

# Meditation: It's Not What You Think

*Jon Kabat-Zinn 1/27/2005*

It might be good to clarify a few common misunderstandings about meditation right off the bat. First, meditation is best thought of as a way of being, rather than a technique or a collection of techniques.

I'll say it again.

Meditation is a way of being, not a technique.

This doesn't mean that there aren't methods and techniques associated with meditation practice. There are. In fact, there are hundreds of them, and we will be making good use of some of them. But without understanding that all techniques are orienting vehicles pointing at ways of being, ways of being in relationship to the present moment and to one's own mind and one's own experience, we can easily get lost in techniques and in our misguided but entirely understandable attempts to use them to get somewhere else and experience some special result or state that we think is the goal of it all. As we shall see, such an orientation can seriously impede our understanding of the full richness of meditation practice and what it offers us. So it is helpful to just keep in mind that above all, meditation is a way of being, or, you could say, a way of seeing, a way of knowing, even a way of loving.

Second, meditation is not relaxation spelled differently. Perhaps I should say that again as well: Meditation is not relaxation spelled differently.

That doesn't mean that meditation is not frequently accompanied by profound states of relaxation and by deep feelings of well-being. Of course it is, or can be, sometimes. But mindfulness meditation is the embrace of any and all mind states in awareness, without preferring one to another. From the point of view of mindfulness practice, pain or anguish, or for that matter boredom or impatience or frustration or anxiety or tension in the body are all equally valid objects of our attention if we find them arising in the present moment, each a rich opportunity for insight and learning, and potentially, for liberation, rather than signs that our meditation practice is not "succeeding" because we are not feeling relaxed or experiencing bliss in some moment.

We might say that meditation is really a way of being appropriate to the circumstances one finds oneself in, in any and every moment. If we are caught up in the preoccupations of our own mind, in that moment we cannot be present in an appropriate way or perhaps at all. We will bring an agenda of some kind to whatever we say or do or think, even if we don't know it.

This doesn't mean that there won't be various things going on in our minds, many of them chaotic, turbulent, painful, and confusing, if we start training to become more mindful. It is only natural that there will be. That is the nature of the mind and of our lives at times. But we do not have to be caught by those things, or so caught up in them that they color our capacity to perceive the full extent of what is going on and what is called for (or color our capacity to perceive that we have no idea what is really going on or what might be called for). It is the non-clinging, and therefore the clear perceiving, and the willingness to act appropriately within whatever circumstances are arising that constitute this way of being that we are calling meditation.

It is not uncommon for people who know little of meditation except what they have gleaned from the media to harbor the notion that meditation is basically a willful inward manipulation, akin to throwing a switch in your brain, that results in your mind going completely blank. No more thought, no more worry. You are catapulted into the "meditative" state, which is always one of deep relaxation, peace, calm, and insight, often associated with concepts of "nirvana" in the public's mind.

This notion is a serious, if totally understandable, misperception. Meditation practice can be fraught with thought and worry and desire, and every other mental state and affliction known to frequent human beings. It is not the content of your experience that is important. What is important is our ability to be aware of that content, and even more, of the factors that drive its unfolding and the ways in which those factors either liberate us or imprison us moment by moment and year in, year out.

While there is no question that meditation can lead to deep relaxation, peace, calm, insight, wisdom, and compassion, and that the term "nirvana" actually refers to an important and verifiable dimension of human experience and is not merely the name of an aftershave lotion or a fancy yacht, it is never what one thinks, and what one thinks is never the whole story. That is one of the mysteries and attractions of meditation. Yet sometimes even seasoned meditators forget that meditation is not about trying to get anywhere special, and can long for or strive for a certain result that will fulfill our desires and expectations. Even when we "know better," it can still come up at times, and we have to "re-mind" ourselves in those moments to let go of such concepts and desires, to treat them just like any other thoughts arising in the mind, to remember to cling to nothing, and maybe even to see that they are intrinsically empty, mere fabrications, however understandable, of what we might call the wanting mind.

Another common misconception is that meditation is a certain way of controlling one's thoughts, or having specific thoughts. While this notion, too, has a degree of truth to it, in that there are specific forms of discursive meditation that are aimed at cultivating specific qualities of being such as lovingkindness and equanimity, and positive emotions such as joy and compassion, and equanimity, our ways of thinking about meditation often make practicing more difficult than it needs to be, and prevent us from coming to our experience of the present moment as it actually is rather than the way we might want it to be, and with an open heart and an open mind.

For meditation, and especially mindfulness meditation, is not the throwing of a switch and catapulting yourself anywhere, nor is it entertaining certain thoughts and getting rid of others. Nor is it making your mind blank or willing yourself to be peaceful or relaxed. It is really an inward gesture that inclines the heart and mind (seen as one seamless whole) toward a full-spectrum awareness of the present moment just as it is, accepting whatever is happening simply because it is already happening. This inner orientation is sometimes referred to in psychotherapy as "radical acceptance." This is hard work, very hard work, especially when what is happening does not conform to our expectations, desires, and fantasies. And our expectations, desires, and fantasies are all-pervasive and seemingly endless. They can color everything, sometimes in very subtle ways that are not at all obvious, especially when they are about meditation practice and issues of "progress" and "attainment."

Meditation is not about trying to get anywhere else. It is about allowing yourself to be exactly where you are and as you are, and for the world to be exactly as it is in this moment as well. This is not so easy, since there is always something that we can rightly find fault with if we stay inside our thinking. And so there tends to be great resistance on the part of the mind and body to settle into things just as they are, even for a moment. That resistance to what is may be even more compounded if we are meditating because we hope that by doing so, we can effect change, make things different, improve our own lives, and contribute to improving the lot of the world.

That doesn't mean that your aspirations to effect positive change, make things different, improve your life and the lot of the world are inappropriate. Those are all very real possibilities. Just by meditating, by sitting down and being still, you can change yourself and the world. In fact, just by sitting down and being still, in a small but not insignificant way, you already have.

But the paradox is that you can only change yourself or the world if you get out of your own way for a moment, and give yourself over and trust in allowing things to be as they already are, without pursuing anything, especially goals that are products of your thinking. Einstein put it quite cogently: "The problems that exist in the world today cannot be solved by the level of thinking that created them." Implication: We need to develop and refine our mind and its capacities for seeing and knowing, for recognizing and transcending whatever motives and concepts and habits of unawareness may have generated or compounded the difficulties we find ourselves embroiled within, a mind that knows and sees in new ways, that is motivated differently. This is the same as saying we need to return to our original, untouched, unconditioned mind.

How can we do this? Precisely by taking a moment to get out of our own way, to get outside of the stream of thought and sit by the bank and rest for a while in things as they are underneath our thinking, or as Soen Sa Nim liked to say, "before thinking." That means being with what is for a moment, and trusting what is deepest and best in yourself, even if it doesn't make any sense to the thinking mind. Since you are far more than the sum of your thoughts and ideas and opinions, including your thoughts of who you are and of the world and the stories and explanations you tell yourself about all that, dropping in

on the bare experience of the present moment is actually dropping in on just the qualities you may be hoping to cultivate -- because they all come out of awareness, and it is awareness that we fall into when we stop trying to get somewhere or to have a special feeling and allow ourselves to be where we are and with whatever we are feeling right now. Awareness itself is the teacher, the student, and the lesson.

So, from the point of view of awareness, any state of mind is a meditative state. Anger or sadness is just as interesting and useful and valid to look into as enthusiasm or delight, and far more valuable than a blank mind, a mind that is insensate, out of touch. Anger, fear, terror, sadness, resentment, impatience, enthusiasm, delight, confusion, disgust, contempt, envy, rage, lust, even dullness, doubt, and torpor, in fact all mind states and body states are occasions to know ourselves better if we can stop, look, and listen, in other words, if we can come to our senses and be intimate with what presents itself in awareness in any and every moment. The astonishing thing, so counterintuitive, is that nothing else needs to happen. We can give up trying to make something special occur. In letting go of wanting something special to occur, maybe we can realize that something very special is already occurring, and is always occurring, namely life emerging in each moment as awareness itself.

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