

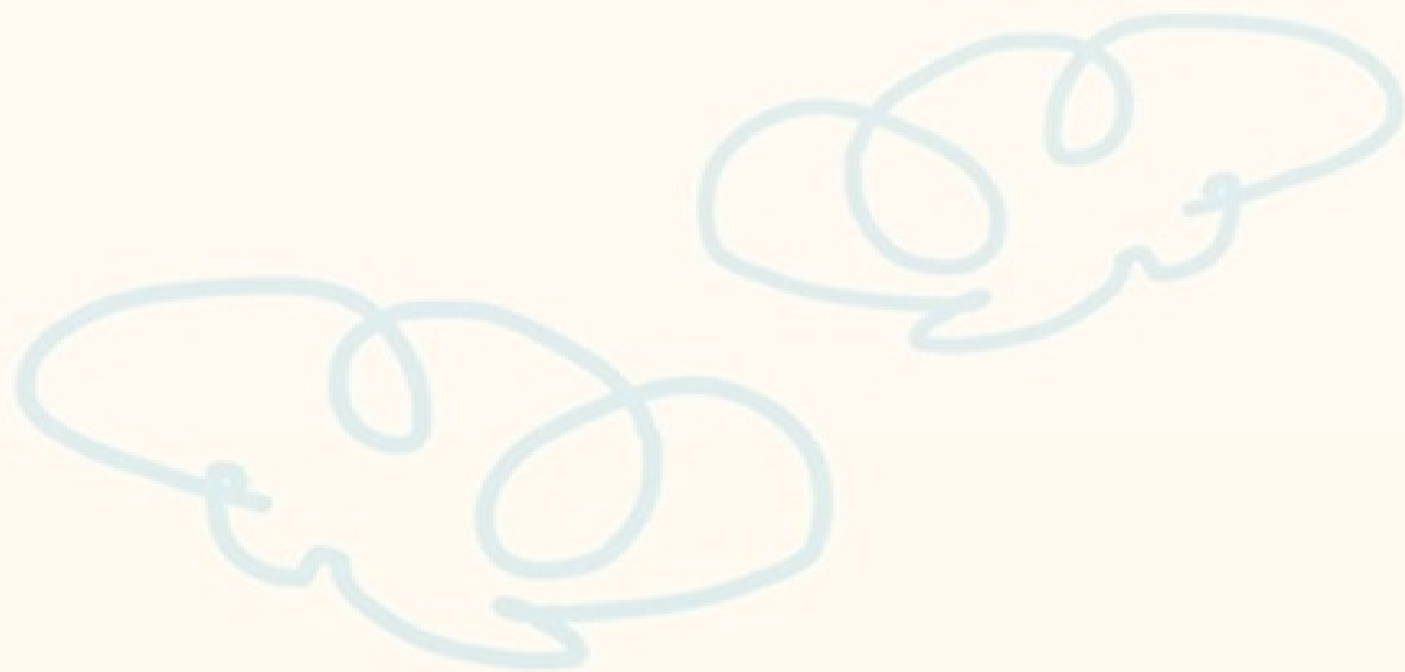


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the art of meditation

MATTHIEU RICARD

'Matthieu Ricard combines the talents of a philosopher
and scientist... He reminds us that to change individuals is also,
ultimately, to change the world.' George Soros



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We must *be* the change we want to see in the world.

—Gandhi

WHY THIS LITTLE BOOK ON MEDITATION? FOR FORTY years I have had the good fortune to study with authentic spiritual masters who inspired me and illuminated my path in life. Their precious instructions have guided my actions. I am not a teacher – I remain more than ever a student – but in the course of my travels round the world, I have frequently met people who have shared with me their wish to learn to meditate. I have tried to the best of my ability to direct them to qualified teachers, but this has not always been possible. So it is for all those people who have a sincere desire to meditate that I have collected these instructions, drawn from authentic Buddhist sources, into book form.

The real significance of meditation is inner transformation through training the mind, which is a really exciting adventure. The exercises you will find here are taken from a tradition that is more than two thousand years old. It is best to explore them gradually, but you may also practise them independently of each other, whether you devote only thirty minutes a day to meditation or practise it more intensively in the undisturbed environment of a retreat.

As to my personal history, I had the tremendous good fortune of meeting my spiritual master, Kangyur Rinpoche, in 1967 near Darjeeling in India. I owe him whatever goodness there is in my life. After his death in 1975, I spent several years in retreat in a small wooden hut built on stilts in the forest above his monastery. For a period of thirteen years, starting in 1981, I had the privilege of living in the presence of the great master Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and receiving his teachings. Since 1991 when he departed this world, I have often stayed in retreat in a small mountain hermitage in Nepal, a few hours away from Kathmandu, in a contemplative centre founded by the Shechen Monastery, where I usually reside. These periods of retreat have without a doubt been among the most fertile times of my life.

Over the course of the last ten years, I have also participated in several scientific research programmes intended to document the long-term effects of meditation practice on the brain and on behaviour. This research has shown that it is possible to make significant progress in developing qualities such as attention, emotional balance, altruism and inner peace. Other studies have also demonstrated the benefits of meditating for twenty minutes a day for a period of six to eight weeks. These benefits include a decrease in anxiety, in vulnerability to pain and in the tendency towards depression and anger, as well as strengthening attention, the immune system and an increase in general well-being. Thus no matter what point of view you approach it from – from that of personal transformation, the development of altruistic love or physical health – meditation emerges as a factor essential for leading a balanced life, rich in meaning.

It is a pity to underestimate the capacity we have to transform our mind. Each of us possesses the potential needed to free ourselves from the mental states that perpetuate our own suffering and that of others – the potential to find our own inner peace and contribute to the welfare of others.

PART I

Why Meditate?

TAKE A SINCERE LOOK AT YOURSELF. WHERE ARE YOU in your life? What have your priorities been up to now and what do you intend doing with the time you have left?

We are a mixture of light and shadow, of good qualities and faults. Are we really the best we can be? Must we remain as we are now? If not, what can we do to improve ourselves? These are questions worth asking, particularly if we have come to the conclusion that change is both desirable and possible.

In the West, we are consumed from morning till night by endless activity. We do not have much time or energy left over to consider the basic causes of our happiness or suffering. We imagine, more or less consciously, that if we undertake more activities we will have more intense experiences and, therefore, our sense of dissatisfaction will fade away. But the truth is that many of us continue to feel let down and frustrated by our contemporary lifestyle.

The aim of meditation is to transform the mind. It does not have to be associated with any particular religion. Every one of us has a mind and every one of us can work on it.

Is Change Desirable?

There are very few people who would say that there is nothing worth improving in the way they live and experience the world. However, some people think their own particular weaknesses and conflicting emotions are something rich that contributes to the fullness of their lives. They believe this particular alchemy in their character is what makes them unique and think they should learn to accept themselves the way they are. They do not realize that this kind of thinking can lead to a life of chronic discontent. Nor do they realize that they could help themselves with just a little reflection and effort.

Imagine someone suggested you spend an entire day tormented by jealousy. Would you want to do that? I doubt it. If, on the other hand, someone suggested you spend that same day with your heart filled with love for all beings, you would probably be quite willing to do so. I'm sure you would find that infinitely preferable to a whole day of jealousy.

As things stand now, no matter what our preferences might be, our mind is often filled with troubles. We spend a great deal of time consumed by painful thoughts, plagued by anxiety or anger, licking the wounds we receive from other people's harsh words. When we experience these kinds of difficult moments, we wish we could manage our emotions; we wish we could master our mind to the point where we could be free of these afflicting emotions. It would be such a relief. However, since we don't know how to achieve this kind of control, we take the point of view that, after all, this way of living is 'normal' or 'natural', and that it is 'human nature'. Even if it were natural, that would not make it desirable. Illness, for example, comes to everybody, but does this prevent us from consulting a doctor?

We don't want to suffer. Nobody wakes up in the morning and thinks: 'Oh, if I could only suffer a day today and, if possible, every day for the rest of my life!' Whatever we are occupied with – an important task, routine work, walking in the woods, pursuing a relationship, drinking a cup of tea – we always hope we will get some benefit or satisfaction out of it, either for ourselves or others. If we thought nothing would come of our activities but suffering, we wouldn't do anything at all and we would fall into despair.

Sometimes we do have moments of inner peace, of altruistic love, of deep-felt confidence, but, for

the most part, these are only fleeting experiences that quickly give way to other less pleasant ones. What if we could train our mind to cultivate these wholesome moments? No doubt it would radically change our lives for the better. Wouldn't it be wonderful to become better human beings and lead lives in which we experience inner fulfilment, while also relieving the suffering of others and contributing to their well-being?

Some people think life would be dull without inner conflict but we are all familiar with the suffering that accompanies anger, greed or jealousy, and we all appreciate the good feelings that go along with kindness, contentment and the pleasure of seeing other people happy. The sense of harmony that is connected with loving others has an inherent goodness in it that speaks for itself. The same is true of generosity, patience, emotional balance and many other positive traits. If we could learn to cultivate altruistic love and inner calm, and if at the same time the self-centred approach of the ego and the frustration that arises from it could be reduced, then our lives certainly would not lose any of their richness – quite the opposite.

Is Change Possible?

So the real question is not whether change is desirable; it is whether it is possible to change. Some people might think they can't change because their afflictive emotions are so intimately associated with their minds that it is impossible to get rid of them without destroying a part of themselves.

It is true that in general people's characters don't change very much. If we could study the same group of people every few years, we would rarely find that the angry people had become patient, that the disturbed people had found inner peace, or that the pretentious people had learned humility. But as rare as such changes might be some people *do* change, which shows that change *is* possible. The point is that our negative character traits tend to persist if we don't do anything to change the status quo. No change occurs if we just let our habitual tendencies and automatic patterns of thought perpetuate and even reinforce themselves thought after thought, day after day, year after year. But those tendencies and patterns can be challenged.

Aggression, greed, jealousy and the other mental poisons are unquestionably part of us, but are they an inalienable part? Not necessarily. For example, a glass of water might contain cyanide that could kill us on the spot. But the same water could also be mixed with healing medicine. In either case, H₂O, the chemical formula of the water itself, remains unchanged; in itself, it was never either poisonous or medicinal. The different states of the water are temporary and circumstantial. Our emotions, moods and bad character traits are just temporary and circumstantial elements of our nature.

A Fundamental Aspect of Consciousness

This temporary and circumstantial quality becomes clear to us when we realize that the primary quality of consciousness, which is comparable to the water in the example above, is simply knowing. Knowing in itself is neither good nor bad. If we look behind the turbulent stream of transient thoughts and emotions that pass through our mind day and night, this fundamental aspect of consciousness,

knowing, which makes possible and underlies all perception no matter what its nature, is always there. Buddhism describes this knowing aspect of the mind as luminous, because it illuminates both the external world and the inner world of sensation, emotion, reasoning, memory, hope and fear.

Although this faculty of knowing underlies every mental event, it is not itself *affected* by any of these events. A ray of light may shine on a face disfigured by hatred or on a smiling face, it may shine on a jewel or on a garbage heap; but the light itself is neither mean nor loving, neither dirty nor clean. Understanding that the essential nature of consciousness is neutral permits us to understand that it is possible to change our mental universe. We can transform the content of our thoughts and experiences. The neutral and luminous background of our consciousness provides us with the space we need to observe mental events, rather than being at their mercy, and then to create the conditions necessary to transform them.

Just Wishing is Not Enough

We have no choice about what we already are, but we can wish to change ourselves. Such an aspiration can give the mind a sense of direction. But just wishing is not enough. We have to find a way of putting that wish into action.

We don't find anything strange about spending years learning to walk, to read and write or to acquire professional skills. We spend hours doing physical exercises in order to get our bodies fit. Sometimes we expend tremendous physical energy pedalling a stationary bike that goes nowhere. To sustain such tasks, we have to have a minimum of interest or enthusiasm. This interest comes from feeling that, in the long run, these efforts are going to benefit us.

Working with the mind follows the same logic. How could it be subject to change without the least effort, just from wishing alone? That doesn't make any more sense than expecting to learn to play a Mozart sonata just by occasionally doodling around on the piano.

We expend a lot of effort to improve the external conditions of our lives, but in the end it is always the mind that creates our experience of the world and translates it into well-being or suffering. If we transform our way of perceiving things, we transform the quality of our lives. It is this kind of transformation that is brought about by the form of mind-training known as meditation.

What is Meditation?

Meditation is a practice that makes it possible to cultivate and develop certain basic positive human qualities in the same way as other forms of training make it possible to play a musical instrument or acquire any other skill.

The words that are translated into English as meditation are *bhavana* from Sanskrit, which means 'to cultivate', and *gom* from the Tibetan, which means 'to become familiar with'. Primarily, meditation is a matter of familiarizing ourselves with a clear and accurate way of seeing things and cultivating the good qualities that remain dormant inside us until we make the effort to bring them out.

So let us begin by asking ourselves, 'What do I really want out of life? Am I content to just keep

improvising from day to day? Am I going to overlook the vague sense of discontent that I always feel deep down when, at the same time, I am longing for well-being and fulfilment?’

We have become accustomed to thinking that our faults are inevitable and that we have to put up with the setbacks they have brought us throughout our lives. We have come to take the dysfunctional aspect of ourselves for granted without realizing that it is possible to free ourselves from the vicious circle that is exhausting us.

From a Buddhist point of view, every being has the potential for enlightenment just as surely, say the traditional texts, as every sesame seed contains oil. Despite this, to use another traditional comparison, we wander about in confusion like a beggar who is simultaneously both rich and poor because he does not know that he has a treasure buried under the floor of his hut. The goal of the Buddhist path is to come into possession of this overlooked wealth of ours, which can imbue our lives with the most profound meaning.

Transforming Ourselves to Better Transform the World

Developing our own positive inner qualities is the best way to help others. At the beginning, our personal experience is our only reference point but, as we continue, it can become the basis for a much larger point of view that includes all beings. We are all dependent on each other, and none of us wants to suffer. Being happy in the midst of an infinite number of other beings who are suffering is absurd (if it were even possible). Seeking happiness for oneself alone is doomed to certain failure, since self-centredness is the very source of our discontent. ‘When selfish happiness is the only goal in life, life soon becomes goalless,’ wrote the French novelist Romain Rolland.¹ Even if we show all the outward signs of happiness, we cannot be truly happy if we fail to take an interest in the happiness of others. Altruistic love and compassion are the foundations of genuine happiness.

These remarks are not intended to be moralistic; they simply reflect reality. Seeking happiness selfishly is the best way there is to make yourself, or anyone else, unhappy. Some people might think that the smartest way to guarantee their own well-being is to isolate themselves from others and to work hard at their own happiness, without consideration for other people. They probably assume that if everybody does that, we’ll all be happy. But the result would be exactly the opposite: instead of being happy, they would be torn between hope and fear, make their own lives miserable and ruin the lives of the people around them as well. In the end, just ‘looking out for number one’ is a losing proposition for everybody. One of the fundamental reasons such an approach is doomed is that the world is not made up of independent entities endowed with intrinsic properties that make them by nature beautiful or ugly, friends or enemies. Things and beings are essentially interdependent and in constant state of transformation. The very elements that compose them only exist in relationship to each other. The self-centred approach of the ego continually runs afoul of this reality and only succeeds in creating frustration.

Altruistic love, according to Buddhism, is the wish that others be happy, an attitude that consists of wishing others to be happy and find the true causes of happiness. Compassion is defined as the desire to put an end to the suffering of others and the causes of that suffering. These are not merely noble sentiments; they are feelings that are fundamentally in tune with reality. All beings want to avoid suffering just as much as we do. Moreover, since we are all interdependent, our own happiness and unhappiness are intimately bound up with the happiness and unhappiness of others. Cultivating love

and compassion is a win-win situation. Personal experience shows that they are the most positive of all mental states and create a deep sense of fulfilment and wholesomeness. Research in neuroscience also indicates that among all kinds of meditations those focusing on unconditional love and compassion give rise to the strongest activation of brain areas related to positive affects. In addition, the behaviour they give rise to is intended to benefit others.

In order for the deeds we perform for the sake of others to have the intended benefit, they must also be guided by wisdom – the wisdom that we can acquire through meditation. The ultimate reason for meditating is to transform ourselves in order to be better able to transform the world or, to put it another way, to transform ourselves so we can become better human beings in order to serve others in a wiser and more efficient way. It gives your life the noblest possible meaning.

A Universal Effect

The primary goal of meditation is to transform our experience of the world, but it has also been shown that meditation has beneficial effects on our health. For the last ten years, inspired by the catalytic activities of the Mind and Life Institute, dedicated to the collaboration between Buddhism and modern science, major American universities such as the University of Wisconsin in Madison, Princeton, Harvard and the University of California at Berkeley, as well as research centres in Zurich, Switzerland, have been conducting intensive studies on meditation and its long- and short-term effects on the brain. Experienced meditators who have meditated for between ten and sixty thousand hours have demonstrated qualities of focused attention that are not found among beginners. For example, they are able to maintain more or less perfect concentration on a particular task for forty-five minutes whereas most people cannot go beyond five or ten minutes before they begin making an increasing number of mistakes.

Experienced meditators are able to generate precise targeted mental states that are enduring and powerful. Among other things, experiments have shown that the region of the brain associated with mental states like compassion exhibits considerably greater activity among persons who have long meditative experience than among those who have not. These discoveries demonstrate that certain human qualities can be deliberately cultivated through mental training. Such studies have led to the publication of several articles in prestigious scientific journals, establishing the credibility of research on meditation, an area which had not been taken seriously until then. In the words of Richard Davidson, a leading neuroscientist, ‘These studies seem to demonstrate that the brain can be trained and physically modified in a way that few people would have imagined.’²

Other scientific investigations have also shown that you do not have to be a highly trained meditator to benefit from the effects of meditation, and that twenty minutes of daily practice can contribute significantly to the reduction of stress, whose harmful effects on health are well established.³ It also reduces anxiety, the tendency towards anger (which diminishes the chances of survival following heart surgery), and the risk of relapse for people who have previously undergone at least two episodes of serious depression.⁴ Eight weeks of meditation (of the type known as MBSR⁵) for thirty minutes a day significantly strengthens the immune system, reinforces positive emotions⁶ and the faculty of attention,⁷ and reduces arterial pressure in those suffering from high blood pressure,⁸ as well as accelerating the healing of psoriasis.⁹

To what extent can we train our mind to work in a constructive manner – to replace obsession with contentment, agitation with calmness, hatred with kindness? Twenty years ago, it was almost universally accepted by neuroscientists that the brain contained all its neurons at birth, and that their number did not change in adult life. We now know that new neurons are produced up until the moment of death, and we speak of ‘neuroplasticity’, a term which takes into account the fact that the brain evolves continuously in relation to our experience, and that a particular training, such as learning a musical instrument or a sport, can bring about a profound change. Mindfulness, altruism and other basic human qualities can be cultivated in the same way. In general, if we engage repeatedly in a new activity or train in a new skill, modifications in the neuronal system of the brain can be observed within a month. What is essential, therefore, is to meditate regularly.

Study of the influence of our mental states on our way of being and our health, which was once considered a purely eccentric notion, is now becoming a mainstream approach in scientific research. The increasingly powerful Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) techniques and sophisticated electroencephalograms (EEG) as well as magneto encephalography (MEG), combined with the participation of experienced contemplatives, have led us towards a golden age of contemplative neuroscience. It is a fascinating prospect, and there is so much more to discover.

A full life is not made up of an uninterrupted succession of pleasant sensations but really comes from transforming the way we understand and work through the challenges of our existence. Training the mind not only makes it possible to cope with mental toxins like hatred, obsession and fear that poison our existence, but also helps us acquire a better understanding of how the mind functions and gives us a more accurate perception of reality. This, in turn, gives us the inner resources to successfully face the highs and lows of life without being distracted or broken by them, and allows us to draw deep lessons from them.

One of the great tragedies of our time is that we significantly underestimate our capacity for change. Our character traits remain the same as long as we do nothing to change them, and as long as we continue to tolerate and reinforce our habits and patterns, thought after thought.

The truth is that the state we generally consider to be ‘normal’ is just a starting point and not the goal we ought to set for ourselves. Our life is worth much more than that! It is possible, little by little, to arrive at an ‘optimal’ way of being.

I cannot emphasize enough how much meditation and mind training can change our lives and bring about an inner revolution, which is profound and peaceful and affects the quality of every moment of our experience.

Source of Inspiration

Unfortunately, one of the main obstacles we face when we try to examine the mind is a deep-seated and often unconscious conviction that ‘we’re born the way we are and nothing we can do can change that’. I experienced this same sense of pessimistic futility during my own childhood, and I’ve seen it reflected again and again in my work with people around the world. Without even consciously thinking about it, the idea that we can’t alter our minds blocks our every attempt to try.

People I’ve spoken with who try to make a change using aspirations, prayers, or visualizations admit that they often give up after a few days or weeks because they don’t see any immediate results. When their prayers and aspirations don’t work, they dismiss the whole idea of working with the mind as a marketing gimmick designed to sell books... [However]

during my conversations with scientists around the world, I've been amazed to see that there is a nearly universal consensus in the scientific community that the brain is structured in a way that actually does make it possible to effect real changes in everyday experience.

—Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche¹¹

PART II

What to Meditate On?

THE OBJECT OF MEDITATION IS THE MIND. FOR THE moment, it is simultaneously confused, agitated, rebellious and subject to innumerable conditioned and automatic patterns. The goal of meditation is not to shut down the mind or anaesthetise it, but rather to make it free, lucid and balanced.

According to Buddhism, the mind is not an entity but rather a dynamic stream of experiences, a succession of moments of consciousness. These experiences are often marked by confusion and suffering, but we can also live them in a spacious state of clarity and inner freedom.

We all well know, as the contemporary Tibetan master Jigme Khyentse Rinpoche reminds us, that 'we don't need to train our minds to improve our ability to get upset or jealous. We don't need an anger accelerator or a pride amplifier.'¹² By contrast, training the mind is crucial if we want to refine and sharpen our attention, develop emotional balance, inner peace and wisdom, and cultivate dedication to the welfare of others. We have within ourselves the potential to develop these qualities, but they will not develop by themselves or just because we want them to. They require training. And all training requires perseverance and enthusiasm, as I have already said. We won't learn to ski by practising one or two minutes a month.

Refining Attention and Mindfulness

Galileo discovered the rings of Saturn after devising a telescope that was sufficiently bright and powerful and setting it up on a stable support. His discovery would not have been possible if his instrument had been inadequate or if he had held it in a trembling hand. Similarly, if we want to observe the subtlest mechanisms of our mental functioning and have an effect on them, we absolutely must refine our powers of looking inward. In order to do that our attention has to be highly sharpened so that it becomes stable and clear. We will then be able to observe how the mind functions and perceives the world and we will be able to understand the way thoughts multiply by association. Finally, we will be able to continue to refine the mind's perception until we reach the point where we are able to see the most fundamental state of our consciousness, a perfectly lucid and awakened state that is always present, even in the absence of discursive thoughts.

What Meditation is Not

Sometimes practitioners of meditation are accused of being too focused on themselves, of wallowing in egocentric introspection and failing to be concerned with others. But we cannot regard as selfish a process whose goal is to root out the obsession with self and to cultivate altruism. This would be like blaming an aspiring doctor for spending years studying medicine before beginning to practise.

There are a fair number of clichés in circulation concerning meditation. I should point out right away that meditation is not trying to create a void in one's mind by blocking out thoughts – which is impossible anyway. Nor is it engaging the mind in endless cogitation in an attempt to analyse the past or anticipate the future. Neither is it a simple process of relaxation in which inner conflicts are temporarily suspended in a vague amorphous state of consciousness. There is not much point in resting in a state of inner bewilderment.

There is indeed an element of relaxation in meditation, but it is connected with the relief that

comes from letting go of hopes and fears, of attachments and the whims of the ego that never stop feeding our inner conflicts.

A Mastery That Sets Us Free

As we shall see, the way we deal with thoughts in meditation is not to block or feed them indefinitely but to let them rise and dissolve by themselves in the field of mindfulness. In this way, they do not take over our minds. Beyond that, meditation consists in cultivating a way of being that is not subject to the patterns of habitual thinking. It often begins with analysis and then continues with contemplation and inner transformation.

To be free is to be the master of ourselves. It is not a matter of doing whatever comes into our heads, but rather of freeing ourselves from the constraints and afflictions that dominate and obscure our minds. It is a matter of taking our life into our own hands rather than abandoning it to the tendencies created by habit and mental confusion. Instead of letting go of the helm and just letting the boat drift wherever the wind blows, freedom means setting a course towards a chosen destination – the destination that we know to be the most desirable for ourselves and others.

At the Heart of Reality

Meditation is not a means of escaping reality, as some people think. On the contrary, its object is to make us see reality as it is right in the midst of our experience, to unmask the deep causes of our suffering and to dispel mental confusion. We develop a kind of understanding that comes from a clearer view of reality. To reach this understanding, we meditate, for example, on the interdependence of all phenomena, on their transitory character and on the non-existence of the ego perceived as a solid and independent entity.

Meditations on these themes are based on the experience of generations of meditators who have devoted their lives to observing the automatic, mechanical patterns of thought and the nature of consciousness. They then taught empirical methods for developing mental clarity, alertness, inner freedom, altruistic love and compassion. However, we cannot merely rely on their words to free ourselves from suffering. We must discover for ourselves the value of the methods these wise people taught and confirm for ourselves the conclusions they reached. This is not purely an intellectual process. Long study of our own experience is needed in order to rediscover their answers and integrate them into ourselves on a deep level. This process requires determination, enthusiasm and perseverance. It requires what Shantideva calls, ‘the joy of doing what is beneficial’.¹³

Thus we begin by observing and understanding how thoughts multiply by association with each other and create a whole world of emotions, of joy and suffering. Then we penetrate behind the screen of thoughts and glimpse the fundamental component of consciousness, the primal cognitive faculty out of which all thoughts arise.

Liberating the Monkey Mind

To accomplish this task, we must begin by calming our turbulent mind. Our mind behaves like a captive monkey who, in his agitation, becomes more and more entangled in his bonds.

Out of the vortex of our thoughts, firstly emotions arise and then moods and behaviours, then, finally, habits and traits of character. What arises spontaneously does not necessarily produce good results, any more than throwing seeds into the wind produces good harvests. So we have to behave as good farmer does who prepares his field before sowing his seeds. For us, this means that the most important task is to attain freedom through mastering our mind.

If we consider that the possible benefit of meditation is to have a new experience of the world each moment of our lives, then it doesn't seem excessive to spend at least twenty minutes a day getting to know our mind better and training it towards this kind of openness. The fruition of meditation could be described as an optimal way of being, or again, as genuine happiness. This true and lasting happiness is a profound sense of having realized to the utmost the potential we have within us for wisdom and accomplishment. Working towards this kind of fulfilment is an adventure worth embarking on.

How to Meditate?

MEDITATION IS NOT A MATTER OF THEORY BUT OF practice, just as it does not satisfy your hunger to read a restaurant menu if you are not going to eat something from it. Nevertheless, it is an invaluable help to be able to consult the guidelines for meditation found in the works of the sages of the past. These works are treasure mines of instruction, which clearly expound the goal and methods of meditation, describe the best way to practise it and deal with the pitfalls that may await the practitioner.

Let us look now at some of these teachings. Let's begin with preliminary instructions and general advice, and then move on to some of the numerous methods of meditation. The descriptions will be kept simple so that these practices can be approached easily and gradually. Those who want to go into them more deeply will find references to more detailed works in the bibliography at the end of the book. The importance of an experienced living guide can never be overemphasized. It is not the intention of this book to replace such a guide. The aim is solely to provide some basic instruction derived from authentic sources.

A number of the exercises that follow, especially those dealing with mindfulness, inner calm, deep insight and altruistic love, are common to all schools of Buddhism. Others, for example those dealing with the emotions, come from the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism. Since this book is aimed particularly at readers who want to practise meditation without necessarily becoming Buddhists, certain essentials of Buddhist practice such as taking refuge and other specifically Buddhist topics will not be explained here. These can be found in many insightful texts, such as *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* by Patrul Rinpoche or the commentary of *The Treasury of Precious Qualities* by Kangyur Rinpoche (Longchen Yeshe Dorje). In essence, let us remember that our mind can be our best friend or our worst enemy. Thus liberating it from confusion, the self-centredness of the ego and afflictive emotions is the greatest favour we can do ourselves and others.

Motivation

As with any other action, when we begin to practise a particular meditation, it is essential to be sure about our motivation. For it is our motivation, altruistic or self-centred, vast or limited, that will give the journey we are about to take a positive or negative direction and thus determine its results.

We would all like to avoid suffering and attain happiness, and we all have the basic right to fulfil these wishes. However, our deeds are in conflict with our aspirations most of the time. We look for happiness where it doesn't exist and we rush headlong towards what makes us suffer. Buddhist practice does not ask us to give up what is really good in life, but rather to abandon the causes of suffering, to which we are often addicted as to drugs. Suffering is caused by mental confusion that dims our clarity and judgement. The only way to remedy this is to develop an accurate view of reality and transform our minds. This is what will enable us to eliminate the primary causes of suffering: the mental poisons of ignorance, aggression, greed, pride and jealousy, which in turn are caused by our self-centred and delusional attachment to the ego.

Buddhism refers to several kinds of suffering. Visible suffering is evident everywhere. Hidden suffering is related to impermanence and change, and can conceal itself beneath the appearance of pleasure. An even deeper and less visible aspect of suffering comes from our basic ignorance and will stay with us as long as we remain in the grip of delusion and selfishness.

Over 2,500 years ago, after attaining enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, the Buddha gave his first teaching in the Deer Park outside Varanasi. There he taught the Four Noble Truths. The first is the

truth of suffering, which needs to be recognized. The second is the truth of the causes of suffering – ignorance that engenders craving, hatred, pride, jealousy and many other thoughts that poison our lives and those of others. Since these mental poisons can be eliminated, an end to suffering – the third truth – is therefore possible. The fourth truth is the path that turns that potential into reality. The path is the process of using all available means to eliminate the fundamental causes of suffering.

But just getting rid of our own suffering is not enough. Each of us is just one person, while the number of other beings is infinite. All those other beings want to avoid suffering as much as we do. Moreover, all beings are interdependent, so we are intimately connected with all those others. So the ultimate goal of meditation is to acquire the ability to liberate all beings from suffering and contribute to their well-being.

Sections entitled ‘Meditation’ contain concise and practical descriptions of various kinds of meditations. After carefully reading these instructions, try to bring them into your experience during the meditation session, so that they become part of your mind-stream.

‘Sources of Inspiration’ offer teachings and instructions spoken or written by great masters, which clarify, enrich, and deepen the various meditations proposed in the exercises.

Meditation

Reflect on how you are now. Do you find patterns of behaviour and habitual reactions in yourself that need to be improved or transformed? Look into the deepest part of yourself. Can you sense the presence of a potential for change there? Arouse the confidence to believe that change is possible through effort, determination and wisdom. Take a vow to transform yourself not only for your own sake, but also, and especially, for the sake of one day being able to dispel the suffering of others and contribute to their enduring happiness. Let this determination grow and take root in the deepest part of your being.

Sources of Inspiration

Do our actions demonstrate narrowness or openness of mind? Do we take a whole situation into consideration or do we limit ourselves to the details? Do we have a short-or long-term perspective? Is our compassion confined to our family, our friends and the people we identify with? We must continually reflect on these points.

—14th Dalai Lama¹⁴

May the precious Thought of Enlightenment
Be born in me if I have not already given birth to it.
Having been born, may it never wane
But always become greater.

—The Bodhisattva Vow¹⁵

Conditions Conducive to the Practice of Meditation

FOLLOWING THE ADVICE OF A QUALIFIED GUIDE

To start meditating you have to know how to go about it, which is why a competent instructor is essential. In the best of cases this will be an authentic spiritual master who represents an inexhaustible source of wisdom and inspiration as well as long personal experience. In truth, nothing can replace the exemplary power and profundity of transmission from a living master. In addition to the master's inspiring presence and the teaching that he transmits constantly just by his way of being, he also makes sure that the student does not get sidetracked.

If you do not have the opportunity to meet such a master, you can also benefit from the advice of a person who has more knowledge and experience than you do and whose instructions are based on a proven contemplative tradition. If that too is not possible, the best thing is to get help from a text, even a very simple one like the present book, which is drawn from trustworthy sources. That is preferable to putting yourself in the hands of someone whose teachings are little more than home-made concoctions.

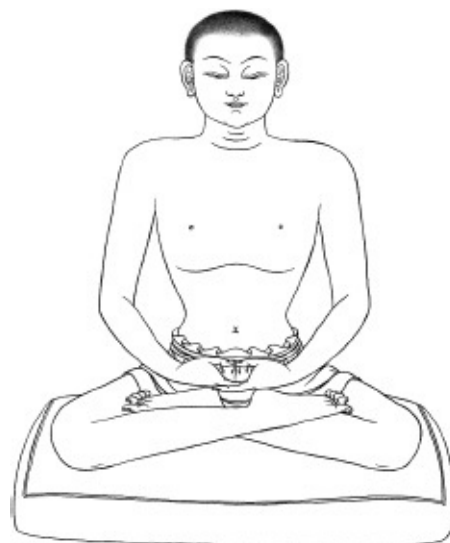
A SUITABLE PLACE FOR MEDITATION

Our time and our minds tend to be taken up by all kinds of activities and preoccupations that never seem to end. That is why, in the beginning stage, we need to set up certain favourable conditions. Of course, the good effects of meditation can last and continue into our everyday life, especially through the practice of mindfulness, but to begin with, we need to train our mind in a protected environment.

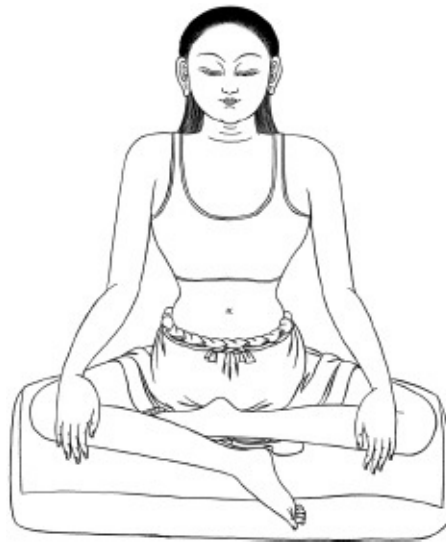
You don't learn the basics of navigation in the thick of a storm; you learn them in good weather on a calm sea. In the same way, it is best in the beginning to meditate in a quiet place where there is space for the mind to develop clarity and stability. A comparison frequently given in the Buddhist texts is the flame of an oil lamp. If it is continually exposed to the wind, its light will be weak and in constant danger of being blown out. On the other hand, if the flame is protected from the wind by a glass cover, it will be stable and bright. The same sort of consideration applies to our minds.

AN APPROPRIATE PHYSICAL POSTURE

Your physical posture affects your mental state. If you take a posture that is too relaxed, especially if you lie down, the chances are that your meditation will stray into drowsiness. Too rigid and tense a posture, on the other hand, might well lead to mental agitation. Thus it is appropriate to take a balanced posture that is neither too tight nor too loose. In the texts, there is a description with seven points, called the posture of Vairochana.



1. The legs are crossed in the *vajra* posture, often called the lotus position. You begin by folding the right leg over the left, then the left over the right. If this is too difficult, you can use the half-lotus posture, also known as the tailor's position, in which one foot is brought on top of the opposite thigh and the other foot rests under the other thigh.
2. The hands rest, palms up, on the lap in the posture of equanimity, with the right hand on top of the left and the tips of the thumbs touching each other. A second variation is letting the hands rest flat, palms down, on the knees.
3. The shoulders are slightly raised and turned slightly forward.
4. The spinal column is quite straight 'like a pile of gold coins'.
5. The chin is tucked in slightly towards the throat.
6. The tip of the tongue touches the palate, near the front teeth.
7. The gaze is directed straight ahead or slightly down, following the line of the nose. The eyes are wide open or half closed.



If you have difficulty staying in a cross-legged position, then it is fine to meditate in a chair or on a raised cushion. The essential is to maintain a balanced posture with the back straight and follow the other posture points described above. It is said in the traditional texts that if the body is quite straight the subtle energy channels will also be straight and, as a result, the mind will be clear.

Nevertheless, it is all right to modify your position slightly in accordance with the way your meditation is going. If you have a tendency to sink into apathy or even sleep, you can straighten your torso and adopt a more energetic posture while directing your gaze upwards. If, on the contrary, your mind is too agitated, you can relax your posture a bit and gaze downward.

You should maintain a suitable posture for as long as you can, but if it becomes too uncomfortable it is better to relax for a few moments than be constantly distracted by pain. You can also, to the extent you are able, turn your attention directly to the experience of pain without either rejecting or amplifying it. Merely take it in as you would any other sensation, pleasant or unpleasant, as part of your mindfulness of the present moment. Also, you can alternate periods of sitting meditation with periods of walking meditation, a method that will be described later on.

ENTHUSIASM AS THE DRIVING FORCE BEHIND PERSEVERANCE

In order to arouse enough interest in something to devote some time to it, you have to see its advantages. Contemplating the benefits that can be expected from meditation and then tasting them a

little bit will nourish your interest. However, this does not mean to say that the practice of meditation is always pleasant. An expedition into the mountains is not always purely fun. In addition to wonderful moments in breathtaking landscapes, we can also face hardships such as rain, hail, exhaustion, or altitude sickness, and perhaps get lost. The essential point is to have enough interest in spiritual practice to keep going despite its ups and downs. The satisfaction of making progress toward the goal you have set yourself will then be enough to nourish your determination and sustain your conviction that the effort is worthwhile.

Some General Advice

It is essential to maintain the continuity of meditation day after day, because in this way your practice can gradually gain substance and stability. This works just the same way as a small trickle of water that little by little turns into a stream and then a river. The traditional texts state that it is better to meditate regularly and repeatedly for short periods of time than to do long sessions every now and then. For example, you could devote twenty minutes a day to meditating formally and also take advantage of short breaks in your daily activities to call up the experience you had during your formal sessions again, even if only for a few moments.

Short regular sessions have a better chance of being high in quality than occasional long ones, and they will keep up a sense of continuity in your practice. For a plant to grow well, you have to water it a little every day. If you just pour a bucket of water on it once a month, it will most likely die between waterings. The same applies to meditation. This does not mean that you shouldn't occasionally meditate for longer periods if the opportunity arises.

If your meditation is too sporadic, there will be long periods during which you will fall back into your old habits and be overcome by negative emotions without being able to call on the support that meditation offers. But if you meditate frequently, even for short periods, it is possible to maintain a certain amount of your meditative experience between those formal sessions.

It is also said that being diligent in your practice should not depend on your mood of the moment. Whether your meditation session is enjoyable or irritating, easy or hard, the important point is to persevere. If you get bored while meditating, this is not due to meditation itself but to lack of training. Moreover, it is when you don't feel like meditating that it might have the most beneficial effects, because at those times meditation is working directly against some obstacle that stands in the way of your spiritual progress.

As we shall see later on when we look into this subject in detail, it is also important to keep your efforts balanced so that you don't become too loose or too tight. The Buddha had a student who was a great musician. He played the vina, a stringed instrument that resembles the sitar. This student had a lot of trouble meditating, and he questioned the Buddha about it. 'Sometimes,' he said, 'I make an intense effort to concentrate, and then I become too tense and tight. At other times, I try to loosen up but then I get too relaxed and fall into a sluggish state. What should I do?' By way of response, the Buddha asked him, 'When you tune your instrument, what amount of tension do you put on the strings to make them sound the best?' The musician replied, 'They have to be neither too tight nor too loose.' The Buddha concluded: 'It's the same with meditation. For it to progress harmoniously, you must find the right balance between effort and relaxation.'

Practitioners are also advised not to place too much importance on various inner experiences that

might arise in the course of meditation. Such experiences might take the form of bliss, inner clarity or an absence of thoughts. They can be compared to the different landscapes you see going by as you're sitting on a train. You would never consider getting off the train every time you noticed an interesting landscape, because the important thing is to keep going until you reach your destination. In the case of meditation, your goal is to transform yourself over the course of months and years. The progress you make is usually hardly noticeable from day to day, like the hands of a clock you hardly see moving. You have to be diligent but not impatient. Haste and meditation do not go together; any profound transformation is bound to take time. It doesn't matter if the way is long; there's no point in setting a deadline. The important thing is to know that you are heading in the right direction. Moreover, spiritual progress is not an all-or-nothing affair. Each step along the way, each stage, brings its measure of satisfaction and contributes towards your development. In essence, what matters is not occasionally to have some transitory experience but to see, after a few months or years of practice, that you have undergone a genuine and lasting change.

In order to strengthen our determination to meditate, there are four points we should think about:

1. The preciousness of human life.
2. The fragility of human life and the transitoriness of all things.
3. The distinction between beneficial and harmful deeds.
4. The unsatisfactory quality inherent in many of the situations of life.

The Preciousness of Human Life

If we enjoy a minimum of freedom and opportunity, human life has extraordinary possibilities for inner development. Made use of intelligently, this life offers a unique opportunity to develop and actualize the potential we all possess but are so ready to neglect and fritter away. This potential, veiled by ignorance or mental confusion and by afflictive emotions, remains for the most part buried within us like a hidden treasure. The good qualities we acquire as we travel along the spiritual path represent the gradual emergence of this potential. This has been compared to a nugget of gold being cleaned – once the dirt has been removed, it shines with dazzling brilliance.

Meditation

Realize how precious human life is and arouse a deep wish to draw out its quintessential qualities. Compared to the life of animals, this human life offers you an extraordinary opportunity to accomplish good things on a scale beyond that of your own personal existence. Your human intelligence is an extremely powerful tool that can create great benefits or horrible disasters. Use it to achieve the gradual elimination of suffering and to discover genuine happiness, not only for yourself but also for those around you. In this way, every moment that passes will be worth living and you will have no regrets at the time of death, like a farmer who has cultivated his fields to the best of his ability. Remain for a few moments in this state of profound appreciation.

The Transitory Nature of All Things

What is the point of reflecting on the transitory nature of beings and things? Human life has incalculable value, but it doesn't last for ever. Reflecting on impermanence makes us realize the value of time. Each moment of life is so precious! Yet ordinarily we let it slip away like gold dust between our fingers. Why do we constantly put off until later what we intuitively know is of the highest importance? There's no point in jumping up and down with impatience to get results as fast as possible, but we do need to develop an unshakeable determination not to waste our time on distractions that make no sense. We must stop being taken in by the illusion that we have our whole

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