Why We Meditate

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When you sit down to meditate, it’s good to remind yourself of why you’re meditating. You may have one of any number of motivations, or lots of motivations, but it’s good to remind yourself of what they are. There’s an aspect of the meditation that’s difficult—getting the mind to stay with one object for a whole hour. There are no monetary rewards. It’s not going to advance your career. It’s not going to make you more interesting to anyone else. There was a cartoon one time in the New Yorker that shows a man sitting in meditation, and in the next room his wife is talking to a friend, saying, “Herbert used to be such an interesting neurotic before he meditated.” And even if anything really wild and amazing comes up in your meditation, when you go to tell it to somebody else, they find it pretty tiresome, because it sounds like you’re bragging. You come to meditation because you want a happiness you can depend on. And you realize how much of your life is shaped by your mind, and how much of your mind is out of your control. Which means, of course, that your life is very much out of your control, and you want to get a handle on it. You see, the danger that comes from thoughts that run out of control—thoughts of anger, thoughts of lust, thoughts of fear, worries—people die because of these things. They go crazy because of these things. They can ruin a perfectly good life, a perfectly good career, a good marriage, a good career, a good marriage, simply as their thoughts get out of control and move into their actions, into their words, and then destroy whatever kind of goodness they’ve been trying to develop in life. So you meditate to get back to the Source, to see if you can get some control over these thoughts. And turn them in the direction you want them to go, because thoughts can also do an awful lot of good. You get good new ideas, the ideas that make you generous, make you principled, make you admirable. It all comes down to the mind. So that’s why we’re here. We’re looking for a happiness that lasts. A happiness that’s good not only for ourselves, but also for other people. There are essentially three ways of finding that kind of happiness—through generosity, through virtue, and through developing good qualities in the mind, the last one being the most essential. It’s good to have practice on the other two. That’s the kind of thing you can do in day-to-day life. And then the good attitudes, the good habits you develop by being generous and being virtuous, carry over into your meditation. From generosity, you learn that if you’re going to get anything good out of whatever you’re doing, you first have to be willing to give. In this case, you’re going to give time. You’re going to give your energy. You’re going to give it all your attention. From virtue, you learn that you need some control. There are certain times when you have to say “no” to yourself, and you have to say “no” skillfully, so that whatever you’re saying “no” to doesn’t simply go underground and turn into the thing that sends up its tentacles in all sorts of weird places. You have to learn how to say “no” with skill. That means giving yourself something positive to say “yes” to. With virtue, you’re saying “yes” to truthfulness. You’re saying “yes” to harmlessness. You’re saying “yes” to being trustworthy—good things to say “yes” to. You carry those insights over into what you’re doing right now. There are lots of topics you can choose for the meditation. You can think of thoughts of goodwill. Try to develop the attitude that you don’t wish harm for anybody, even the most despicable people you could think of. Because if they come to harm, they’re going to be even more despicable in the way they respond. There are very few people who really learn from their actions in any predictable way. So you hope that those people who are creating the causes for happiness continue to. Those who are creating the causes for misery, you hope that they come to see the light. And you work through all the people in your life or people you know through the media that you have trouble holding this feeling for. And reason with yourself until you really can honestly think, “I wish everyone in the world would know the causes for true happiness and would act on them.” That’s a good thought to hold in mind. There are also thoughts of equanimity when you realize, “Well, if it’s not possible, I still want to be able to hold my balance, keep my balance in the face of what’s possible and what’s not, so that I don’t get knocked off course by the things that are unfortunate in life.” You try to develop that toward everyone, even people you love a lot. You have to realize that we are born in this human realm. It tends to be a realm of loss. The people we love change. Either their love changes or they change. You can just go down the roster. All the people in the past year who’ve died have gone away. And yet we can’t let that thought destroy our desire for goodness, for true happiness. This is why you have to develop equanimity and be willing to develop equanimity in every case where it’s needed. This is why concentration is so important, because it gives you a good, solid foundation. It’s important for looking at any attitude, any thought that comes up. That’s why we’re here, focusing on our breath, or focusing on whatever topic of meditation captures our imagination and gives us a good place to stay, where we can be clear and settled with a sense of well-being, so that the mind has less of the hunger that keeps it driven to grab onto things that are ultimately disappointing. Essentially, we’re learning two major skills. One is how to stay here, and two, once we’re here, how to look at the thoughts that would pull us away. In the beginning, the first step is to try to stay here. Try to stay here as well as you can. If you notice that something’s pulled you away, learn how to look at that thought in such a way that you can let it go. In some cases, it’s simple enough. You see that the mind has wandered off into something you’re not really interested in, so you bring it back. It wanders off again, you bring it back again. Try to make the breath as comfortable as possible, and start exploring this sensation of breathing in the body. What is the breath? How does it move? What kind of breathing would feel best right now? In other words, this is how you learn how to say “yes” to the mind, so that when you’re saying “no,” it doesn’t seem so oppressive. There are other times when the mind is really fascinated by a particular kind of thinking. It’s not enough to say, “Hey, let’s come back to the breath.” You’ve got to remind yourself of why you want to drop that thought. One is to ask yourself, “Suppose I were to think that thought for twenty-four hours. Would it drive me crazy? Would it get me anywhere? If it were a movie, would I pay to see it? Or suppose I were to die tonight? Would I want to die in the midst of that kind of thinking?” In other words, learn how to think in a way that pulls you out of the thought. So you can look at it more as a process in the mind, something that comes from a particular motivation, and it actually has a consequence. Many times we play with our thoughts because we think, “Well, there’s no consequence. I’ve got a whole hour here. I can think about whatever.” Or we might say, “Here’s a whole hour. I can think about something at work. I can think about something at school.” But you really want your mind to be totally defined by work or school. Isn’t there a part of the mind that wants something more, that needs more attending to? When you look at the choices that your day-to-day life provides for you, you want to ask yourself, “Is this what I was born for? Is this what I went to school for? To be dealing with this?” It’s like that ad they ran several years back, going around interviewing little kids. A little kid says, “Yes, I’m glad I’m born into a democracy so I can get to vote for the lesser evil.” A lot of the actual circumstances in life are pretty small and confining. But the mind yearns for something more. So when we meditate, we’re listening to that yearning to see if there’s a deeper happiness we can find. So try to put your thoughts into context. One way is thinking of it as going into a movie theater where a bad movie is playing. But you’re stuck in the theater. If you sit and you look at the screen, you find yourself getting pulled into what you know is a made-up story. There are not really people up there on the screen. It’s just lights flashing on and off. So instead, try to put yourself off to the side. Instead of looking at the screen, sit on the side of the room and look at the people. There’s this beam of light flickering over their heads onto the screen. Their gaze is fastened on the screen and they laugh and they cry and whatever, all over these flashing lights. That’s what’s happening in the mind. These flashing thoughts come through the mind. You act as if they were real. The mind can get itself all tied up in worry and fear and lust and anger. What is it all about? Where does it all lead? The question is, do you want your life to be run by these vagrant, random thoughts? When you can see the thoughts, it’s really not all that interesting. It’s a lot easier to pull yourself back to the work that needs to be done. Another way of dealing with the thoughts is to infect the fantasy. If there’s a thought of lust, infect it with a little germ of what’s really unattractive about that object of lust or what’s unattractive about feelings. Our society says that kind of thinking is sick, but it’s actually very helpful, healthy, and you’re able to pull yourself out of these things. The same with anger. When somebody gets you all stirred up, ask yourself, “Who’s burning with the anger right now? And what am I getting out of it?” The mind actually does have a little bit of injury. It’s the enjoyment and the anger, otherwise it wouldn’t get involved. But you look at the enjoyment and you look at the misery and you compare the two. In this case, you’re trying to think about what are the good things of that person. What’s the good side of the person? Think of all the good things they’ve done for you. If they haven’t done good things for you, maybe they’ve done good things for someone else in a way that’s admirable. If there’s nothing at all good about the person, you’ve really got to feel sorry for them. There’s a great story about Ajahn Lee when he was a young monk thinking about disrobing. Before he disrobed, he went up to the top of the jetty, which is one of the spired monuments you see in all the monasteries in Thailand. This one had an opening inside a little meditation cubicle. So he went and sat in there and he thought about, “Well, what was life going to be like when he disrobed?” First, everything went really, really well, unbelievably well. But then he started infecting the fantasy. The wife, the beautiful wife he had, died and left him with a child. He needed someone to nurse the child, and so he got a woman who was inexpensive, didn’t charge much. One thing led to another, and he married her. They had another child. And then, of course, the wife started playing favorites with the kids, and home life became hell. She said, “Gee, I wish I hadn’t disrobed.” Well, of course, he hadn’t yet disrobed. That’s how you infect a fantasy. You bring reality in. You learn how to look at the world with two eyes and not just one. That’s what all this is about, is learning how to see things in perspective. Sometimes when trying to bring the mind to stillness, especially when there hasn’t been any sense of real rapture or ease coming from the stillness, it seems to be the hardest thing you can do. But then you’ve got to realize this is the most important work you could do, because if you don’t get any control over your mind, you have no idea where it’s going to lead you. An impulse could take over and just ruin your life. So when you keep things in perspective like this and learn how to use the various tools for distancing yourself from your thoughts, try to develop what’s called a sense of saṃvega, about these worlds that the mind has been creating. Saṃvega means seeing that these things go nowhere, and yet you’ve been spending so much time involved in them. You yearn for a way out. Then you realize there is a way out. It may not be easy, but it’s real. It’s possible. And it’s not always going to be hard. When you lay the groundwork well, things start settling in. The mind gets more and more at home with the breath here in the present. It feels better and better just sitting here, being very still, very still. Very alert, not swept away by every little thought that comes your way. There’s a genuine feeling of well-being, even though that’s not the end of the path. There are lots of rewards of the path along the way. So when you find that it’s getting difficult, remember that you’re here, the good things that come from being here, right here at your breath, right here in the present moment. Life happens in the present moment, yet for the most part we’re not really here. Here’s an opportunity to settle down and look at what’s actually happening. If it seems dull in the beginning, well, it’s not always going to be dull. Ask yourself, “What is this feeling of dullness? Who says it’s dull? So start questioning the complaints. Try to track down where they come from. Part of it just comes from your old habits of wanting to do things the way you’re accustomed to doing them. But ask yourself,”Is that what I want out of life? To just keep on doing the same old things over and over again? Have I gotten to the point in my life where I just really can’t learn anything new?” Here’s the opportunity to seize the moment. To see something you’ve never seen before. To attain something you’ve never attained before. To know something you’ve never before known. So do your best to appreciate that possibility and make the most of it. But it really is the only way out, and out is really good. You’ve got the word of the Buddha and all of his noble disciples as your guarantee.

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