

Appendix

Learning To Meditate

How is it possible to find meaning in a finite world, given my shirt and waist size?

— Woody Allen, quoted in *The Essential Crazy Wisdom* by Wes Nisker

THE MEDITATION THAT I practice is called insight meditation. It calms the mind, focuses the attention on the present moment, and leads to self-transformation. This meditation practice could help you if you suffer from physical or emotional pain; or if life is moving too fast and you find yourself always busy and your tasks fill every available moment as a gas fills a vacuum; or if you are unhappy or depressed or fearful; or if you sleep poorly; or if you are angry; or if, like Woody Allen, you are perplexed by the arduous task of finding meaning in this finite world. Or perhaps you are just curious to learn it.

Meditating is a skill, like swimming or playing the cello. Although the instructions are simple, learning to meditate takes practice and effort. However, the rewards are potentially infinite:

- Meditation calms the mind and brings equanimity.
- It teaches us to accept whatever happens with perfect trust.

- It enables us to connect with the wisdom of our bodies and the wisdom of the present moment.
- It helps us cope with pain, reduce stress, and alleviate suffering.
- It allows the innate wisdom planted within us to blossom.
- Through meditation, we heal ourselves.
- Calming our minds creates peace within us and peace for those with whom we interact.

Here are brief instructions for insight meditation. They are an expanded version of the instructions for becoming present that I give my students at the beginning of every class I teach at the university. After reading this, I ask you to spend several minutes trying to do what I suggest:

If you would like to participate, then I invite you to sit up straight in your chair. Feel your body in the chair and your feet on the floor. Relax and be comfortable in this space. Close your eyes. Gently focus on your breath. If you are distracted by a sound, then make a mental note of that distraction. You can't change the sound or stop it, so just let it go. Similarly, if you are distracted by a thought, then make a mental note of that distraction. Let the thought float through your mind like a cloud through the sky, and let it go. When you are able to, bring your attention back to your breath. Relax into it. Keep your attention soft and precise. Let your mind become quiet by

focusing on the always changing and recurring breath. When you feel relaxed and present, open your eyes.

What happened during the time that you just meditated? If you have done it before, then you might have experienced an ease in quieting the mind and remaining in the present moment. On the other hand, if you have never meditated, then you might have been surprised to discover that the mind has a mind of its own, jumping from thought to thought, unable to stay quiet and focused. If so, then you experienced what the Buddhists call “monkey mind.”

How does the quiet mind deal with distractions such as sounds and thoughts? When we meditate, we pay attention to their coming and going without getting caught in the flow. We observe, remaining nonattached. Although we normally consider sounds as being external and thoughts as being internal, as mental phenomena they are on the same level, just like pain. Eventually the distractions cease to distract, and they become part of the passing show. Wisdom and peace arise when we learn to accept them, just as we accept the rhythmic flowing of the breath. As we focus on the breath, our mental landscape expands. Personal concerns exert less pressure in the expanded space. Because the breath sustains life, focusing on it can give rise to gratitude for the miracle of being alive.

Even in the short time that you just meditated, I hope that you felt less agitated, more aware, and more present. Perhaps after meditating, you might be able to appreciate the insight that all the Buddhist teachings are contained in the breath.

If you are interested in learning to meditate, then there are several ways to begin. Numerous books on meditation practice

are available, and there are many resources on the internet. The websites <http://www.dharmaseed.org> and <http://www.audiodharma.org> are particularly helpful. Some people find it easier to learn meditation from a teacher rather than from a book or an internet talk. If you live near a meditation center, then even an hour with an experienced teacher will introduce you to the fundamentals of meditation, which you can then build on in your own practice. Try to meditate regularly in a safe and quiet place at the same time each day. When you are ready, a weekend or longer retreat will help you deepen your practice, through silence, a supportive environment, and the absence of the distractions of your everyday routine. May the calm light of awareness lead to insight, transformation, and peace.

In August 2003, after three and a half years of suffering from headaches, I learned the truth about the pain at an eight-day retreat held at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. I never expected what would eventually happen of its own accord. The mindfulness cultivated by meditation blossomed from a practical technique for dealing with the headaches and the suffering into an all-encompassing approach to my life.

Since August 2003, I have continued to meditate and to exercise daily. I have also given up trying to find the meaning of life because living mindfully in the present moment without searching is so much more meaningful.