Why We Meditate

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When you meditate, it’s important you understand both how to do it and why you’re doing it. The how isn’t all that difficult to explain. It may not be easy to do, but the instructions are pretty simple. Focus on your breath. Notice, when you breathe in, where do you feel the breath? And we’re not talking just about the air coming in and out, but also the movement of the body that brings the air in and then allows it out. Where is that feeling most pronounced? Where is it strongest? Focus your attention there. Try to stay with the sensation of the breath all the way in, all the way out. You may want to use a breath as a meditation word along with the breath. Butto is traditional. It means “awake.” It’s the title the Buddha earned on the night of his awakening. It’s the quality of mind that you want to develop. So you divide the word into two—but for the in-breath, to for the out—and allow the breath to be comfortable. It’s normal, when you first focus on the breath, to find yourself forcing it too much. You want to make sure it’s clear, you want to make sure it’s distinct, and so you make it too strong or too long, too short—whatever. So remind yourself that it’s going to be easier to stay with the breath if it’s comfortable. So you can experiment. See what rhythm of breathing feels best right now. Think long breath and see what the body does. And then how does it feel? Stick with it for a while and then think shorter breath. And if shorter breath feels better, then stick with the shorter breath. If not, go back to the longer breath. Then after a while, think deeper. See how that feels. More shallow. See how that feels. In other words, take some time to experiment with the sensation of breathing to see how it feels. Until you get a rhythm that feels just right. And then stick with that rhythm as long as it feels good. If you find that after a while it starts getting mechanical or unbalanced, unpleasant, then experiment some more. See what other changes need to be made. In other words, stay on top of the breath, stay on top of the needs of the body. Because the body’s needs will change as you sit here. If you find the mind calming down, you’ll find that you need to breathe less and less. The body will get enough oxygen. In fact, it’s possible that when the mind is really still, that the sensation of in-and-out breathing will stop because you’re getting enough oxygen coming in through the pores of your skin. So that’s basically how you do the meditation. When the sensation of breathing feels good, you can think of allowing that sensation to flow to different parts of your body, like a current of honey going down the front of the body, down the back of the body, down through the shoulders and the arms, down to the base of the spine, out your legs to the tips of the toes. In other words, don’t force the sensations into different parts of the body. But if there’s a sensation of ease or comfort, allow it to flow. Allow it to connect with different parts of the body, working through any sense of tension or tightness you may have in the body and allowing it to dissolve away. That way, the more ease and comfort you feel in the body, the more of a sense of fullness comes up, and the easier it is to stay with the breath. So that’s pretty much the how, how you do it. Now, why is also important, because it helps keep you with it and to understand what you’re doing, to understand the point of all this. Because you’re going to find different voices in the mind saying, “Why am I doing this? Why don’t I think about that? Why don’t I think about this?” Not everybody in this committee of your mind is sold on the breathing meditation yet. So even though the sense of ease that can come from the breathing may help, you need more than just that. You need to be able to remind yourself why you’re doing this. That’s why we had those chants before we started. On the one hand, there’s that very last chant that says, “May I be happy.” Because this, after all, is what we want. Everything we do in life is for the sake of happiness, long-term or short-term, wise or unwise. But there’s a quest for happiness in everything we do, and the Buddha has us recognize that and honor it. He doesn’t say you should be embarrassed to search for your own happiness. He says it’s an important thing. This is why we act anyhow. So let’s do it wisely. Let’s look for happiness that is long-term. The other chants are there to remind us some of the obstacles we’re going to face in trying to find a long-term happiness. One, we live in a world that’s full of aging, illness, death, and separation. Those five recollections or the five reflections we had just now, the first four, are pretty depressing. They remind us that this is what the human world is like. You probably heard the story of the woman, the dead child, who refused to believe that her child was dead. She was looking around for a doctor who would cure its illness. Someone finally recommended that she go see the Buddha, and the Buddha said, “Okay, there is medicine for your child. Mustard seed, which back in those days was the cheapest thing you could find in any house in India. But it has to come from a house. Nobody in the family has ever died.” So she went from house to house asking for mustard seed, and people were happy to give it to her. But then she said, “Oh, by the way, has there been a death in the family?” And everyone said, “Oh, of course. Father, mother, sister, brother, child, son, daughter.” So she went from house to house to house. She was willing to admit that, yes, her child was dead. This is a part of human life. It’s everywhere. In fact, it was this reflection on aging, illness, and death that sent the young prince, who eventually became the Buddha, out into the forest. He had power, wealth, everything you could imagine. Yet he realized one day that this power was not enough. All the power and wealth that he had, all the happiness he had, was going to be ended by aging, illness, and death. He had no defense against those things. He wondered if there was a way to find a different happiness. On seeing a forest wanderer, he said, “This must be it. Go out in the forest and really look deep down inside into your mind to see if there’s an alternative. Is there a kind of happiness that can come from within?” And, as with most people who had lived a life of sensual indulgence, he went to the opposite extreme, extreme austerity, thinking that if he could subject himself to as much pain as possible and keep his mind resilient in the face of the pain, then maybe he might break through to something important. Well, after six years of that, he realized that didn’t work, which is how he then came to the middle path, halfway between sensual indulgence and self-torture. In other words, using this state of mind, calm, clear, easeful, that we’re trying to work on right here, right now, as a way of observing the mind to see what it does to create suffering. Because, as he realized, the cause of suffering isn’t outside. It’s what the mind does to itself. It’s what handles the events of life. This is that fifth reflection. It’s our actions that make all the difference between whether we’re going to suffer or not. And that’s the reflection that’s hopeful, because we can change our actions. If we’ve been acting in an unskillful or thoughtless way, we can change. But change has to come from learning how to control your mind. So you can observe it. This is why we meditate, is trying to exert some sort of control over the mind, keeping it mindful. In other words, you try to keep the breath in mind and keeping it alert, watching to see what the mind is doing. Because it’s only then that you can clearly see what the mind does that causes suffering and what it does that actually leads to an end of suffering. So that even though you live in a world filled with aging, illness, death, and separation, the mind doesn’t have to suffer. That other reflection wasn’t translated, or at least we didn’t chant the translation “reflection on the requisites.” This is another issue in finding happiness, reflecting on the fact that when you’re born into this world, you need food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. In other words, you’re born with needs. We don’t come into this world complete. We come in, each of us, like a big gaping hole. As I say, you can stuff whole herds of cattle, a farm full of vegetables, into your stomping, and it never seems to be full. That’s just the food side. Then there’s clothing, shelter, and medicine. Many of us, in the pursuit of these things, as we’re children, of course, we depend on our parents. But as we grow up, we have to become more self-reliant. We go way overboard in trying to find these things and cause a lot of harm to ourselves and to other people. This is the other big issue in the pursuit of happiness. If your happiness depends on the harm being caused to other people, they’re not going to stand for it. That kind of happiness can’t last. So again, you have to look into the mind. Is there happiness that doesn’t harm anyone, doesn’t harm yourself, doesn’t harm others? That’s the only kind of happiness. That’s the only kind of happiness you can hope to depend on. So all these reflections come together. We want happiness. We have to honor that desire. Buddhism is one of the few teachings that actually says, “Honor your desire for happiness.” The world at large says, “True happiness? Don’t even think about it. Just buy our stuff.” We can’t promise real fulfillment, but at least a little bit of pleasure. In ownership, a little bit of pleasure and consumption. That’s the best there is. That’s what they want us to think. So we focus all our energies on trying to get this, get that. But the Buddha says, “No, you have the potential for true happiness. Each of us does. You should honor that desire for true happiness, a happiness that doesn’t disappoint, a happiness that doesn’t cause any harm.” In other words, a happiness that’s not dependent on things that age, grow ill, die, and get separated, and a happiness that doesn’t demand that you keep looking for things and stuffing things into the body or into your homes at the expense of other people. So where does that leave us? It leaves us with the mind, as the Buddha pointed out, what he discovered as he pursued that path to awakening. There are qualities that each of us has in the mind. Mindfulness, which is a pretty simple sort of thing. It’s just being able to keep something in mind. But in most events, it’s not developed. You try to keep something in mind for a little bit, and then you’re off to something else. Or alertness, really watching what you’re doing, being clear about your intentions, being clear about your actions, being clear about their results. That’s a quality we all have to some extent. But again, it’s not thorough, it’s not all around. It needs to be developed, it needs to be trained. In fact, all the good qualities in the mind—good will, compassion, concentration, discernment—we all have these to some extent. It’s simply a question of learning how to develop them. If you really develop them, you find that you’ve got all the potentials you need for true happiness right here in the mind. Once you can tap into that inner source of happiness, then you can live in the world from a position of strength, helping other people when they need to be helped, and you’re able to provide the help. You’re able to live in all kinds of difficult situations, and the mind can still be very happy. This is a principle you see all around you. There are some people who are extremely wealthy, powerful, connected, and they’re miserable. There are other people who have not very much at all, but they seem to be really happy. This shows that it’s not the outside circumstances that can determine whether you’re happy or not. It’s how the mind talks to itself. It’s how it focuses on things, how it observes things, what it learns, the skills it has in dealing with itself and with events around it. That’s where the secret to happiness lies. So this is why we meditate. And it’s good to keep this in mind all the time, because there will be a tendency for the mind to say, “Well, nothing seems to be happening with the breath. It’s just in and out, and there’s no third alternative. What else is there?” And it starts looking around. When that question comes up, you say, “Wait a minute. We haven’t really looked at the breath thoroughly yet. After all, the Buddha gained awakening while looking at his breath. So there must be more to it than just the in and out.” Of course, his breath is no different from yours. It’s simply the qualities of mind that he learned how to train and develop and bring to the breath in the present moment. That’s what made all the difference. So if the mind starts wandering off in its old ways, remind yourself, “I’ve been there before. It’s like the movies on the American movie channel.” My brother, who’s been sick for the past couple of years, has gotten to see the whole repertoire they’ve got. And it’s the same with our minds. So many of the thoughts that come through our minds have come before. We’ve seen them before. And if they were movies, you wouldn’t bother to pay for them. And yet the mind keeps going back, going back, going back. Well, here you’re providing with an alternative. There’s something new here. As the Buddha said, when you practice this way, you ultimately attain something you’ve never attained before. You know something you’ve never known before. You’ve realized things that you’ve never had a chance to realize before. There are these new things in life. So be willing to follow the breath to see where it takes you. So this is the kind of understanding you need to meditate. One is understanding how to do it, and two, you understand why that helps keep you with it, because it’s the staying with it that makes all the difference. It’s like a medicine. There are some creams that you put on your skin to heal rashes. That’s not the case. You put the cream on and then you wipe it off. You put it on and you let it stay there for long periods of time so it can do its healing work. It’s the same with the breath. It takes a while sometimes for the breath to help heal the mind, but it is healing. The breath is comfortable coming in, going out. You can get in touch with how to let that comfortable sensation spread throughout the body, down the nerves, throughout the body, out to the skin. Then just let it stay there. If I gradually, bit by bit by bit, the mind does feel healed, the body feels healed. The ultimate in the happiness that the Buddha promises is still an important step there. In other words, the path that he teaches doesn’t save all of its happiness for the end. Right concentration is an important element of the path. In fact, it was the first one that he discovered. It can give you a sense of ease and well-being as you go through life, continuing to practice. This is your strength. This is your nourishment. So you’ve got the rest of the hour to work on that. If you find the mind wandering off, keep reminding it why you’re here. With time, you’re sure to see results.

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