

Why meditate?

(Modified excerpt from the book "Introduction to Buddhism and to Buddhist Meditation", previously in the book "Why meditate?" by Khun Reinhard)

Humans strive for happiness but usually we experience it rarely and then for a short time only.

Sometimes we are really unhappy but most of the time we are in a more or less indeterminate state of mind. Not really unhappy, but not really happy either and usually we do not bother, but at times we have the notion that something is not quite right, something is missing, without knowing what this might be.

Even this indeterminate state of mind, though not an unhappy state, is already difficult to bear for many of us because there is a sense of lack which prevents us from feeling happy, but that is what we are looking for all the time.

In order to escape we have invented or are using all kinds of means: overindulgence in sex or the use of alcohol, nicotine, other drugs, indulgence in food, TV, internet, endless chatter ...

We are used to looking outside ourselves, looking for sense stimulations which may make us happy and sometimes they do. But all of this is just temporary and when the effect is gone, we have to do it again and again ... chasing happiness endlessly because, as we all know from our own experience, there is no lasting happiness in all these excitements.

Sometimes we are totally stressed out, tired of everything and what are we then longing for? Then we are yearning for a quiet and calm place, we don't want to hear or see anything, we want to be alone, want to just rest, relax or go to sleep. I guess all of us have experienced this feeling of being fed up with everything.

However, all of us might be familiar with a different kind of happiness as well, a happiness which does not spring from excitement but out of calm and peaceful circumstances: a walk along a quiet, empty beach in the early morning, a stroll through a beautiful landscape bathed in mild sunlight, listening to the birds and crickets in the morning, watching a spectacular sunrise or sunset.

Usually it happens when we are alone, silent, undisturbed by people. This connection with nature can uplift our minds immensely; it induces a very peaceful and calm kind of happiness, a feeling of lightness, of floating, something magical.

Peacefulness and calmness of the mind is our refuge after being stressed out by all the other means of chasing "worldly" happiness. So why live the hard way and turn to this inner peace and balance only after a health scare, a divorce or other catastrophes in life? Why wait until our problems in life mount until they become nearly unbearable?

A much wiser approach is to investigate the causes of our discontentment and little by little free ourselves from this relentless and tiring chasing after pleasure. Even though reading books or listening to talks will help with this inquiry, it can effectively be done only by looking inside, by examining our own bodies and minds – by meditation. At the end of the road *Nibbana* or *Nirvana*, a balanced permanent state of mind is waiting but at least for me (and I suspect for the vast majority of others) this is beyond reach. But we can free the minds more and more frequently from discontentment and unhappiness. The path to genuine happiness is provided by meditation.

Meditation is to be found in many religious systems, pursuing different goals. As with most things in this world there is not just one way of looking at or dealing with them. Depending on the many different schools of Buddhism (like Tibetan, Zen, Thai, Sri Lankan and Chinese Buddhism) and their subdivisions, let

alone all the diverse forms of meditation in Hinduism and Yoga, we find different ways to approach meditation and we will find diverse meditation techniques. There is no 'right' or 'wrong' with different techniques, usually just different goals and experiences of those who meditate. Different techniques suit different people. So there is nothing really wrong with acknowledged various techniques, but we should stick to only one of them, not mixing them. One may try different ways of practice, but one at a time and then choose one and stick to it. Do not trust in anything or anybody offering quick results. Meditation is the task of a lifetime; it took even the Buddha six years of continual, at times extreme practice to become enlightened.

In my opinion meditation could simply be regarded as a training of the mind. All of the following is viewed from a Buddhist standpoint, though many of the mentioned definitions and results are common for most of the different approaches to life. There are numerous definitions of the term 'meditation', but generally speaking, meditation refers to the cultivation of the human mind, to the development of concentration, mindfulness, awareness and wisdom. Buddhism offers calmness or concentration meditation and *vipassanā* or insight meditation. The example given by Tan Ajahn Poh, the abbot of Wat Suan Mokkh, is that of a bird: like as a bird depends on two wings to fly, a meditator needs to develop both concentration and insight meditation to lessen unsatisfactory states of mind.

Meditation takes energy and commitment, determination and discipline. To get any results from the practice of meditation it has to be done regularly and continually over years, otherwise results will be meager and frustrating. For me it is the task of a lifetime.

Why should we devote time and effort to develop concentration and wisdom, why meditate? What is there to expect? First let us look at what should not be expected. If you are looking for quick, possibly instant results or you expect to develop certain kind of supernatural psychic powers, or you simply want to dream yourself away from reality, if you want to use meditation as kind of a drug to escape reality, then you are in for disappointment. Supernatural psychic powers belong to fanciful thinking. And how can we expect to change lifelong exercised habits in a short time? It took us all our lives to become the people we are today. Changes are possible but they will take a long, long time. And meditation is not to escape from our social environment, to retreat into some calm and peaceful 'inner' world. On the contrary, it should enable us to face reality. "Meditation is not to drop out of society but to reintegrate into society," as Thich Nhat Hanh, a famous Vietnamese meditation teacher, said in chapter four of his book *Being Peace*¹.

Through the practice of sitting still we start to see clearly what is going on in our bodies and minds. We get a chance to really get to know ourselves, who we really are and not who we think we are or want to be. We get to know all our desires, our hopes and fears, our ambitions, our anger, our boredom, our self-righteousness, our judgmental minds, our idealism... Once we know ourselves, once we know how we are driven by this continuous flow of thoughts and emotions in the mind, we can more easily understand others, who have to deal with the same chaos in their minds and when we understand ourselves and others, we can respond to everything with great skill. Ajahn Chah, one of the great meditation teachers in Thailand of the last century, said in *Everything is Teaching Us*²: "One who meditates and realizes a tranquil mind will become an uncomplicated, undemanding person, content with simple food, simple living and other requisites of life, easy to speak to and unassuming in their actions. Without difficulty or trouble, they will live at ease."

¹ **Thich Nhat Hanh**, *Being Peace*, Chapter 4: The Heart of Practice
Originally published: Berkley: Parallax Press, 1987, eISBN 978-1-935-20917-1

² **Ajahn Chah**, *Everything is Teaching us*
www.amaravati.org/downloads/pdf/Everything_is_Teaching_Us_web.pdf

By practicing meditation in the right way we should develop great tolerance towards other human beings, it should make us humble in regard to them as well as in regard to all other forms of life, to the environment and to nature. We should keep in mind that all things are connected with each other; we are a part of society and nature, not apart from them.

As a result of a continuous mature meditation practice we realistically can expect to live more harmoniously and in peace with ourselves and others, to reduce the more gross forms of suffering, not of unhappiness and discontentment altogether.

Young people quite often will begin a meditation practice more or less out of curiosity. They are usually not discontented with their present life, but most people would not meditate if they were not unhappy to some extent with their past and present conditions and, of course, they then would expect some change for the better in the future. The main motivating force might be some kind of dissatisfaction with their current situation.

What causes this dissatisfaction and how can meditation help to alleviate it?

All of the Buddha's teaching is concerned with the unsatisfactory nature of human life. It is summarized in what is called the Four Noble Truths. These are:

1. There is suffering, discontentment in life (the Buddha did not say that life is suffering).
2. There are causes for this suffering to arise (if there is no cause for suffering, then suffering will not arise).
3. There is a way out of suffering (by avoiding or eliminating the causes).
4. The way leading out of suffering (the Noble Eightfold Path).

Meditation is a method to see very clearly all of the above, to experience it in our own bodies and minds. It is not difficult to understand the Four Noble Truths intellectually but mere intellectual understanding is usually not sufficient to lead people into taking the way out of the problems of life. But experiencing suffering in our bodies and minds motivates us to take the necessary and sometimes challenging steps out of it.

It is highly recommended to participate in a 7- or 10-day meditation retreat, where one can get a thoroughly introduction into an acknowledged meditation technique. Whether we are new to meditation or experienced already, a meditation retreat makes us (more) familiar with the meditation technique, it helps us to deepen our understanding of ourselves and of the truth of nature, helps us recharge our "spiritual battery", and it should make us fit to deal with the challenges in our day-to-day routines.

In a meditation retreat we may experience very calm and peaceful states of mind, but our daily lives usually do not allow formal meditation sessions for longer than thirty minutes a day. Here it is more important to try to be as much mindful as possible of all our daily activities, to keep the mind's attention on the activities of the body. During our formal sittings we then may reflect on what has happened to us or what we are going to do.

Thirty minutes to calm the mind, to reflect on what is happening in our lives, to keep it free from the bombardment of our senses is bound to have positive effects in the long run. The need to change people, situations or the environment according to our likes and dislikes will lessen. We simply will become more content and balanced, a valuable companion for ourselves and others.

