

Why We Meditate

Why do you meditate?

It's a good question, especially if you are considering or are practicing the Buddhist Way. The reason why we meditate can, I think, be just as important as our meditation, as it defines the underlying purpose for our practice; it sets the goals, intention and the focus of our practice.

However, I think we all—Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike—can forget why we meditate: after a while, it can just be a habit. It's something we do, but we don't really remember why. Or we might know why we meditate, but we might be doing it for reasons that aren't the greatest. I say 'not the greatest' not in the sense that they are *bad* reasons, but literally *not the greatest*—we may be seeking something from our practice, but maybe we could be seeking more. In a weird way, maybe our goals in meditation can actually limit us. If you're aiming to get a B- on an essay, you might be missing the opportunity to work for an A+.

So, by knowing *why* we meditate, we can energize our practice and give it a focus that is often very needed. Today, we'll be exploring different reasons people can have for meditating, and we'll discuss why we meditate within the context of Buddhism.

The Immediate Benefits of Meditation

Meditation offers us a lot of benefits in the "here and now" sense. Go look on any medical journal, forum, website, or even facebook group, and this'll be obvious. Meditation can

- 1) Decrease stress
- 2) Decrease blood pressure
- 3) Improve concentration and focus
- 4) Improve creativity
- 5) Lessen anxiety
- 6) Over all tendencies towards healthier and longer lives
- 7) And much, much more!

Often times, meditation is suggested for a variety of these reasons, and can even be used for rehabilitation physically, mentally, and emotionally. It's benefits have been pretty obvious.

In the creative spectrum, the Buddhist-Beat-Poet Jack Kearouack once wrote that he used to keep a notebook by his cushion. He realized that the greatest ideas for his work came to him while meditating, so he'd sit down to meditate for a few minutes, and then would write furiously and creatively, and write some pretty damn good stuff...

How the Immediate Benefits of Meditation can Distract us from the Better

...but he stopped doing that after a while. Any idea why?

See, ol' Jacky figured out that the purpose of meditation for a Buddhist *is not* to improve creativity. So, after a while, he put the notebook away. When he'd work he'd work, and when he'd sit, he'd sit. Did meditation still help him in his writing? Sure. But he realized that meditation was *not* a tool for fighting writers bloc, even if it happened to do that.

I think we can learn a lesson from Jack. Often times, it's easy to get caught up in the immediate benefits of meditation. They're definitely great, and very useful and salutary. *BUT THEY AREN'T THE REASON WE MEDITATE.*

In fact, they're limiting to our practice. In the Buddhist perspective, meditation is used as a means of attaining enlightenment; it is a means of recognizing things how they truly are, and then accepting this; it is a means of recognizing suffering in our lives, and to recognize the causation of suffering. It is a means of being happy—purely, joyfully, truly and deeply happy.

But when people ask me about the benefits of meditation, I find myself stupidly saying: “It improves concentration, lowers blood pressure, etc etc etc.” Is this true? Yes. But that's not the ultimate benefit of meditation—when someone asks what the benefit of meditation is, the answer should be “It stops our suffering.”

As I've mentioned before, the Buddha is sometimes called The Great Physician, as he cures the disease of our suffering. The prescription he gives us meditation—it cures suffering. In the process, it has side-effects, and these side effects are often good. Meditation is one of few medications where you'll hear “Side effects include lower blood pressure, a decrease in stress, improvement in confidence and concentration. Consult your physician immediately if positive feelings last for more than four hours...”

However, no matter how helpful these side effects are, they're just that: side effects.

So, why's that important?

It's important to recognize that these benefits are just side-effects because *we do not want to mix them up with the cure.* If we meditate to be healthy and calm and untroubled, we're underestimating what we can do. I'm not saying that we're all meditating to attain total awakening—what I'm saying is that we can do more to minimize our suffering in our lives.

When we focus on the side-effects of meditation, our practice becomes escapism—we are trying to escape the stresses of the world rather than face them. But, as we know, Buddhist meditation is not escapism—rather, it is a way of confronting our suffering.

If we confuse the side-effects for the cure, we may very well actually *increase* our suffering. The beneficial side effects of meditation are great, but as we know from discussing the Four Noble Truths, they aren't lasting:

- 1) Our blood pressure may lower now, but our hearts will fail eventually
- 2) We may feel concentrative now, but we'll get distracted later
- 3) We may lessen our anxiety, but we're still going to face hardships.

We should look beyond the side-effects. We can enjoy them, but we shouldn't expect them. When we come to expect them, we'll simply be disappointed when we don't have them. At a retreat with Roshi (and Catholic priest) Robert Kennedy, a woman once said that normally meditation made her feel calm and light and easy, but lately she just wasn't seeing those benefits. It was discouraging her practice. She asked him what was wrong with her. His answer: "Sometimes it's sunny. Sometimes it rains. Meditate."

A lot of times, these side-effects are good, but they center themselves on the "earthly"—on the fading. We should look beyond:

"More than any earthly power,
More than all the joys of heaven
More than rule o'er all the world,
Is the Entrance of the Stream" (Dhp. 178)

*"Entrance of the Stream" is a term for realizing the path of enlightenment and beginning to practice it.

So, what are the benefits of meditation?

- 1) Meditation increases calm,
 - 2) it decreases blood pressure, increases healthfulness
 - 3) it improves concentration,
 - 4) and it makes you over all more content;
- a. meditation allows you to recognize what does (and will) disturb your calm,
 - b. it will allow you to see the body as transient and allow you recognize and accept the changes of the body,
 - c. it will give you the effort to persist in meditation even when you can't seem to concentrate,
 - d. it will allow you to see when you are not content and why you are not content.

And, weirdly, this will make you content.

So, why do you meditate?