

Learning to Meditate

by David Fontana



What is meditation?

Put simply, meditation is the experience of the limitless nature of the mind when it ceases to be dominated by its usual mental chatter. Think for a moment of the sky. If the sky is continually covered by clouds, we are never able to see its true nature. Roll the clouds away, and magically we experience the blue vastness of the sky in all its beauty. If the mind is continually clouded by thoughts, we are never able to experience it in and of itself. All that we experience is the cloud-cover of its contents.

Why should we want to experience the mind in and of itself? The answer is that it represents our true nature, a nature that is naturally calm and serene, unclouded by the various anxieties and wishes, hopes and fears that usually occupy our attention. To experience the mind in this unclouded way is to experience the sense of being

fully and vitally alive, yet at the same time deeply at peace within ourselves.

Meditation brings with it many other benefits for body and mind, but all of these depend upon the ability to experience this central state of alert yet peaceful being. A way of understanding this is to imagine the mind as a pool of water that for years we have been busily churning into mud with our mental chatter. Once the churning stops, and mind settles to the bottom, the pool becomes clear. Not only can we now see the limpid, pure water itself, but also we can enjoy other pleasures, such as quenching our thirst, and bathing. Its clarity and cleanliness allow us to see through to the bottom of the pool, and discover there a new world of interest and wonder. When the mind becomes calm and still in meditation, we come to a much deeper understanding of ourselves and of our own true nature.

WATCHING THOUGHTS

An early exercise in meditation is to take an objective look at the mind in order to see what goes on within it, and the tricks that it can play.

1. Sit and relax. Close your eyes and turn your attention inward. As objectively as you can watch the thoughts that pass through your awareness. Don't judge them, or attempt to hang on to pleasant ones, or push unpleasant ones away. Just watch.
2. Notice the nature of your thoughts - how one thought leads to another, and how quickly a chain of associations is set up. Notice how these associations sometimes follow a single theme or go off at a tangent into a quite different set of considerations. Notice how intent your mind seems on distracting your attention, and observe the strategies it uses to do so.
- 3 Notice how easily your objective awareness does in fact disappear, and you become 'lost' in your thoughts. Each time this happens, gently re-establish awareness.
4. Continue the exercise for as long as seems comfortable. Afterward, write down what you have discovered about your mind.

By stilling and calming the thoughts, meditation also stills and calms emotions. Thought and emotion are inextricably linked in our everyday lives. The mind goes over painful memories, current worries and concerns for the future, and as it does so it sparks off emotions such as regret, anger and fear. When the mind enters into meditation, the emotions experience a new sense of peace. Even if troubling thoughts arise, much of their usual power is lacking. The meditator is able to observe them objectively, without becoming lost in them and identifying with them. As a result, his or her ability to rouse unwelcome emotions decreases. At the centre of everything the tranquility of mind and feeling remains. Potentially disturbing thoughts pass through the mind like clouds across the face of the sun, and are replaced by an equanimity, only possible when one is at peace with oneself.

Meditation should never be thought of as an external technique that we impose upon ourselves, much as we might learn a foreign language or master a computer. It is in essence a re-discovery of something that has always been within us, an opening of half-familiar pages in a book that we once loved but have put aside. This does not mean that in meditation we return to the mind of a child. Meditation does not ask us to relinquish our life experiences

nor to distrust the power of thought. It also does not ask us to become different or less interesting people than we are now. Once the meditation session is over, the mind returns to the plans and concerns that are its usual way of being - but now with an added clarity and power in its thinking, and a greater ability to meet both the challenges and the frustrations with which life continually confronts us.

Meditation does not take us away from the world, but helps us to become more clear-sighted and effective people within it. It also enables us to become more sensitive and compassionate toward other people and toward the natural world, because it develops within us a sense of the unity and inter-dependence of all things, and an awareness of what it means to be human. With this greater sensitivity and awareness comes an enhanced feeling of self-awareness and self-acceptance. For the first time, we really sense the deep mystery and the precious nature of life.

Mind Benefits

The term mind covers three levels of our mental life. These are the conscious level (the thoughts, feelings and emotions of which we are currently aware); the preconscious (everything that we can call into consciousness at will); and the unconscious (the vast reservoir of

memories, unacknowledged wishes and fears that lie below normal awareness, but that can exert a major influence over how we think and behave). Many of the great traditions, together with some newer psychotherapeutic movements in the West, maintain that spiritual and psychological development depend in part upon improving communication between the conscious and unconscious levels of the mind. Such communication not only enhances our self-knowledge and self-understanding, but also provides access to the creative and transformative abilities that often lie latent within each of us.

Meditation can be one of the most effective ways of improving this communication. When the conscious level of the mind becomes still, awareness of the deeper, unconscious, level grows. The unconscious is an essential part of ourselves: it determines many of our hopes, anxieties, likes and dislikes, and other important personal characteristics and perhaps contains the secrets of our very being. Failure to access the unconscious means that that we remain strangers to an essential part of our own nature. The Russian mystic Georgei Guridieff likened the mind to a house, and suggested that our failure to explore its deeper levels is like living in a single room instead of roving through the spacious corridors from one room to another.

The principal mind benefits of meditation are improved tranquillity, patience, concentration and memory, and enhanced understanding and sympathy toward others. Tranquillity arises naturally from the alert state of peaceful being that is central to meditation. In this state the meditator is in the role of an observer, conscious of whatever arises in the mind, but detached from it, instead of identified with it. Thoughts, emotions, feelings and memories are seen without

judgement and allowed to pass into and out of awareness like images across a screen. Essentially, when we meditate we become aware that although we have these thoughts and feelings, they are not who we are. They are impermanent, transitory events in our mental life, whose power over us is in direct proportion to the strength of our attachment or aversion toward them. True identity lies beyond such passing experiences. This does not mean that the meditator becomes insensitive to pleasure and pain; it means only that pleasure and pain no longer take control.

Patience comes as a consequence of the unhurried act of peaceful sitting, and the contrast it provides to the frantic pace at which most of us normally live our lives. The meditator becomes aware of the essential 'now-ness' of existence. All we have is the instant of each present moment. Concern for the future and over-preoccupation with the past are seen as artificial distractions from the direct experience of living. Something of this unhurried approach persists even when we are not meditating, so that life comes to be experienced at a gentler pace, and its minor irritations are faced with greater equanimity. The result is not only reduced stress for ourselves and often for others, but clearer vision and more objective judgement. Hurry is seen as counter-productive, and with patience there comes a greater ability to discriminate between what is important and what is not.

Concentration permits the meditator to practise mindfulness. The usually scattered elements of our attention are drawn together and focused, clearly and calmly, upon a single stimulus. Whenever the mind wanders it is brought gently back to this point of focus. By degrees, as the mind becomes concentrated, it calms down and becomes tranquil.

Memory is the fourth key mind benefit. Much of our inability to remember things stems from our failure to attend properly to them in the first place. Often our minds are busily thinking about something quite different, with the result that we function practically as automatons. Worse still, we frequently tend to do several things at once without concentrating properly on any of them. **Meditation trains the mind to be in the present moment, focused upon whatever is at the centre of awareness.** The result is that more of what we experience is registered and transferred to our memory stores. Together with the practice of mindfulness, meditation helps us to use our minds in a more efficient way.

Enhanced understanding and sympathy toward others is based, in part, on enhanced understanding and sympathy toward ourselves. With meditation comes increased self-insight and understanding, and a corresponding increase in our understanding of other people. We become aware that what we see inside ourselves is also there in them. Other people have the same emotions and feelings as ourselves. They make the same mistakes, seek the same goals, and can show the same compassion and generosity. Even if we consider that there is no need for their anger or for their fears, we can appreciate the reality of the suffering that these emotions cause them.

For the advanced meditator, there often comes an awareness of the underlying unity and inter-dependence of all things. This leads to a recognition that to harm others is to harm oneself, and that to show kindness to others is to show kindness to oneself. The weaknesses and vulnerabilities of other people thus come to be seen as images of our own weaknesses and vulnerabilities. There is a growing awareness of shared humanity, which leads naturally to the development of what in the East is called ahimsa, an

emphasis upon non-violence and a concern and respect for all life.

Creativity and Problem-solving

One of the greatest mysteries of the mind is the origin of thoughts. The more we watch our own thought processes in meditation, the more we become aware of this mystery. One moment the mind is empty, next moment, as if from nowhere, a thought appears - then another and another. Who or what puts together these strange mental events? Modern psychologists have no final answer. We say that thoughts emerge from the 'unconscious', but this is simply to invent a term for mystery. The unconscious is as far beyond our direct comprehension as the invisible dark matter that holds the universe together, which eludes direct scientific observation.

The mystery that surrounds the origin of our thoughts is particularly apparent when it comes to creativity. Many creative artists have written of their creative processes, yet none has been able to explain their operation. A prime example is Mozart, who claimed to 'hear' much of his music, so that he had only the task of writing it down. Where the music came from was a much a puzzle to him as it is to us. It is said that Shakespeare never had to correct a line he wrote - each one came to him ready-made. Many great scientists such as Poincare, Mendeleev and Bohr have also claimed that many insights came to them as if fully-formed from the unconscious, sometimes even in dreams.

There can be little doubt, however, that the more open we are to the inner world, the more readily creative thoughts and ideas are able to emerge into our consciousness. Meditation can be like 'listening in' to some deep well within us - an imaginative spring that is capable of generating creative insights and impulses far beyond conscious thought. It is not surprising that

the ancients thought these creative insights came from the gods.

One thing we can say is that creativity can be viewed as a form of problem-solving characterised by fluency and originality, whether the problem is to do with scientific invention, with the idea for a play or a novel, or with the poetry needed to express a profound emotion. It is thus possible to meditate on a certain problem and listen for the answer. Whatever is the problem, even if it is only a fairly mundane one, the process is the same. Keep the problem in your mind as you establish your meditation, as if confident that the solution will be found for you. Then let go of the problem, in the same way that you let go of all thoughts.

If solutions to the problem arise during meditation, instruct them to re-surface at the end of the meditation, then let them go. If you hold on to them, not only will you disrupt the rest of the meditation, you will prevent any further insights arising. If the required insights fail to appear, do not regard the exercise as a failure. They may arrive when least expected during the rest of the day or be there when you wake the following morning.



WHO AM I?

1. Sit comfortably and relax by tensing and releasing your muscles. Take a deep breath and slowly exhale, imagining that any remaining tension is set free with your out-breath. Close your eyes and turn your attention inward:
2. Watch the thoughts that pass through your awareness, but don't judge them. Try not to hang on to pleasant thoughts, or push unpleasant ones away. Just watch.
3. Now go one step further and ask yourself, "Who is it who is watching?"
4. Repeat the question mentally from time to time throughout the meditation, but always in a light, half-amused way, without demanding an answer.

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