

# Why meditate?

SD 15.1 (14)

## Living the moment

The best and direct way to know Buddhism is to meditate, or more correctly, to cultivate mindfulness to the point of mental calm and clarity. Meditation is also a powerful tool for introspection, for looking into our own mind.

There are, however, two common problems here: first, there is the beginner's problem, that is, difficulties in sitting and finding focus. Secondly, even at the early stages of effective meditation, we may not see a very flattering picture of our mental self. If this is the case, then it is likely that we have not approached meditation with the right motivation or attitude. Summarized here are some points and pointers to help our meditation journey go more smoothly and fruitfully.<sup>1</sup>

### **1 Do not collect meditation**

Meditation is like medicine: they are meant to be applied or taken, not collected, nor observed like a spectator sport. What physical exercise is to the body, meditation is to the mind: we have to *do* it, not merely read or talk about it. We may meet many good meditation teachers or read much about them, but without our practising what is taught, we are like a spoon that carries the soup but not tasting it.<sup>2</sup>

Or worse, we are simply making an ego trip, pinning another shiny badge on our proud coat, behaving as if we have actually mastered the practice. Meditation methods are like signboards: follow them if we need to, disregard them if they do not apply, but there is no need to hold anything against them. Meditation is not about "which" meditation—"insight," or forest, or Zen, or whatever—it is about learning from the past, being the present, and letting the future be where it is.

### **2 Do not run away from life**

Attention itself is very conditioned. We may only be watching what we like, rather than what is beneficial. If we do not like lovingkindness meditation, it means that we need it even more. Get some calm energy from a method we like, and bit by bit build up our lovingkindness. Maybe, our meditation has been bogged down by passivity and dependence so that the practice becomes self-punishing because of some guilt or some bad feeling about ourselves. If we do not forgive ourselves, no one can.

Then, there is the fear of intimacy and social involvement: we meditate perhaps because we do not wish to meet people, not to get into awkward situations. Sometimes, we may use the practice to immunize ourselves from feeling (from fear of being hurt again). Good meditation makes us more mindful of ourselves, like a doctor who is aware of his own body. Meditation should help us feel more connected to others and the environment. All this greatly helps us exude a radiant and healing ambience. At least, it keeps us cool in a crisis.

### **3 We are as we feel**

Meditation can be a great way of servicing our quirks and neuroses. The practice, for example, could be a form of narcissistic wish: "Through meditation I'm going to become self-sufficient and invincible; I'm not going to get hurt any more; I'm going to be perfect." Difficulties we have faced can

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<sup>1</sup> A good reading here is Jack Engler's "The unconscious motivations for meditation practice" (1997). Parts of this section draws freely from Engler's insightful paper.

<sup>2</sup> Dh 64.

weigh heavily upon us; or they can act as ballast for us to sail smoothly through life: from suffering arises faith.<sup>3</sup> Smile at our pain: we are not the first to suffer it, nor certainly the last. Pain means we have feelings, and that things can be better if we work at them. A rose is not a rose without its thorns. Pain is our mirror: clean it well and we can see ourselves better in it. We can't really change our behaviour until we change our feelings.

Live the meditation. Try smiling and greeting others first and do so spontaneously. Smile to cheer up. Start with a soft smile, then slowly broaden it so that our eyes show chicken-feet. Smile with the mouth and eyes. We must become what we do: even a forced smile (but with sincerity) is better than a sulk or glare. See how the Buddha smiles (as depicted in the Buddha images and pictures).<sup>4</sup>

#### 4 Don't try to *do* something, just sit!

In meditation, the path itself is the goal. In meditation, there is no aim, no goal, no destination: if you have one, you are not meditating. When great things happen during meditation, don't stop there: it is a sign of even *greater* things to come. Simply noting or labelling such experiences can help strengthen clear recognition and understanding. "**Labelling** introduces a healthy degree of inner detachment, since the act of apostrophizing one's moods and emotions diminishes one's identification with them" (Anlayo).<sup>5</sup> When we are more comfortable, let go of even the noting. Let it come, let it go: it reduces, even dispels, anxiety and fear.

Meditation instills good posture: when you look your relaxed best, it helps boost your self-confidence. Meditation is a journey to self-awakening: it's all right to move slowly, only don't stop. It's not how long we sit: it's how *happily* we sit. No hen hurries her hatching.

#### 5 Non-judgement day is here

As beginners, noting and labelling thoughts and sensations help to keep us objectively focused so that negative ones do not intrude. But do not let the mind die. That would be like a butterfly collector who sticks a pin through its heart and a neat label underneath. The Buddha speaks of the mind "changing while it stands." He is not a butterfly catcher and collector, but an observer of nature. He wants us to watch the butterfly's flight and flutter, to see how it lives in its natural environment, to follow it quietly until it settles down to rest still in its nature. For our mind, this he calls samadhi. Our eyes blind us: close the eyes and truly see.<sup>6</sup>

#### 6 Close our eyes, see more

Sometimes we could be driven by the fear of reasoning and thinking. Conversely, we might find feeling painful. Either way, we may look inward for a convenient way of escaping from the real world. A proper balance of reasoning and feeling is vital for healthy living: a bird needs two wings to fly. When we really look within, we will see that the mind often goes on autopilot on a course set by the "old mind" or "the doer," that is, habitual tendencies or "habitual mind" built up from long time past but still controlling us.

We are deluded, for example, to assume that we are reading this of our own free will. In an important sense, we have no choice but to do so! Yes, we wanted to read this: that's the point! The will, then, is not the action of being, but is the end-result of a process.<sup>7</sup> This "will" is what keeps us

<sup>3</sup> Upanisā S (S 12.23,15/2:31), SD 6.12.

<sup>4</sup> See CA 287 = *The All-embracing Net of Views* (tr Bodhi), 1978: 268.

<sup>5</sup> Anlayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna: The direct path to realization*, 2003: 113-117.

<sup>6</sup> See Sujato, *The mystique of the Abhidharma*, p7.

<https://sites.google.com/site/santipada/themistiqueoftheabhidhamma>.

<sup>7</sup> See Brahmavamso, *The Jhānas*, 2003:37. See also *Saṅkhāra*, SD 17.6 esp (8.4). On the doer, see SD 17.6 (8.4).

growing *old*, but never growing *up*. Meditation helps us see into this will so that we truly see not what “we” really *are*, but what really is. We are then not pushed by the past nor pulled by the future: we are live *now*.

## 7 Meditation as progressive renunciation

When we seriously make an effort to meditate, we are effectively getting into the state of a renunciant. The very first thing we do in meditation is to find a conducive place and sit as comfortably as we can so that we can forget about our body after a while. This is a bodily renunciation.

After sitting for some time, we might begin to feel some discomfort. Again here, we should simply ignore it if possible. Otherwise, try to observe with an open mind, “What is this pain?” We would notice that it is a process of rising and falling of feeling. If we do not let our negative mind to return and colour the pain, then this is a feeling renunciation.

Once we are physically comfortable, we go on to work with our thoughts as they arise. The usual way is to simply ignore them and keep our focus on the meditation object (say, the breath or lovingkindness). If thoughts do arise, it is best to simply let them come and let them go. Never follow them. If we can do this comfortably over time, then this a mental renunciation.

Another kind of renunciation is that directed to blissful feeling or an experience of some mental brightness, often known as “the sign” (*nimitta*). This sort of feeling or experience, if it is truly blissful, should be silently enjoyed for as long as we like. When we feel some sense of familiarity with it, then it is time to let it go gently, so that a higher state would arise. This is a higher renunciation.

Finally, when we are fully free of bodily sensations, thoughts and feelings, we might go on to attain deep concentration, even dhyana. Then, whether we are monastic or lay, we have truly “renounced the world.” This is true renunciation.<sup>8</sup>

## 8 Meditation brings you emotional independence

If we patiently bear the initial pains when starting meditation, the fruits will come in due course. Good meditation begins by a total acceptance of ourselves just as we are. Then we leave the past where it should be, and we do not cross the bridge of the future until we reach it. We need to renounce the past, and reject any desire to jump into the future.

Gently keep bringing the mind back to the meditation-object; constantly extend the horizon of our lovingkindness. We are laying the foundations of emotional strength. As our inner happiness grows, we need less worldliness, less religion—and we no more need a parent-figure or a guru-figure or any kind of power-figure. Our locus of control stays within us: we become emotionally self-reliant, without any need for the approval of others or any measuring ourselves against others. We have realized our true self.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For a fuller reflection, see “Truly renouncing” (R226, Reflection 120208): see <http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/72-Truly-renouncing-120208.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> See SD 17.8c: (8.4) Downside of meditation (the danger of cults); (8.5) Who should not meditate.

## Who should *not* meditate?

SD 17.8c (8.5)

**1** Meditation is generally safe for most people, but there are reported cases and studies noting some adverse effects.<sup>1</sup> From one-third to one-half of participants of long silent meditation retreats (two weeks to three months) in the West reported increased tension, anxiety, confusion, and depression.<sup>2</sup> In an article well publicized on the Internet, **Jack Kornfield** confesses that in *vipassanā* practice,

At least half the students who came to three-month retreats couldn't do the simple "bare attention" practices because they were holding a great deal of unresolved grief, fear, woundedness, and unfinished business from the past. I also had an opportunity to observe the most successful group of meditators—including experienced students of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism—who had developed strong samadhi and deep insight into impermanence and selflessness. Even after many intensive retreats, most of the meditators continued to experience great difficulties and significant areas of attachment and unconsciousness in their lives, including fear, difficulty with work, relationships wounds, and closed hearts. (Kornfield 2003)

**2** On the other hand, most of these very same participants also reported very positive effects from their meditation practice. The vulnerable margin of participants usually includes those who are under some kind of medication, or have a psychiatric history or some kind of undisclosed personal disorder. There have been a few reports that intensive meditation could cause or worsen symptoms in people who have certain psychiatric problems, but this question has not been fully researched.

Such studies do suggest, however, that meditation may not be recommended for people with psychotic disorders, severe depression, and other severe personality disorders, unless they are also receiving psychological or medical treatment, and closely monitored so that they can receive support whenever needed. Individuals who are aware of an underlying psychiatric disorder who wish to take up meditation should speak with a mental health professional or experienced instructor before doing so.<sup>3</sup>

**3** Obviously, for some people, the "vipassana" method does not always work, or does not always work by itself. **Meditation for beginners** is likely to succeed when the following minimum conditions are present:

- (1) Participants with emotional or psychological issues have them resolved first.
- (2) The instructor is an experienced teacher, with sufficient spiritual training.
- (3) Breath meditation and lovingkindness cultivation are taught in a balanced manner.
- (4) The group is small, say, not more than fifteen participants per group.
- (5) The environment is quiet and conducive, and there are basic standing rules.
- (6) The length of sitting is flexible, depending on the student's ability and inclination.
- (7) The instructor keeps to an ethical code and is easily available for related consultation.

**4** Psychotherapists and other professional specialists trained in meditation may be effective meditation instructors for beginners, even for intermediate levels. However, for more advanced practice, the teacher must be firmly founded on Buddhist meditation, if the students are to really benefit.

**5** Even if religious experience can be scientifically induced [8.1], it is still a feeling like love, faith and compassion, which cannot be meaningfully induced by the most sophisticated scientific instrument, short of man himself. This is a matter of consciousness working upon itself: only the mind can induce such states. The best tool for cultivating inner stillness is a hearty meditation.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See §8.2nn for refs.

<sup>2</sup> See eg Jack Kornfield 1993.

<sup>3</sup> For more details, see *Bhāvanā*, SD 15.1 esp (14).

<sup>4</sup> On Buddhist meditation, see *Bhāvanā*, SD 15.1.

## Downside of meditation

SD 17.8c (8.4)

**1** The history of the meeting of western science and eastern meditation has not always been smooth. In a sense, the whole process is like a lotus rising from the mud of false and weak systems, a veritable evolutionary process of the survival of the fittest system by scientific selection.<sup>1</sup> By the mid-1970s, clinical reports of negative outcomes of various mantra meditation programs began to appear in psychiatric literature.<sup>2</sup> These included people becoming unemployable because they were unable to control their mental states (eg everything around them seemed unreal), and more serious problems ranging from depression and agitation to psychosis.

**2** **Leon Otis**, a psychologist at Stanford Research Institute, found that adverse outcomes were related to how long that person had meditated using such methods.<sup>3</sup> **Michael Persinger**, neuroscientist at the Laurentian University, Sudbury, Ontario, Canada, found that for some people, meditation can bring on symptoms of complex partial epilepsy, such as visual abnormalities, hearing voices, feeling vibrations, or experiencing automatic behaviours.<sup>4</sup>

**3** Another concern, explored by Esalen founders, **Michael Murphy**<sup>5</sup> and **Steven Donovan**,<sup>6</sup> was that advanced practitioners of mantra meditation ranked high in suggestibility,<sup>7</sup> not surprising given its similarity to self-hypnosis. A number of people in the US have successfully brought legal suits for

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<sup>1</sup> This section is mostly based on <http://www.ex-premie.org/pages/ismeditation.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Clinical reports of negative outcomes. A P French, A C Schmid and E Ingalls, "Transcendental Meditation, Altered reality testing, and behavioral change: A case report," *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 161 1975:55-58; R B Kennedy, "Self-induced depersonalisation syndrome," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 133, 1976:1326-1328; A A Lazarus, "Psychiatric problems precipitated by Transcendental Meditation," *Psychological Reports* 39 1976:601-602.

<sup>3</sup> N Mead, "Why meditation may not reduce stress," *Natural Health* 23,6 Nov-Dec 1993: 80-85. L S Otis, "Adverse effects of transcendental meditation" in D Shapiro & R Walsh (eds), *Meditation: Classic and Contemporary Perspectives*, New York: Alden, 1984; D S Holmes, "Meditation and somatic arousal reduction," *American Psychologist* 39 1984:1-10.

<sup>4</sup> Michael A Persinger, "Transcendental Meditation and general meditation are associated with enhanced complex partial epileptic-like signs: Evidence of 'cognitive kindling'?" *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 76, 1993:80-82; Persinger, "Enhanced incidence of 'The sensed presence' in people who have learned to meditate: Support for the right hemispheric intrusion hypothesis," *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 75, 1992:1308-1310; M A Persinger & K Makarec, "Temporal lobe epileptic signs and correlative behaviors displayed by normal populations," *Journal of General Psychology* 114,2, 1987:179-195.

<sup>5</sup> **The Esalen Institute**, Big Sur, California, founded by Michael Murphy and Dick Price in 1962, is a center for humanistic alternative education, a nonprofit organization devoted to multidisciplinary studies ordinarily neglected by traditional academia. Esalen offers more than 500 public workshops a year, besides invitational conferences, residential work-study programmes, research initiatives, and internships. Part think-tank for the emerging world culture, part college and lab for transformative practices, and part restorative retreat, Esalen is dedicated to exploring work in the humanities and sciences that advances the full realization of what Aldous Huxley called the "human potential." Esalen is well known for its blend of East/West philosophies, its experiential/didactic workshops, and the steady influx of philosophers, psychologists, artists, and religious thinkers.

<sup>6</sup> Entrepreneur & consultant, President of the Esalen Institute, 1985 to 1993.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Murphy & Steve Donovan, *The Physical and Psychological Effects of Meditation*, Big Sur, CA: Esalen Institute, 1989.

damages suffered as a result of their participation in meditation programmes, especially commercialized methods such as cult Guru Mahesh's TM ("transcendental meditation").<sup>8</sup>

Many such people suffered from problems and difficulties regarding thinking and attention. Other impairments included emotional difficulties, blackouts, anxiety, "spacing out" [feeling drowsy, weak, and bored], amnesia, and losing track of time.<sup>9</sup>

**4** This is not to say that everyone who meditates has had these difficulties. Many find brief meditation sessions relaxing, but these people are usually not part of groups which influence or induce them into continuing, regardless of their own feelings or experiences. The problem arises when *a particular meditation* is triumphalistically claimed to be universally "good for mankind" so it can, indeed must, be applied to anyone.

In the early years of Buddhism in the US, two approaches were common. The first was *the empty-mind mantra meditation* based on the Hindu tradition. The second, from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, is *reflective meditation*, where you reflect as a way of focusing. In the former, a close relationship between teacher and pupil included attention to individual differences and any problems which might arise. In contrast to earlier approaches, meditation today is often being sold by mass marketing, and often by individuals who have no religious affiliation or do not declare it.<sup>10</sup>

**5** As early as 1967, when **the Divine Light Mission** arrived in the US, it used "meditation" as a marketing strategy. By the 1980s, numbers dropped off due to disillusionment, and its guru Maharaji (Prem Rawat) renounced its Asian trappings and changed the cult's name to Elan Vital, and went on to seek new converts in third world countries such as Nigeria. Many more productive lives were destroyed as a result.

**6** In the 1980s, Swami Muktananda, a respected meditation guru and avowed celibate of **the Siddha Yoga cult**, was accused of regularly having sex with his teenaged disciples.<sup>11</sup> Around the same time, Richard Baker, one of the foremost **Zen** teachers in the US, was forced to resign from his leadership of the San Francisco Zen Centre on charges of misuse of funds and having an affair with a married resident female student.<sup>12</sup>

**7** In the late 1980s, **Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh** (also called Osho), the self-proclaimed enlightened Indian "sage," who owned thirty Rolls Royce, fled the US in the wake of an ugly controversy involving charges of blackmail and murder.<sup>13</sup> In 1981, on arriving in the US he bought the 64,000-acre Big Muddy cattle ranch in eastern Oregon for US\$6 million, and named it Rajneeshpuram, which he headed as a virtual autocrat. He was renowned for molesting young girls and women to "feel their chakra," and impregnated many of them. His own sannyasins (monastic followers) were known to

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<sup>8</sup> Legal suits for damages. John Doe I-VI and Jane Doe vs Maharishi Mahesh Yogi; World Plan Executive Council-United States; Maharishi International University for the US District Court for the District of Columbia, 95-2848, 2849, 2851, 2852, 2853, 2854 (consolidated); Jane Green vs Maharishi Mahesh Yogi et al. US District Court for the District of Columbia, 87-0015-OG. Patrick Ryan vs World Plan Executive Council-United States et al. US District Court for the District of Columbia, 87-0016-OG. On the ineffectiveness and problems of TM, see A Lutz, Donne & Davidson 2007:41-43; however, cf <http://mantra.meditation.onwww.net/>. On the dangers of TM (Transcendental Meditation) (a detailed insider report by Joe Kellett), see <http://www.suggestibility.org/>. Another comprehensive insider's website is [www.minet.org](http://www.minet.org).

<sup>9</sup> Problems found in therapy. M T Singer & R Ofshe, "Thought reform and the production of psychiatric casualties," *Psychiatric Annals* 20,4 1990:189-190.

<sup>10</sup> On various aspects of the commercialization of meditation and pseudoscientific claims, see eg Barry L Beyerstein, "Pseudoscience and the brain: Tuners and tonics for aspiring superhumans" at <http://www.autistici.org/2000-maniac/texts/06Pseudoscience-and-Brain.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> See open letter of an ex-follower, <http://leavingsiddhayoga.net/secret.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> See Sandra Bell, "Scandals in emerging Western Buddhism," in Prebish & Baumann (eds), 2002:235-238.

<sup>13</sup> See Hugh Milne (Shivamurti), *The God that Failed*, NY: St Martin's Press, 1987.

poison those they perceived as a threat. Members of Rajneesh's own staff were poisoned by his personal secretary, Ma Ananda Sheela, when she thought they knew too much or had simply fallen out of her favour.

**8** To prevent such misconduct and issues, **the Western Vipassana teachers** formed their own ethics committee. The Insight Meditation Society (Barre, Massachusetts) and Spirit Rock Meditation Center (Woodacre, California), two of the leading meditation centres in the US, for example, have their own ethical code<sup>14</sup> and ethics committee.<sup>15</sup> More importantly, in terms of conflict-resolution, the Spirit Rock Meditation Center also has an Ethics and Reconciliation Council (EAR).<sup>16</sup>

**9** In March 1993, a ten-day conference of Western Buddhist meditation teachers was held in Dharamsala in a hotel near the Namgyal Monastery, the residence of **the Dalai Lama**, who headed the conference, themed, "Toward a Western Buddhism."<sup>17</sup> One of the most important issues discussed was that of Buddhist ethics and the Dalai Lama strongly emphasized the right, even responsibility, of students to object to any behaviour of teachers deemed abusive, damaging, immoral, or unsuitable for the time and place: "Make voice," he insisted, "Give warning! We no longer tolerate!" The Dalai Lama encouraged repeated open criticism of such behaviour; if all else failed, he proposed, "Name names in newspapers!"<sup>18</sup>

**10** Sadly, in early 2006, another scandal arose in Tibetan Buddhism in the West, involving "geshe" **Michael Roach** (b 1952), whose teachings and behaviour are causing controversy and concern within much of the Buddhist community, due to his relationship with female student, Christie McNally and his unconventional teachings about Tibetan meditation practices.<sup>19</sup> In fact, he even declared that he was an enlightened Bodhisattva.<sup>20</sup> As a result, the Dalai Lama has rendered him as *persona non grata*.<sup>21</sup>

**11** The lesson of such scandals and tragedies is basically that we should avoid unhealthy teacher-pupil relationships, especially those involving *transference* and *counter-transference*.<sup>22</sup> These pathological states lead to the teacher's exploitation of his pupils, and of blind obedience and of grandiose perception of the teacher on the pupils' part.

*When the teacher is placed above the teaching*, there is always the danger of the teacher being misperceived as being more than what he is, and the pupils of being abused by the teacher.<sup>23</sup> Meditation only succeeds when we sit peacefully alone and joyfully rise above our physical senses to a higher stillness within.

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<sup>14</sup> That of the Spirit Rock Meditation Centre is called "Teacher Code of Ethics," based on the Five Precepts: <http://www.spiritrock.org/page.aspx?pid=315>.

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.dharma.org/sites/default/files/2003\\_spring\\_insight\\_newsletter\\_0.pdf](http://www.dharma.org/sites/default/files/2003_spring_insight_newsletter_0.pdf), p8.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.spiritrock.org/about-us/ethics-council>.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.mandala.hr/5/6-surya.html>.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.tricycle.com/blog/dorje-shugden-deity-or-demon?page=3>;  
<http://alt.religion.buddhism.tibetan.narkive.com/SvkEUDaz/hh-dalai-lama-denounces-geshe-michael-roach>.

<sup>19</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael\\_Roach](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Roach): also see links here.

<sup>20</sup> See <http://michaelroachfiles.wordpress.com/>; <http://michaelroachfiles.wordpress.com/category/the-problems/feed/>. See **The Three Roots Ins**, SD 31.12 (3.4.7).

<sup>21</sup> For related links, see <http://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/defendersofthedharma/conversations/topics/796>. See **Three Roots Inc**, SD 31.12 (3.4.7).

<sup>22</sup> In psychotherapy, "transference" is the displacement of feelings and attitudes applicable to other persons (usually one's parents, spouse, siblings, etc) onto the analyst or teacher; while "countertransference" is the analyst's or teacher's displacement of affect (feelings) (ie transference) onto the client or pupil.

<sup>23</sup> See **The teacher or the teaching?** SD 3.14.