayer is not intrinsic to Buddhist meditation. The Buddhist texts themselves describe meditation as "concentration" (*samādhi*), "cultivation" (*bhāvanā*), *dhyana* (*jhāna*), and so on, depending the method and purpose of the meditation. To "cultivate" the mind, we have to do it ourselves. No one else can cultivate our minds for us.

Here are some pointers for taking up a safe and effective meditation method:

- (1) The teacher or instructor is himself a calm and friendly person. (Some teachers may dress in a bizarre way, which might suggest eccentricity, or a desire for power or status. Meditation is not about being well dressed, anyway.)

- (2) The teacher makes no claim to special powers for himself or to change your life, as your own meditation will work for you.
- (3) The teacher answers your meditation questions patiently in a clear and relevant manner, and does not ridicule or belittle you.
- (4) You feel generally good about the meditation, or feel calmer than before.

Meditation is not about charismatic teachers or powerful gurus or famous masters. It is about spending quiet time with oneself, being at peace with oneself. As we enjoy the meditative peace, we leave more and more of our unhappy past behind us, and live more and more in the present, truly enjoying (feeling joy) in the people we meet and in what we are doing.

Above all, one of the best benefits of meditation is that it makes us emotionally independent. We are not dependent on anyone or anything for our happiness. We are happy because we have decided to be happy. Then we are in a good position to fully live life, and to bring joy to others, too.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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