

Starting to Meditate

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The best way to understand the mind is not by reading about it, but by observing it directly. Doing so means making a space in one's life to take the time for observation. Find a quiet place to sit and allow yourself to become still. Pay attention to the activity of your mind as you do so. Just notice what happens. The process of being still and noticing your own mind is called meditation.

Proliferation

Probably the first thing you will notice as you meditate is what a busy place the mind is. Sensations, sounds, images, intentions, urges, emotions, memories, plans, reveries, and judgments, all flit in and out of awareness with surprising speed. If the mind is observing itself rather than focused on problem solving, it might appear at first that there is no order in the jumble and chaos that presents itself. The mind may also appear chaotic in that the intention to self-observe does not, in itself, seem very stable. One moment we are observing our minds, and the next moment we are off in a daydream, the intent to observe all but lost. It can be a bit alarming to see how hard it is to keep the mind on track. Whatever our intentions as observers, the mind seems to have a mind of its own.

This is the very first lesson of observation: "we," the observers, are not in control of our minds: the mind is completely untamed and follows its own rules independent of our wills. What is happening, however, is not really chaotic. The mind is following rules. One of those rules is that one event in the mind triggers a variety of associated processes. Imagine for a moment that we are sitting quietly and notice the sound of bird song. This event then triggers a variety of contingent processes:

- 1) Labeling – Categorizing the sound: Is it a robin? Is it a cardinal?
- 2) Judgment – Is the sound pleasant or unpleasant?
- 3) Memory – Remembering facts about birds, images of birds, past memories of having heard birds, etc.
- 4) Intention – Deciding to look for the bird; Vowing to read up more on birds in the future, etc.

This process of one sensation setting off a volley of subsequent processes (which in turn sets off a new set of subsequent processes) is called mental proliferation. Proliferation is the normal state of the human mind. Another thing you might notice about the mind is that it is very hard to focus on observing anything in itself without its immediately being labeled, judged, compared to, or acted on in some way. Try for a few moments to just notice things without labeling, judging, comparing, or otherwise thinking about them. Go ahead, try it right now.

Some people mistakenly think that meditation is about only noticing without labeling, judgment, memory, intention, etc. As you can probably already tell, if this is what meditation were about, no one would be able to meditate. Instead, meditation is really about observing the noticing, and subsequent labeling, judgment, memory, and intentions as it unfolds in real time. Meditation is about being observant of the entire process, without the need to improve upon it or change it. Or, if there is a need to improve upon it and change it, watching that too.

The Pleasure Principle

One of the other things we might notice as we observe our own experience is that the mind is dominated by what Freud called the Pleasure Principle. The pleasure principle means that the mind tries to maximize pleasure and minimize unpleasantness. If we are sitting and observing the mind, and if what is happening in the mind is pleasant, we act to prolong that pleasantness. If there is bird song, we listen to it and try to stay focused on it. How lovely! How peaceful! How pleasant! This meditation thing is great! We could just sit here and meditate all day! On the other hand, if what is occurring is unpleasant, we want to get away from it. If the sound we are hearing is not a bird singing, but a jackhammer hammering away outside our window, we immediately want to get up and stop meditating, or we want to open the window and shout at the idiot outside to stop at once. All our peace and tranquility is gone in an instant. When you sit and try meditating, notice when you decide to stop observing and either daydream, or get up and do something else. Usually our observation, and our will to observe, stops at some moment when there is some unpleasant feeling. It could be that loud jackhammer or that pesky mosquito, but it could just as easily be something inside of ourselves: a bad memory, a state of boredom, our legs falling asleep. Our tendency to become attached to pleasant events and to push away unpleasant ones becomes very apparent as we observe ourselves. Ancient Buddhist meditators noticed Freud's Pleasure Principle 2,500 years ago, and called it "dependent origination", the chain of how one thing leads to another. They noticed the way sensations led to judgments about pleasantness, and how these judgments lead to the mind's clinging and pushing away. They also thought that the clinging and pushing away was responsible for much of life's misery. It leads to misery because humans lack the capacity to control life and keep pleasant sensations going indefinitely. Humans also lack the capacity to keep unpleasant events at bay.

If you doubt that this is true, think about your own experience. Imagine eating a spoonful of your favorite ice cream. Mmmm. It's delicious. You want to taste that flavor forever. It is just so pleasurable. Then imagine trying to prolong that wonderful enjoyment. Keep on eating more and more ice cream. Imagine the 10th spoonful. The 100th spoonful. The 1000th spoonful. What is happening to the pleasure? You are running into the psychological law of habituation: any repeated stimulus loses its interest upon constant repetition.

Even if habituation did not occur, getting and keeping all the ice cream we needed to keep us happy could be a problem. For one thing, all that ice cream would melt if we didn't have a big enough freezer for it. We will need to work a great many hours to get the money to buy a

freezer big enough. And then we will need to protect our ice cream from others who might want to steal some of it from us. We will need to get an alarm system, and maybe some firearms to protect our ice cream stash. And then, despite our best intentions, the ice cream eventually goes bad in our freezer, anyway. We come up against the inevitability of change.

Everything we desire to possess eventually changes and we cannot hold on to it. If you think the ice cream example is trivial, try another example. Think about relationships. All relationships eventually end. People change and stray, or grow ill and die. All job situations eventually change: the company you work for gets acquired by another company or goes under, you get a new boss or an annoying coworker, you get promoted to your level of incompetence according to the Peter Principle, or you become bored or disabled. Nothing stays the same for long. Eventually even climates change, mountains get worn down, continents drift, and the sun goes out.

The need to keep pleasure going and run from moments of unpleasantness is also the basis for addiction: the relentless chasing of pleasure to run away from emptiness, loneliness, ennui, and self-loathing. We can broaden the concept of addiction so that it applies not just to substances such as alcohol, heroin, nicotine, and cocaine which cause physiological dependence, but also to any relentlessly pursued psychological escape, including gambling, sexual addiction, shop-a-holism, sensation-seeking, and so on. These activities promise escape from pain, but usually end up creating more pain, and create shipwrecks of our lives and our relationships.

Lastly, we might note that avoiding unpleasantness also prevents emotional growth and development. If everything was always handed to us from birth and we were always protected by beneficent parents, we would remain psychological infants and never grow up. Unpleasantness starts from the very moment of our births when we have to start breathing on our own. All the growth we have shown since then has had a connection to our ability to deal with adversity and handle obstacles as they arise. It is through dealing with adversity rather than running from it that we learn to be assertive, and that we develop genuine self-esteem and social worth.

When one looks at all of these factors: The inevitability of habituation, the consequences of addiction, and the dependency of character on adversity, it's easy to see why the Buddhist meditators thought that pursuing pleasure and running from unpleasantness was the cause of much of the misery in life. They recommended a kind of stoicism: enjoying pleasure without becoming overly attached, enduring and dealing with pain that must be accepted. Freud called this kind of stoicism the Reality Principle: learning to live with reality the way it is and not the way we want it to be. We can observe our capacity to rise above the pleasure principle and live with reality in our own meditation. As we sit in meditation, we can watch our attachments and aversions to our own experience as they arise, and just observe them without yielding to clinging or pushing away. There is a great inner calm that can develop as we work at this. In your own meditation, give it a try and see if you can experience that inner calm, which is, in its own way, a source of gratification as deep and pleasurable as any in life.

I have already introduced two important rules that govern the mind: proliferation and the pleasure principle. It is time we examined one of the consequences of the way mental proliferation and the pleasure principle interact. As was pointed out above, even a brief moment of birdsong catapults us into categorization, judgment, memory, and intention. What started out as an event occurring in the world has ended up as a messy porridge of mental processes. Imagine how it is, then, with events that are seemingly more consequential than birdsong: moments, for example, of betrayal, humiliation, failure, pain, or loss. At such times, our problem-solving mind creates such a proliferation of thoughts, that this web of thinking gets mistaken for reality itself, and the real moment that initially triggered the proliferation is buried, like an original oil painting that has been painted over again and again by an artist intent upon revision.

Laurie was abandoned by her biological parents at one year of age, and was placed in an orphanage. She was adopted into her current family when she was two. At age 12, when she was beginning to enter into adolescence, her adoptive father became more distant, perhaps because he was uncomfortable with her developing as a woman, perhaps because she was becoming more independent and headstrong. In any case, she experienced his distancing as another rejection. At the age of 16 she met her biological mother for the first time since early childhood. Her biological mother promised to be a part of her life, but then disappeared from her life again. Laurie's first adolescent relationship with a boy ended when she discovered that he was cheating on her. Now, whenever Laurie begins to feel close to a boy, she pulls back from the relationship, wanting to protect herself from being abandoned again. When she pulls back, the boy she is getting close to pulls away in reaction to her withdrawal, reinforcing her perception that she will always be abandoned. Laurie has just begun a new relationship. She went to a party with her new boyfriend and thought he was paying too much attention to another girl at the party, and not enough to her.

Laurie is unable to stay with the actual experience in the moment: the actual experience is one of seeing the boy talking with another girl and seeming to enjoy the conversation, combined with a desperately anxious feeling inside of herself. But these simple observations are complicated by a flood of reactive thoughts and consequent secondary emotions and action urges. Laurie is having thoughts, for example, like "He is abandoning me just like everyone else," "I am doomed to always be abandoned," and "There is something wrong with me that makes me unlovable." The anxiety is then mixed with feelings of anger at the boy ("all men are untrustworthy pigs"), and feelings of self-pity for herself ("I'll always be alone"). Lastly, she experiences herself becoming cold towards the boy and ignoring him and resolving to leave the party early without him. She then reacts to her own behavior and thinks to herself "I am so angry and cold, no wonder no one loves me." Her belief that she is doomed is thereby reinforced.

If Laurie is unable to observe and understand the process that is going on in her mind, she can take all these thoughts to be the truth, instead of seeing them for what they are, conditioned reactive thoughts. She will then act as if these thoughts are true and make it more likely she will be abandoned in the future. If, on the other hand, Laurie has learned not to act on her thoughts

and impulses, but to observe and understand the process of her mind, she can see that the thoughts are just thoughts, and refocus on what has actually happened. What has happened is only her boyfriend's momentary inattention and her anxiety. Then, she can find a gentle way to communicate to her boyfriend that she would like some more of his attention, and that she doesn't like it when he flirts with other women.

The example of Laurie helps us to see how the mind can create its own alternative reality, spinning a narrative web from our past experiences, expectations, longings, and fears, and then mistaking the created story for truth. Psychoanalysts call this tendency to see the present moment of a relationship in terms of thoughts, feelings, and intentions generated by the past, "transference." It is not pathology, but the normal way the human mind works. The poet Muriel Rukeyser once wrote that "the universe is made of stories, not atoms." Almost invariably our present moments are colored by these stories we ceaselessly tell ourselves.

Behavioral Psychologist Steven Hayes calls this being able to see thoughts as mere thoughts rather than as truth decontextualization. When we are able to decontextualize, we are able to see the quote marks around thoughts and not mistake them for reality. There is a world of difference, after all, between thinking one is a jerk, and realizing that one is now having the thought "I am a jerk." In the first instance one experiences feelings of self-hatred and hopelessness. In the second instance one's reactive emotions are minimized and one just recognizes a familiar conditioned thought which has no substantiative reality. Buddhists talk about thoughts as being "empty" and having no "intrinsic nature." When one can see thoughts as mere thoughts, they are like soap bubbles that burst and vanish when gently touched. Tibetans say that such thoughts are "self-liberating," and are like a thief that has entered a house in which there is nothing to steal. They are insubstantial; there is no longer any energy behind them; they have lost their toxicity; they cause no harm.

What Should We Do With This Moment?

If one has lost one's way in uncertainty, if one is unsure how to act, the most important thing one can do is to sit still and watch what one's mind is doing. We can become aware of the raw feel of this moment, and of our reactivity to it with all of our labeling, judgment, intentions, and urges. We become aware of the stories we are telling ourselves. We resolve to be open to the full moment regardless of whether it is pleasant or unpleasant. If we can make a big enough space inside of ourselves to let this all happen, and if we ourselves can find the quiet and stillness that lies behind and around this storm of activity, the what that we should do often clarifies itself. The mind is like a muddy glass of water that gradually becomes clear as one lets it stand, as all the silt slowly settles. When this happens, we act from a place of great clarity and inner calm, rather than being pushed and pulled by habitual and reactive thought patterns. While there is no guarantee that such an action will bring about result we desire, we will have done the very best we know how to do at the time. That is all we can ever do: just the best we can do in this moment. If we can truly live this way in this moment, moment after moment, then our life takes care of itself. We are fully here, fully responsible, fully ourselves. Rather than turning to authority, we are the authors of our lives: our lives are self-authorized. But this self

which authorizes is no controlling ego, but an open field of knowing, a flowing changing process. In this field, reason, emotion, and intuition meet, and head and heart are joined. In this field, our knowledge of the past, and our hopes for the future, encounter the present.

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