

What is Meditation

What is

MEDITATION?

Bhante Punnaji
Founder of PROTO BUDDHISM

"Meditation is aimed at cultivating a relaxed body, and a pure and calm mind, resulting in the experience of selfless happiness and the genuine kindness of heart."

Bhante Punnaji

"Buddhist meditation, as we teach it, is not a mystical practice; we are not teaching people to become mystics. This technique of meditation is for people who are living a secular life as householders, workers, having responsibilities, and who are involved in various relationships. What such people need is freedom from stress. They need peace of mind, healthy relationships, self-confidence, success in life, and efficiency at work. This means, learning to gain control over the emotions that prevent one from thinking rationally or acting intelligently. These problematic emotional excitements come in the form of anger, lust, worries, fears, and anxieties. The form of Buddhist meditation we teach helps one free the mind of emotional disturbances and help one to think clearly and act rationally."

What's in it for me?

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This technique of meditation does not involve magical ceremonies like chanting mantras, exercises in concentration, or entering trance states. It involves effort to consciously purify the mind, calm the mind and relax the body. When the mind is purified, one experiences an inner happiness, a physical comfort, and a kindness and compassion that one has never experienced before. The happiness that we refer to is not a state of emotional excitement, but a tranquil state of the mind. The kindness and compassion we teach is not an attachment, but a state of selflessness. Emotional excitement is not true happiness, and attachment is not true love. Happiness and kindness are attributes of the pure and tranquil mind. Therefore this method of meditation is aimed at cultivating a relaxed body, and a pure and calm mind, resulting in the experience of selfless happiness and the genuine kindness of heart.

Samatha and Vipassana

You may have heard of the two terms - samatha and vipassana. This type of meditation is based on the teachings of the Buddha. Samatha is the cultivation of tranquility of mind, and vipassana is the cultivation of introspection. **Most people when they speak of samatha meditation, they think it is practicing concentration, but true samatha is not concentration . Concentration only leads to the hypnotic state .** Samatha is not the practice self-hypnosis. Properly understood, samatha means purifying and calming the mind.

Hypnosis

Hypnosis is a term coined by Dr. Braid a Physician from England. His method of producing the hypnotic state was to get a person to concentrate. Concentration needs effort and effort means tension, which is the opposite of relaxation and calm. When one keeps concentrated sufficiently long, the mind and body reacts by entering a kind of sleep, which is different from the normal sleep, and that is the hypnotic sleep. It is half way between waking and sleeping. It is a very passive state, which could be explained as a regression to childhood, where the child lets the mother do what ever she likes to the child, like bathing and cleaning. It is entering an uncritical state of the mind, where one begins to receive uncritically any suggestion given by the hypnotist. Another person can implant ideas in one's mind, when under the hypnotic state, which will be accepted uncritically and carried out without question, even without one's knowledge. Faith and trust is a condition that prepares the mind to enter the hypnotic state. The hypnotic state is not a state of mental purity. One can be emotionally exited in the hypnotic state.

Hypnotic Hallucination

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Some people are prone to enter the hypnotic state easily because they naturally remain in an uncritical state most of the time. They tend to believe anything they are told by an authority. Such people can be easily hypnotized. Sometimes a person might enter the hypnotic state easily when in a religious environment like a church, temple or synagogue. Once a person is in the hypnotic state, he/she can begin to hallucinate. Hallucinations can be in the form of seeing lights, seeing the Buddha, seeing God, or even experiencing out of body movements, and many other such experiences. What is seen or hallucinated depends on what the mind unconsciously expects. It is like dreaming. Someone from outside can suggest what is to be seen, while in the hypnotic state; or someone can suggest it before entering the hypnotic state. These suggestions are not only accepted, they are also carried out in the body and the mind. This is how hypnotic healing is done. The suggestions that lead to hallucinations are also accepted as truth. The hypnotic state can be produced by another person or it can be produced by oneself.

Distinction between Hypnosis and Samadhi

Therefore it is extremely important to distinguish between hypnosis and samadhi, and learn to avoid entering the hypnotic state , before we begin meditation. This is the meaning of the well known *Zen saying, "If you see the Buddha on the way, kill him."* "*Buddha,*" there, is the hallucination. "*Kill,*" there means, destroy it . There is nothing bad about hypnosis, unless it is used for bad purposes. Sometimes it can even be used for medical purposes like healing some sicknesses. In ancient times, hypnosis was used by doctors to anesthetize patients before operation. Some use it in psychotherapy. Yet true Buddhist meditation is not hypnosis. Samadhi is not concentration or self hypnosis.

Vipassana

The term Vipassana is commonly translated as "insight," but this term is also frequently misunderstood because it is commonly translated as "insight." Vipassana is often confused with intuition because of this. The term vipassana is also often confused with the psychological meaning of the term "insight." In psychology, insight is understood as a sudden understanding of the solution to a problem. In psychotherapy it is understood as bringing to consciousness the unconscious motive of a conscious action. Vipassana, on the other hand, is the introspective awareness of the subjective experience. This subjective experience consists of one's reaction to environmental stimulation. This reaction can be broadly analyzed into four parts: sensory perception, thinking, feeling, and acting. Vipassana, therefore, is to see this experience in its parts, as an impersonal process of activity, without a "self" being involved. In other words, vipassana is "systematic introspection," resulting in the realization of the "impersonality" of all phenomena. Therefore vipassana can be translated as "in-sight," provided we know what it means; namely, "mental vision focused within." Yet the use of this word can be misleading because it is often used to mean seeing the inner essence of an object perceived, while vipassana is seeing the inner subjective experience of perception itself. Vipassana is an introspective method of removing the notion of "self" from the mind, in order to free the mind of selfishness.

Selfishness

Selfishness is due to self-centered emotions. These self-centered emotions also influence the thinking process to form the concept of "self." It is true that, biologically speaking, self-centered emotions that support self-preservation is necessary for the survival of animals, but the human being is the only animal that is aware of a "self" that can be attacked by a discourteous word or insult. That "self" is not a physical entity but an imaginary "psychic" entity, which is responsible for all quarrels, wars, and crimes in the world. This psychic "self" can be seen not only as something within the body, it can be expanded in our minds to include all the members of one's family and possessions, one's race, one's nation, or all humanity or even the whole planet earth. This is how the idea of self preservation of the human being can lead to wars between nations and even between planets. These pestilences, the wars and inhuman crimes of human society can be eliminated only by eliminating this imaginary notion of "self," and the self-centered emotions that go with it. There are three basic tendencies that must be eliminated: the emotion, the notion of self, and the unconsciousness that maintains it. By eliminating these three conditions, the human being rises to a higher level of experience, which can be called "divine" (brahma). This is the final aim of the teachings of the Buddha. The practice leading to the elimination of the self-centered emotions is samatha, and that leading to the elimination of the notion of "self" is vipassana. Both are eliminated by eliminating unconsciousness. This rising to a higher level of experience is called Transcendence of the ordinary human level of experience.

Transcendence

Very often people refer to meditation as sitting. It needs to be emphasized here that, meditation is not the practice of a ritual of just sitting. Meditation can be done while walking, standing, sitting, or lying down. Meditation is a mental process, not a physical one. The aim of meditation is to return to the natural state of calmness that we lost, when we started reacting to environmental stimulation. Normally our mind is disturbed because we constantly react to environmental stimulation of our senses. Meditation has to be seen as an effort to stop this and be calm and relaxed, by not making any effort. It is an effort to transcend this animalistic weakness of reacting to stimulation. This is why we like to call Buddhist meditation a growth technique, rather than the mere obedience to rules of conduct or the practice of rituals of sitting or walking, though these postures of the body can be profitably used in meditation. The aim of Buddhist meditation is to raise the human consciousness to a higher level beyond the normal experience. This transcendence is achieved by following the " Sublime Eight-fold Way" (ariya atthangika magga), commonly translated as the "Noble Eight-fold Path."

Growth and Maturity

The term "ariya" is commonly translated as "noble." The Buddha, however, used the term " ariya" to refer to something more than noble. What he meant was a higher evolutionary level of consciousness which could be developed through a proper technique. It is a level beyond the

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normal. Therefore it is more meaningful to translate it as "super-normal," or better "Sublime," rather than "noble." Just as the aim of modern psychotherapy is to raise an "abnormal" person to a "normal" level of living, the aim of the Buddha was to bring the "normal" person to a "super-normal" level. It is very important to understand this distinction between "noble" and "supernormal" or "sublime." This supernormal level is a higher level of emotional and intellectual maturity. The purpose of Buddhist meditation is to grow to a higher level of emotional and intellectual maturity, beyond the normal, and to experience a degree of happiness and kindness beyond the normal. Buddhist meditation is a method of gaining emotional and intellectual maturity through the purification of mind. Samatha meditation is to gain emotional maturity, and vipassana meditation is to gain intellectual maturity.

Natural and Human Technique

This process of growth takes place according to a natural law, by following a natural human technique. It does not happen due to any supernatural power. We are not depending on any external aid, not even that of a teacher or guru. This practice is based on self-reliance. It has to be done by ourselves. This is a "do-it-yourself" technique. A teacher can only show the way. The student does the practice.

Will power

In a sense, meditation can be seen as the development of will-power, to control one's irrational emotions. Some cultures believe in a free-will that we are born with, which means that we have will-power naturally. But we know by experience that when emotion and will are in conflict, emotion wins most of the time. This means that will-power is not a power we are born with. It is only a human "potential" that has to be actualized through practice. We are not born with a fully developed will-power; it is only a potential. Biologically speaking, the human being, as a higher animal, has a more evolved brain, especially the fore-brain (the cerebrum). The difference between the human being and all the other animals is that all other animals are passively reacting to their environment. The human being has the potential to delay the reaction, to get sufficient time to think and decide which response to make in a given situation, and respond rationally instead of emotionally. It is this ability to choose the response that is called will-power. Yet every human being is not able to use this ability all the time.

Free will and determinism

This freedom to choose is also called "free-will." Do we really have this ability to make a choice and to act rationally always? Unfortunately, this ability to choose is not a capacity that is fully developed in the normal human being. This is why we make so many stupid mistakes in life, about which we repent later. Often we want to do something in the right way, but we find ourselves doing just the opposite. This is because our will-power has not been fully developed. Buddhist meditation, when properly practiced, is the way to develop our will-power, or free will.

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This ability is not usable until it is developed. Strictly speaking, it is not even a power but a capacity that is dependent on the necessary conditions. In other words, it is based on the principle of determinism. The debate about free-will and determinism has been going on for a long time. Yet these two ideas are not in conflict; free-will is deterministic. It is only by recognizing this fact that it becomes possible to develop this capacity to choose, using a proper technique based on the principle of determinism.

Organism and Environment

In order to understand this fully, it is necessary to go into the physiology of emotional behavior. We are organisms born with senses: the eyes, the ears, nose, tongue, and the body. When the senses are stimulated, a reaction occurs in the organism as a whole. For example, when light falls upon the eye, sight occurs, and this is a reaction. This sight is only seeing a meaningless field of different intensities and varieties of color. Our next step is to make meaning out of what we see. This is done by the intellect, and in doing so, we construct objects and their relationships. Once an object has been constructed, it is interpreted as pleasant unpleasant or neutral. This interpretation is followed by an emotional reaction to what is seen, in the form of a desire, hatred, or fear. This emotional reaction is but a disturbance in the body, created by a hormone that is secreted into the blood that carries the hormone to all parts of the body, causing changes in the activity of different organs in the body. Every emotion is accompanied by muscular tension, among other changes in the body. This tension is experienced as discomfort, which compels an individual to seek the release of tension in action, to obtain what is desired, to get rid of what is hated, or to run away from what is feared. This is the completion of the reaction.

Reaction and Response

This reaction has three main stages: the cognitive, affective, and active. The cognitive is just the mental creation of the object and the interpretation. The affective is the emotional reaction or excitement that results. The release of tension in action is the behavioral part of the reaction. Normally, all animals below the human level are passively reacting to their environment in this way. The human being has the latent ability to delay the release of tension in action, to get sufficient time to decide which response to make in a given situation. By thinking rationally, the human being is potentially able to decide upon the right response, and make the proper response by acting rationally. This is what we call will-power.

Evolution

This is what one learns from our lessons at the center and during our retreats. It is learning how to act rationally instead of emotionally. One will be provided with the tools to work on oneself. Working on oneself is one's own job, not the teacher's. The teacher's job is only to show the tools that you already have but do not know that you have them. The teacher also can tell you

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how to use them. Our hope is that you will be able to work on yourself and grow, evolve, and be transformed. The degree of transformation, and quality of life experienced is the measure of your progress. What we look for is growth and transformation, not mere insight as a view. This is why we do not call this method of meditation "insight meditation." We also do not expect visions or hallucinations of any kind. If what you gain from a retreat is only more will-power, and a sense of peace of mind, then you have won a degree of success.

Sublime Eightfold Way

It is very important to understand that this technique of meditation is a method of transforming oneself from a self-centered personality into a selfless one, by following the Sublime Eight-fold Way. There are eight steps to be followed. They are as follows:

1. Harmonious Perspective
2. Harmonious goal orientation
3. Harmonious speech
4. Harmonious action
5. Harmonious lifestyle
6. Harmonious Exercise
7. Harmonious attentiveness
8. Harmonious equilibrium

Harmonious Perspective

The first step is to acquire the harmonious perspective. The harmonious perspective is the perspective that brings about harmony internally and externally. This is a perspective, not merely a right view or right understanding. This is a different way of looking at life, yourself, the world, and your relationship to the world. It is seeing things in a different way, which does not create conflict internally or externally.

Conflict with Reality

The first thing we must do is to understand that our emotions come in conflict with the reality of change and separation in the world. Our emotions seek pleasure and avoid pain. This means, they are seeking permanent pleasure. This is not possible because pleasure is impermanent and pain cannot be avoided altogether. Emotions are also possessive and self-centered. We do not really possess anything in the world because all relationships are impermanent. Our self-centeredness is futile because we can never really preserve a permanent identity or self, because we change constantly, both physically and mentally and we cannot avoid death. This pursuit of eternal pleasure and eternal life is based on blind emotions, and not through clear thinking. It is important to understand that our emotions come in conflict with reality, and it is unwise to be carried away by them. It is wiser to be dominated by reason than by emotion.

Unrealistic Pursuits

Let us consider a person who is attracted to money or wealth. He may think that becoming wealthy is the greatest thing in the world. So he begins to earn wealth. When he makes a loss he becomes terribly unhappy. Another might think that social position or power is greater than wealth. He might sacrifice wealth to gain social position and power. When he loses his position and power, he comes to great discomfort as a result. Still another might believe that popularity or good name is better than riches or even social position and power. The latter might sacrifice wealth and high social position to become popular and to secure a good name. Such a person might be blamed and lose the good name some way or other, and as a result suffer much pain of mind. Another person might think, "What is the use of wealth?" "What is the use of social recognition or power?" "What is the use of popularity and a good name?", "What I need is sensual pleasure and keep on enjoying sensual pleasure, thinking that is the greatest thing!" That person too will be thoroughly disappointed when he/she ceases to get the pleasures he/she craves for. Different people have different ideas of what is good or great or superior.

Sense of Values

According to each person's sense of values, each person will feel inferior, superior or equal. If we think that wealth is superior, then the moment we meet a wealthier person, we may begin to compare ourselves to them and feel inferior. Or if a person thinks that high social position is superior, they may feel inferior in the presence of any person who is greater in social position. Likewise, if a person thinks that popularity is the greatest thing, that person begins to feel inferior upon meeting a person who is more popular than himself or herself. If a person thinks that enjoying sensual pleasure is the greatest thing, then that person will feel inferior in the presence of some one that is enjoying more sensual pleasures. This is how people feel inferior or superior.

True Happiness

This unhealthy or worldly sense of values was shown by the Buddha to be something that only brings unhappiness, disappointment, frustration, sorrow, pain, anxieties, and worries. The Buddha pointed out that happiness is to be sought not outside in wealth, status, popularity or sensual pleasures; but rather, inside, through purity of mind. This happiness within is inner peace, calm or tranquility of mind. If one can understand that inner peace is the greatest thing in the world, then one will be feeling inferior only when meeting a calm person. This feeling is rather an admiration and appreciation rather than a feeling of inferiority. Meeting such a calm person becomes an inspiration for us to pursue the goal of calmness ourselves. And if we are really convinced that calmness is the greatest thing, we don't need tranquilizers because tranquilizers are needed only when you are not convinced that calmness is the greatest thing. If calmness is appreciated we automatically begin to pursue this goal and as a result we begin to think, speak, act, and live calmly. Our whole life becomes calm automatically.

Harmonious Goal

It is only when your goal is becoming rich, and you need calmness only to reach that goal, that you need to take a tranquilizer pill. This is because tranquility is not your goal; it is only a means to your goal. Your mind is not tranquil because you are seeking a different goal. It is our sense of values that makes us calm or not calm. You are already familiar with the word "Nirvana," which is regarded as the ultimate goal of the Buddhist. Some think that Nirvana is a kind of Heaven, but Nirvana simply means the Imperturbable Serenity of mind. (nir is the negative prefix like the English "non," and vana means shaking). "Nirvana" is the mind that is not shaken by anything in the world, not even in the face of death. It is the "Unshaken Mind." It is a tranquility of mind which can never be disturbed. That is what "Nirvana" is. All varieties of Buddhist meditation, whether we call it samatha or vipassana, has "Nirvana" as the ultimate goal. This means, if we think that tranquility is the greatest thing in the world, we become Buddhists automatically, as a result. If we think that calmness is not the greatest thing in the world, then we are not Buddhists after all, because we will not be trying to achieve Nirvana. This means, one becomes a Buddhist not by birth or baptism, but by one's sense of values.

Change of Perspective

Our change of perspective results in our understanding of the true values of life. This change in our sense of values results in a new goal orientation. When our goal in life changes to tranquility of mind, our thoughts, speech, and actions will fall in line directed towards this goal. You don't have to push yourself to meditate. Meditation will automatically occur in you because meditation is the means to the goal you are pursuing. Your life is going in that direction. You don't have to make any effort. You don't have to make any resolution. You don't need to have will-power to meditate. Willpower is the result of meditation, and not a means to it. You don't have to force yourself to meditate. You don't have to say, "I don't have any time, I have to make time." You will automatically have time because that is what you want to do. If you really want to do something you will have time. You don't have time only when you are not really interested in doing something.

Autonomy

Therefore meditation is automatic to the person who has the Harmonious Perspective, because with the Harmonious Perspective (samma-ditthi) arises the Harmonious Goal-orientation (samma-sankappa), which automatically leads to Harmonious Speech (samma-vaca), Action (samma-kammanta), and Lifestyle (samma-ajiva). From there on, one makes the effort to purify the mind automatically. This is the Harmonious Practice (samma-vayama). This results in the introversion of attention (satipatthana). This is the Harmonious Attention (samma-sati). This is the beginning of the Sevenfold Process of Awakening (satta bhojjanga). This introversion of attention leads to seeing what is within (dhamma vicaya), which is one's experience within, which is the reaction of the organism to environmental stimulation. When this is achieved, the will

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power (viriyā) is developed, and one's mind becomes purified. This makes the mind experience the happiness of selflessness (pīti). This leads to relaxation of the body (passaddhi) and the feeling of comfort that goes with it. This results in tranquility of mind (samādhi). This tranquility helps healthy objective introspection (upekkhā), resulting in true "in-sight (pañña)," which is "experiencing experience" and "Awakening" (sambodhi) from the "dream of existence" (bhava nirodha). This is the freedom from all self-centered emotions (vimutti) and sufferings of life (dukkha nirodha). This is the "Imperturbable Serenity" (NIRVANA).

Awakening

To understand more fully the meaning of "awakening from the dream of existence," through "experiencing experience," we need to go into an examination of the deeper meaning of the term vipassana. Experience is normally seen as the interaction between a "subject" (the self) and an "object" (in the world outside). The Buddha taught that the experience of "existence," of a subject and an object, is a "delusion." This means "experience precedes existence" (mano pubbangama dhamma); that is, "existence" is only an "experience." Experience is the basis of existence. Experience is the ground on which existence stands.

What is existence

Normally, we experience the "existence" of a subject (conceived as oneself) and an object (conceived as individuals and things of the world). We (the self) also tend to become emotionally involved with (things of the world). We get involved by forming relationships between the subject (self) and objects (of the world). Because we get involved with the existence of oneself, others, and the relationship, we tend to forget that this existence is only an "experience." We tend to take the "existence" to be very real. This is why the separation from our loved ones makes us so unhappy. This is why the death of a relative or friend results in immense grief and lamentation. When, however, we begin to become aware of the "experience," which is the basis of existence, through vipassana meditation, the "existence" is found to be less real. Ultimately we realize that this "existence" is only an illusion (a perceptual fallacy) or more correctly a delusion (a conceptual fallacy). This is the "awakening" (sambodhi) from the "dream of existence." This is also called the "cessation of existence," which is Nirvana (bhava nirodho nibbanam).

Lay Person's Meditation

Of course the purpose of our meditation is not to reach that high ideal, which is Nirvana. This level of "Awakening from the dream of existence" is a high level of meditation, which is for yogis who have given up the worldly secular life altogether. This is for yogis who have realized the futility and the suffering involved with the secular life. These yogis see that secular life is painful (dukkha) because it is mainly based on emotional involvement with objects.

Yogi's Meditation

This point of view of the yogis, however, is not difficult to understand today, because we know that every emotion is self-centered and is accompanied by muscular tension, which is uncomfortable until it is released in action, to get what we want, to get rid of what we hate, or to run away from what we fear. It is this temporary release of tension that is so pleasurable, which keeps us enthralled and enslaved to it. Unfortunately, it is not always possible to release this tension, because we cannot always get what we want, or get rid of what we hate, or run away from what we fear. This unreleased tension gets accumulated and can lead even to a nervous breakdown. This problem is what is called "stress" today. Therefore the aim of the yogi is to get rid of these self-centered emotions and self-centered thinking. Physical relaxation alone does not solve the problem, though, however, it can be a temporary symptomatic treatment.

Emancipation from emotion

This was why the Buddha showed the way to freedom from this slavery to emotions and suffering. The radical solution of the Buddha was to awaken from the dream of existence and relationship, by learning to focus attention on the experience (dhamma) instead of existence (bhava). This is a paradigm shift resulting in the experience of impersonal experience, and freedom from the experience of existence. It is the ultimate stage in the evolution of human consciousness. It is NIRVANA (bhava nirodho nibbanam), the sumum bonum of the Buddhist practice.

Vipassana is high level

Vipassana, therefore, is the cultivation of the awareness of experience, instead of the awareness of existence. This definition of vipassana might be confusing at the beginning, but it will become clearer as one advances in the practice of proper vipassana. The first step in meditation is to learn to purify the mind, which is the practice of tranquility (samatha) meditation. Without cultivating tranquility (samatha), it is not possible to practice in-sight (vipassana).

Vipassana not suited to lay person

This is why Vipassana meditation, being a high level of practice, is not applicable in the secular life, which is concerned with self-preservation, propagation of the species, and gratification of the senses. The only kind of meditation suited to secular life is samatha or tranquility meditation. It is only when a person is interested in going the whole way, which leads to the awakening from the dream of existence that a person should take up the practice of vipassana. This reminds us of what Jesus said: "If you want to go the whole way, sell all your things, give to the poor, and come with me;" and again, "Even if a camel could creep through the eye of a needle, a rich man

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cannot enter the kingdom of God." It is only when a person is willing to give up everything that vipassana proper can be practiced.

Look before you leap

It is important to know what we are doing, before set about doing it. This is why our method of meditation begins with Right Understanding.



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