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Cultivating a Quiet Mind: Questions and Answers About the Practice of Meditation

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The following questions and responses are presented for the better understanding of meditation. Familiarity with meditation's guiding principles and techniques can be a first step to beginning a practice. Through meditation, many people are able to connect with their true self and better communicate with the sacred.

The world's major religious traditions-Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Daoism, and Judaism-all teach practices that might be called meditation. Not all traditions refer to these disciplines as "meditation," but they all recommend some form of calming the mind and body to gain insight and wisdom or to communicate with the god. "Be still," writes the Psalmist, "and know that I am God" (Ps. 46: 10).

Not all religions emphasize these practices as strongly as others. Buddhism and Hinduism are most frequently associated with meditation because these traditions feature this discipline more prominently than do traditions such as Christianity, which tends to stress worship, doctrine, and social action. Yet deep within the contemplative and mystical dimensions of Christianity and other western traditions are meditative disciplines similar to those taught in Asian religions. Christian mystics such as St. John of the Cross and Meister Eckhart refer to practices akin to the mindfulness practices of the Buddha. Father Thomas Keating, more recently, has developed the method of "centering prayer," a meditative practice rooted in the mystical Christian classic, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. But theologians such as these are not extensively celebrated and studied in the institutional churches. This is especially true in Protestantism, which has so often made spirituality a matter of belief rather than experience. Finding resources on meditation in the Christian traditions, therefore, is not as easy as finding them in the Hindu or Buddhist traditions.

We seem to hear more these days about meditation and spirituality. Why is that?

Many persons who have grown up in the indigenous traditions of the west-Christianity, Judaism, liberal secular humanism-say they feel their native religious perspective has become too concerned with matters of theology, doctrine, and institution and has neglected to attend to matters of the heart and religious experience, the essence of spirituality. There is a growing interest among many sensitive persons in deepening their interior lives in ways that doctrine and religious institutions as such cannot. This desire is perhaps the central reason for the growing interest in meditative practice. Meditation is not intrinsically related to religious doctrine or institutions. It is a practice that is "beyond belief," one concerned with the experiential core of spirituality. Hence, one may practice meditation regardless of one's particular religious convictions.

What is it about modern life that drives people to seek refuge in spiritual disciplines like meditation?

Modern life is not especially conducive to personal and communal wholeness. Innumerable things compete for our attention, driving us in dozens of directions at once. We often experience our lives as fragmented, over-stimulated, and restless. Most of our common methods for gaining relief from the stresses of modern life-such as entertainments and alcohol-tend only to intensify the tensions. Increasingly, people are discovering that they need sanctuaries of quiet and calm and practices for strengthening their inner lives. There are not many places to find these things other than the world's spiritual disciplines.

But is meditation really a spiritual discipline? Isn't it just a form of stress reduction and relaxation?

In a culture that tends to medicalize and psychologize almost every facet of life, it is not surprising to find a spiritual discipline such a meditation marketed as a form of stress reduction or as a relaxation technique. Such an effort, of course, is a way of trying to remove the modern stigma of "religion" from meditation. Meditation is, to be sure, a form of stress reduction. Those who practice meditation will often discover their levels of stress diminishing. But stress reduction and relaxation are only by-products of the practice; they are not its principal purpose or aim. Meditation is a discipline for gaining awareness, or what many traditions call mindfulness. Relaxation assists in the process of cultivating mindfulness, but relaxation is not the goal. Indeed, the development of mindfulness may initially exacerbate one's feelings of stress and tension, because it involves being silent and attending to one's experience. Paying attention to one's inner self may stir up unpleasant memories and emotions; that is one of the reasons most persons neglect their interior selves.

What are some other misconceptions about meditation?

Just as many assume that meditation is essentially a technique for relaxation, they assume that the practice is easy. It isn't. Many beginning students get discouraged with meditation and choose not to continue after a little bit of experience. Usually, they give up on the practice because they believed that meditation would be an easy and relaxing thing to do. In order to realize the deepest benefits of this discipline, one must practice with commitment, diligence, effort, and courage. Yet it is heartening to realize that meditation actually helps us to develop commitment, diligence, effort, and courage.

Just as some might think meditation is easy, others seem to hold the idea that it is too difficult. This attitude seems to prevail in Asia where meditation is more commonly practiced. Some apparently think that meditation takes a particular talent or a special quality of holiness. While it may be true that some persons have a natural affinity or aptitude for meditation practice, it is more accurate to think of meditation as a skill rather than a talent. As a skill, meditation can be learned. And, like any skill, it must be cultivated through consistent practice.

Many persons think that meditation is a technique for producing altered states of consciousness or extraordinary experiences. They believe the purpose of meditating is to have a trancelike state or to eliminate all thoughts from one's mind or to become one with the universe. But in actuality, meditation is not about having any particular kinds of experiences. One may indeed experience a deep sense of connectedness to the world or even to God; one may have profound and creative thoughts; one may even experience feeling out of one's body. Any kind of experience is possible during meditation. But meditation is not oriented toward having particular kinds of experiences. Rather, meditation is concerned with how we relate to all our experiences, not about inducing specific sorts of experiences. In essence, meditating teaches awareness of whatever happens and allowing our experiences to come and go without judgment. In this sense, meditation is profoundly ordinary. There is nothing extraordinary or exotic about it.

Finally, another common misconception is that meditation is an escape from reality, that those who practice this discipline find life too difficult and hence seek refuge in some narcissistic haven shut off from the rest of the world. My experience with meditation is that just the opposite is true. Rather than being an escape from reality, meditation is more of an escape into reality. Consider how most of us live our lives most of the time. Usually, we are not present to the world as it is or to our experience of the world. We live our lives according to routine and habit; we are slaves to clocks, deadlines, and schedules; we impose our beliefs and preconceptions on the world. We don't so much relate to the world as we relate to our ideas about the way the world is or should be. This is not living in reality. Meditation, on the other hand, teaches one to be aware of the present place and moment, whatever they are. Meditation is more like an escape from the unreality of everyday routine life.

Okay, this is a lot about what meditation isn't. Say more about what meditation is.

In good apophatic fashion, it may be easier to express what meditation is not rather than what it is. Like many things spiritual, meditation is best grasped experientially, not descriptively. I therefore discourage beginning students from reading a lot about meditation. All too often, reading about meditation becomes a substitute for meditating, which is like the difference between reading a recipe for apple pie and eating a slice of apple pie.

Yet despite this limitation, I can say some things about what meditation is and about the benefits it can confer. Already I have indicated that meditation is a discipline for stilling the mind and body to develop greater awareness of and insight into the nature of the world and self. I can add that over time meditation trains us to be more open to and receptive of our life's experiences. It nurtures in us the qualities of equanimity and compassion. It teaches us the skill of letting go. Ultimately, according to some practitioners, meditation is a way to end suffering.

How do I get started? Do I need a teacher?

In what follows, I will describe the fundamental aspects of insight meditation practice, the discipline first taught by the Buddha 2,500 years ago. Ideally, one should learn the practice in a setting where one has access to a flesh-and-blood teacher. But not all of us have such opportunities, and so trying meditation on your own with the help of the written word is a good substitute. Of course, your practice will be enhanced if you ever attend a retreat or speak to an experienced teacher. But there is no need to wait until such an opportunity arises for you to begin this path toward greater awareness.

First, find a suitable place and time. The place should be quiet and calming, free from distractions and interruptions. The time should be what works best for you. Perhaps it is the early morning, just after you rise; perhaps it is when you return home from work. Choose a time during which you are not likely to be called away from your practice or lulled to sleep by drowsiness. Initially, try to set aside ten or fifteen minutes for your practice. As you develop your discipline, you may wish to increase your practice time to forty-five minutes to an hour.

Is there a particular posture?

Usually, one engages in meditation while sitting. In the Buddhist tradition, meditation is commonly referred to as "sitting practice" or simply "sitting." But meditation can be practiced standing up, walking, or lying down. To learn the basics of the discipline, it is best to start with sitting. Since it is necessary to still the body in order to still the mind, one must assume a stable, stationary position. And since one will try to avoid movement, it is necessary to find a comfortable posture. Sitting works well on both counts.

You can sit on the floor or in a chair. For most persons, sitting on the floor requires a cushion to be comfortable. A traditional meditation cushion, such as a Japanese zafu or a

Tibetan gomden, works well, but so does a pillow or sofa cushion if it allows sufficient height while sitting. A chair is especially good for those who find floor sitting to be difficult or painful. In both modes-cushion or chair-it is important to sit up straight without external support for the back. Do not rest against a wall if you are seated on the cushion or against the back of chair if you choose that approach. Maintaining a straight back without external support allows one to keep the sitting posture longer without fatigue. To keep the back in proper alignment, it may help to imagine a string attached to the crown of the skull gently pulling the head upwards toward the ceiling, allowing the back to elongate.

The legs and hands may be placed in a variety of positions. If you use a chair, both feet should rest flat on the floor. If you use a cushion to sit on the floor, the legs may be crossed several ways. Many teachers prefer the traditional "full lotus" position, with the feet placed on the top of the opposite thighs, but it is hard posture to hold, especially for beginners. The "half lotus," in which one foot is placed on the top of the opposite thigh and the other foot tucked beneath the opposite thigh, is easier, but it too may prove uncomfortable for beginners. The "Burmese" position may be best for western practitioners. It consists of crossing the legs and tucking the feet under the opposite thighs. Shifting the pelvis slightly forward on the cushion, creating a gentle curve in the small of the back, helps to make this posture more stable and comfortable.

The hands may be placed on the knees or kept on the lap, one hand on top of the other. Choose the position you find most comfortable.

The mouth should be closed and the tongue resting on the roof of the mouth. The eyes, too, should be shut, at least as one begins to learn the practice. This reduces visual stimulation and helps to facilitate concentration. As one gains experience, it is possible to meditate with eyes partially open, and focused on a place on the floor about six feet away.

What am I supposed to do with my mind?

There are many different styles of meditation; practitioners of each of them may answer this question differently. Some practices entail visualizing certain images, some encourage silently repeating a syllable or phrase (mantra), some involve gazing at a candle or some other object. All of these activities essentially serve to focus and affix one's attention for the purpose of cultivating concentration.

Perhaps the best anchor of attention for beginning practitioners is the breath. The breath is a simple focus, requires no additional accoutrements, and is omnipresent. Rarely, however, do we ever attend to it. Yet, the breath has much to teach us about ourselves and the nature of reality.

As you settle into a meditative posture, begin to relax and pay attention to your breathing as the breath moves in and out of the body. There are two convenient locations on which one can place the awareness: the nostrils and the diaphragm. Choose the place at which the sensation of breathing seems most prominent. If you focus on the diaphragm, try to be conscious of the way the breath rises and falls as the belly expands and contracts. If you select the nostrils, attend to the sensation of the air as it moves in and out of your nose. Focusing awareness on the rhythms of the breath almost automatically aids in relaxation. Keep your attention on the breath as best you can. You need only be aware of one inhalation or exhalation at a time.

You will discover, if you are paying attention to the workings of your own mind, that you will not be able to stay mindful of the breath for very long. Try as we might, unbidden thoughts, feelings, and sensations begin to intrude. That is fine and to be expected. The goal of meditation is not to eliminate these intrusions but to be aware of them. When you become aware of a thought or sensation, take note of it. You might simply say silently to yourself "thinking" or "tingling" or "hearing" or whatever term seems appropriate to your experience. Keep it simple, though; don't become overly analytical. The point is simply to take note of experience as it is happening. When you have become conscious of a thought or sensation, let it go. Gently return attention back to the breath and be present to your breathing again. When another thought or sensation arises, note it and return to the breath.

If you allow yourself to get absorbed into your thoughts, it may take a long time before you realize you are thinking. One moment you are focused on your breath, then suddenly you are woken from your reverie twenty minutes later to discover you have been fantasizing about your vacation in Cincinnati. That's the way the mind works. Don't become judgmental about that process; that only stimulates further thinking. No matter how long it takes for you to become aware of your thoughts, simply recognize that you've been thinking and return attention to the breath.

This is the basic technique for strengthening concentration. It is a simple practice, but it is not an easy practice. Initially, one will find it hard to stay focused on the breath. Don't be discouraged. The mind has been conditioned your entire life to resist discipline. It has to be gently but firmly trained to stay attentive. Don't expect instant and dramatic results. The benefits of meditation are cumulative and gradual. Over time, you will recognize that your mind responds to training. Increasingly, your concentrative powers are sharpened and you find it easier to remain focused on the object of your attention.

But the value of meditation practice is even more than just enhanced capacities for concentration and awareness. The practice gradually inculcates a different and wiser perspective on our experience. By learning to become aware of our thoughts, feelings, and sensations and then letting them go, we learn the invaluable discipline of non-attachment. One of the central insights of Buddhism is the intrinsic connection between suffering and attachment. Unskillfully clinging to the items of our experiences—whether other persons, ambitions, goals, ideals, feelings, or beliefs—causes us greatly to increase our suffering and the suffering of others. Reality is simply not structured to

sustain our attachments. Nothing is immune to the flux of change, and attempting to relate to anything as if it were permanent or absolute is bound to cause us sorrow. Our greatest attachment, perhaps, is to our very notion of self, our illusion that there is something substantial and permanent about who we are. Even this belief—indeed, especially this belief—must be released. By learning that it is not necessary to identify with any thought, feeling, or sensation, we increase our ability not to cling to or grasp at the elements of our life's experience.

Buddhists liken the mind in its natural state and function to a clear blue sky. The thoughts and sensations we experience they compare to clouds. As long as those images, thoughts, and feelings are allowed to drift through the mind like clouds on a blue day, we maintain clarity and wisdom. But when we begin to cling, to hold on to that which is fundamentally elusive, our minds become cloudy, unable to see the world and our lives in it as they truly are. Our minds become so filled with opinions and beliefs, our entire experience is filtered through them, distorting our understanding of what really is.

Are there any advanced techniques for mindfulness practice?

I've described the basic practice of insight meditation. There are, of course, other techniques and practices that can be profitably added to this fundamental discipline. But one should gain a secure grounding in the rudiments of the discipline before augmenting it. When it is appropriate to do so, I recommend that aspiring meditators learn walking meditation practice, to supplement sitting practice, and metta, or loving kindness, meditation, which enhances our capacities for compassion.

Since it's beyond my limitations here to detail these practices, let me recommend that you consult a basic meditation instruction manual. I've listed some of the best below.

How do I incorporate meditation into the rest of my life?

Meditation is for the purpose of conscious living, not for having interesting experiences while seated on your ass. Meditation is a discipline for learning mindfulness and gaining insight for the rest of life. It means very little if we leave the cushion and return to our slovenly habits of mindless living.

Fortunately, the benefits of the practice gradually manifest themselves throughout our lives with little effort as long as we remain committed to the discipline. The hard work is making a place in your life for meditation. Once you start to practice meditation, you will discover dozens of excellent reasons not to meditate. Suddenly, doing the laundry and mowing the grass seem far more interesting and more important than sitting to train the mind. I have often found it helpful to practice with a group. Group practice provides an external structure that fosters discipline.

It is not always possible, however, to meditate with a group. Commit yourself to meditate at particular time every day. Don't be overly ambitious. Start with a goal that is reasonable. If you can only sit mindfully for five minutes, begin with that. With practice, your length of meditation can increase to forty-five minutes or an hour. You will discover that the benefits of meditation increase proportionally with the regularity and length of your practice. But begin modestly, with humble expectations.

Which books are available if I wish to pursue this practice?

It is often a temptation simply to read about meditation rather than pursuing the practice. Don't spend too much time with books; their value is limited. A few good texts, however, will be of benefit, especially in the beginning stages of practices. Here is a list of some of the best English books that I have found.

Joseph Goldstein. *Insight Meditation: The Practice of Freedom*. Boston and London: Shambhala, 1994.

Henepola Gunaratana. *Mindfulness in Plain English*. Boston: Wisdom Books, 1991.

Perhaps the clearest and most concrete explanations of Insight meditation available.

_____. *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness: Walking the Buddha's Path*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001.

A fitting sequel to *Mindfulness in Plain English*. Read *Mindfulness* first.

Thich Nhat Hanh. *The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual on Meditation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1976.

Written by a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk, this is an excellent introduction to mindfulness meditation.

Jack Kornfield. *A Path with Heart: A Guide through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life*. New York: Bantam Books, 1993.

A well-written meditation manual by an American Vipassana master.

Walpola Rahula. *What the Buddha Taught*. New York: Grove Press, 1959.

A classic introduction to the teachings of the Buddha according to a prominent Theravadin monk.

Larry Rosenberg. *Breath by Breath: The Liberating Practice of Insight Meditation*. Boston: Shambhala, 1999.

Sharon Salzberg. Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness. Boston and London: Shambhala, 1995.

An excellent introduction to metta meditation, a practice to cultivate compassion.

Chögyam Trungpa. Meditation in Action. Berkeley: Shambhala, 1969.