

## Meditation

One avenue to access the Divine, that's common across many spiritual practices, is meditation. The common understanding of the term "meditation" comes with some baggage, so I'd like to talk about the spectrum of meditation possibilities.

I like to think of meditation as silent sitting. This takes away all the expectations of what we have heard meditation should accomplish. We've probably heard that meditation is an opportunity to attain something, to become enlightened, to become more peaceful, or fall into ecstasy. This misses the point because the effort to attain something means that we're denying what's already present.

When we meditate, there's an opportunity to see what's actually happening, before we try to make something else happen. It is also an opportunity to trust that whatever arises is for our benefit; it is a chance for us to see, to recognize, to allow to exist, and to be open and willing to face whatever may be experienced. Some days thoughts and restlessness might prevail; other days might be a time of peace and happiness. Whatever arises, it's all ok. Unless, of course, we tell ourselves that it is not.

When we start out in meditation, we may have a busy, chaotic mind, that has trouble focusing, and that tends to jump from one thought to the next endlessly. Some meditative practices that are valuable at the beginning are really forms of concentration. An example of this might be counting with your breath: "one, two, three ..." With each breath you count a number and remain with the counting at a natural breathing pace. At first, it can be challenging to get to the number ten. It doesn't sound that hard, but it might be more challenging than you would think. Another example of a concentration practice would be to focus your mind on a single repeated mantra or phrase, or maybe a single word like, "love" or "peace."

"Blah, blah, blah" is also a wonderful mantra to quiet the mind.

When we can keep our minds focused for longer periods of time, then a mindfulness meditation practice can be very helpful. When practicing mindfulness, we recognize that there's still activity in the mind or in our senses and we remain focused on that activity, while not getting lost in it. We allow the activity to take place without getting attached to any one particular thought, emotion, or sensation. We practice not chasing after pleasant thoughts, feelings or memories and not running away from unpleasant sensations or difficult experiences. With mindful meditation, we step back slightly from the conceptual mind even though our attention is still on the content of our mind or our perceptions. We watch what's happening. We're attentive to what's happening, but we're not trying to change anything. With practice, that begins to create a little distance from our stream of thoughts.

Then, we can go a little deeper. We can allow the mind to still be there and do what it does. But, rather than focusing on the mind, or the emotions that may be arising within the body, we can turn our focus back to awareness itself. In other words, there's activity happening in the mind, but it remains as background noise as our attention shifts back to awareness itself. Awareness is what's watching the thought stream. We can become curious about that simple, every day, already present, awareness.

Awareness might seem elusive or flimsy, but without awareness, we wouldn't be able to notice whatever was occurring in the body-mind.

Instead of focusing on our thoughts, emotions, or sensations, we step back more and more fully into a simple sense of awareness or consciousness. (I use those two terms interchangeably.) We can see that there are objects appearing within consciousness (thoughts, feelings, memories, sensations, etc.) and then there is the awareness, the consciousness itself, that is prior to, and more fundamental than, those objects.

At this point in our practice, we can inquire into the nature of this awareness. It is important to do so in your own firsthand experience. Philosophy and imagination are counter-productive in this endeavor. We can ask, for example: "Where in the body is the origin of the awareness?" "Does the awareness extend beyond the body? If so, how far?" "Does it have a shape?" "Does it have an age?" "Does it have a gender?" "Has it ever been hurt?" The important thing is to sense into it rather than to try to figure it out in the head.

This awareness is already present. It always has been. We dismiss or ignore it because, well, it is always there. We have been taught from an early age that what's important is the *content* of our minds. The fact that awareness exists is nearly always overlooked; it is most often dismissed as a mere function of our brain cells. We believe that thinking and awareness are synonymous. They are not. Awareness is what notices thought.

This awareness is not a special "spiritual" awareness, nor is it a high state. It is our normal, but normally unnoticed, everyday awareness.

This is a delicate point. It is important not to conceptualize this pointer.

When we can sense into this simple, yet extraordinary and mysterious, awareness, we can learn to simply rest and relax in it.

We can also notice that we can't really stand back and look at awareness because awareness itself is what's doing the looking. It's like our eyeball which can't see itself. We can recognize that it is awareness that's looking. Whatever awareness is looking at can and will change. Whereas, awareness itself is changeless.

When we look deeply enough, we may find that awareness is really the deepest sense of what we are when all of the opinions, beliefs, stories, labels, hopes, and fears drop away. Awareness is what remains. As Jed McKenna says, "Burn everything and see what's left."

In a sense this type of meditation practice is becoming more and more distant from the thinking mind. The mind may still be there, but our attention is resting elsewhere.

Meditation can be an exploration of our inner self by stepping back into that sense of awareness. And then a further stepping back is just allowing whatever arises, to arise within that consciousness. We can recognize that consciousness exists, and that content of all sorts arises within consciousness. For example, a thought or an emotion may arise and we can see it as arising within that field of consciousness. Consciousness itself is not disturbed by whatever arises. From the perspective of consciousness, thoughts and emotions aren't a problem.

When we can relax into this deeper form of meditation, it can feel as if we are letting go of our tendency to control our experience. We begin to allow things to arise if they do. If nothing arises, that too is beautiful, and we can rest in that.

And we may find that we can still rest in allowing everything to be as it is even while we are out in the world relating to others. Meditation at this stage is no longer confined to the cushion.

We may also discover that the consciousness that is always present is not *my* consciousness as distinct from, say, your consciousness. We may discover that it is the One Consciousness appearing in, and functioning through, all of us.

So, this is the spectrum of meditation practices. There are, of course, many variances to these practices. It's not that one's right and the other's wrong. It's more about what's most useful for you at a particular point in the journey. If you have a busy mind one day, maybe it's necessary to settle in and get grounded in presence by using a concentration practice. And then, once you've established yourself in your own seat, so to speak, you can step back into mindfulness and then into simple awareness.

The potential of meditation is to fully allow ourselves the time and space to sense into our own deepest nature. Our deepest nature is that sense of simple consciousness; a simple sense of "I am, I exist, now, here, without the expectation to achieve anything, and without the desire to change my state into something more peaceful, pleasant, or more spiritual." In meditation, seeking spiritual enlightenment is still seeking. Instead, we have the opportunity to notice what is already present and to explore that infinite depth of consciousness.

Meditation allows us to step into our deepest nature and relax in it. It's nothing more. That is enough. And if something arises, we can allow it to arise. My sense is that if something arises in our consciousness, it's meant to arise. It's not something that we should try to get rid of. If we've kept a lid on our emotions or we've held onto an old story for a long time, perhaps for decades, and it starts to arise in meditation, rather than try to make it go away because "I'm trying to meditate," it's really an opportunity. We can let it arise into our consciousness and free it by not judging it, by allowing it to be there, and giving it the transformative light and transparency of consciousness.

Whatever arises, let it be seen – give it its day in the Sun.

Meditation allows us to watch how our minds work. Meditation also creates the possibility to recognize that our inherent, every day, always present, consciousness is taking in the whole show. All of our stories, old memories, painful events of the past, fears about the future and anxieties, arise within this field of awareness. In meditation, there's the possibility of recognizing that our entire life is unfolding within the field of consciousness. This recognition forever changes our sense of belonging in this Life.

The opportunity is to invite Life into our experience without reservation. It doesn't matter whether we're sitting in meditation or just walking down the street; or at home with the family, at work, or in challenging situations. It is unquestionably beneficial to sit in quiet meditation. But, in the end, the question really becomes, can we live our Life from that spaciousness?

All are opportunities to allow Life to teach us its deepest meaning.

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