

# Your meditation roadmap: a newcomers guide

What can I expect if I am new to meditation? How do I know whether I can do it? How do I sort my way through all the alternative offerings in meditation classes? What is the right way to learn?

I hope that this little road map will give guidance and answer some of your questions about embarking on a meditation path.

## What is meditation?

Meditation is above all a tool for personal transformation. The state of meditation is a relaxed yet focussed alertness. It is a blissful stability of mind.

In terms of precise definition, meditation is 'the cultivating of virtue'. Though precise, the definition is broad.

We translate the Sanskrit word Bhavana as meditation. Bhavana means 'cultivation'. Implicit in cultivation is development and improvement. What we cultivate, develop, and improve is our state of mind.

To bring improvement to our state of mind, we must increase virtue. Thus meditation is 'cultivating virtue'.

This virtue is the true source of happiness. In fact, we define virtue as those states of mind which are a source of happiness to oneself and others.

Virtue makes our inner states better and enables us to benefit others.

Thus, to cultivate the mind we need more good states of mind. We need more virtue: more clarity, concentration, wisdom, compassion, love, generosity and ethics. All forms of actual meditation and mindfulness are virtue.

With virtue we are more effective in all areas of life. When virtue propels our actions we become a great influence on others. We enrich every relationship. Virtue drives us toward greater performance, health, wealth

and joy.

## **Differing types of meditation**

Every activity which develops our virtuous states of mind is meditation. Thus there are many types of meditation.

We hear of calming meditation, mindfulness meditation, insight meditation, mantra meditation, visualisation meditation, stillness meditation, loving-kindness meditation, body-scan meditation, walking meditation and many more.

These forms of meditation are just some of those found in the vast range of Buddhist meditations.

There has been a tendency in recent times to package specific forms of meditation and present these as something new and unique. However the foundation of all these is some form of Buddhist meditation, be it calm abiding meditation, insight meditation, Zen, or tantra.

## **Why do we need a variety of meditations?**

Some claim a distinctive meditation practice to be better than others. However, there is a reason for the variety in forms of meditation.

To meet the needs of the great differences in the individual personality and psychological makeup of trainees, we need an equal range of methods of practice.

Some people have a quick mind and are resistant to meditations that slow the mind down. Even though some people find these meditations calming and relaxing others find them frustrating. They are much more comfortable with more active, analytical methods.

Some prefer complex and challenging meditations while others prefer a simpler approach. Some like an austere and very disciplined approach while others prefer a more relaxed and flexible way. There is no one size fits all.

An experienced teacher will be familiar with the full range of methods and be able to guide new meditators in the best direction.

## **The relationship of meditation to mindfulness**

In all the various forms of meditation there is an application for mindfulness.

Other important mental factors in meditation include awareness, concentration and attention. It is worth examining each of these.

### **What is mindfulness?**

Mindfulness is to remember the object of concentration. It is 'retaining an object of memory'.

Mindfulness brings our attention back to the object of concentration whenever it wanders. So mindfulness enables us to keep our awareness on a specified object. The popular presentation of mindfulness is to remain present. To abide in the present moment. Here the object of memory is the present and we give full attention to exactly what is happening at the moment.

### **What is awareness?**

Awareness is the mental factor which appreciates its object. It is the aspect of consciousness which appreciates both the broad sweep and details of an object.

### **What is attention?**

Attention is the capacity to maintain a focus on an object or a stream of analysis.

### **What is concentration?**

Concentration is single pointedness free of distraction and dullness.

We learn more about how we can use these mental factors during a meditation course.

## **What is the difference between meditation and mindfulness?**

Mindfulness and the other mental factors mentioned above are all

essential components of meditation.

In meditation we use attention to steady our focus on an object, mindfulness to bring our awareness back to the object and hold it, awareness to appreciate the aspects and overall impact of the object, and concentration to maintain a single-pointed focus.

These are the classical definitions of meditation and its mental factors.

Modern interpretations of mindfulness blend aspects of awareness and attention into their definitions. They are, in fact, presenting a unique form of meditation rather than the mental factor of mindfulness itself.

## **How we approach meditation in our classes**

During our introductory meditation courses we can examine a large variety of meditations and try them out. In such a setting we have the advantage of being guided by a teacher experienced in them all.

That way each person can find which practice most suits them. They can then focus on developing their practice according to their personal interest. A good teacher will give guidance in this process.

Even while focusing on one particular type of practice, it is beneficial to broaden your practice by gaining experience in other meditations. This will enhance your main type of meditation.

We begin with a meditation called mindfulness of the breath. It is easy to learn and gives us a basis for learning other types of meditation.

## **Why do we practice meditation?**

We come to meditation practice looking for a benefit of some sort. Often we seek relief from stress, emotional turmoil or health issues. We may need a solution for pain management, or perhaps improving our sleep patterns. We may want to improve our performance in work, art or sport. There are many other reasons. Meditation practice can provide a solution to all these things and much more.

There are many listings of the benefits of meditation, (just Google 'benefits of meditation'). You will find hundreds of benefits backed up by

volumes of recent scientific studies so I won't go into that here.

The key reason we learn to meditate is to find a means to solve our problems (all of them!) We need greater happiness, satisfaction, peace and joy in all areas of our life. This is because every person, every conscious being, wants less suffering, problems and difficulties and more happiness, fulfilment, joy and hope.

When we come to meditation, we have a real chance of achieving a lasting state of happiness. Such happiness comes from within and is not dependent on transient outer relationships and circumstances. It is a state of freedom from problems, difficulties and sufferings and it remains with us always.

Until we tackle meditation, we try to solve our problems and look for our happiness in others. Once we meditate we realise that the real resources for happiness have been within us all the time. Our best nature is just waiting for discovery. We then realise that within us we have the means to free ourselves from any problem, difficulty or pain we may encounter.

## **Virtuous states of mind vs non-virtue**

Why is it that cultivating virtue defines meditation? Virtue is the source within us which produces our happiness. It enables us to share happiness with others. It is our love and consideration, our wisdom and compassion, our caring and patience and our strength and stability. Virtue is also our meditation, mindfulness, awareness and focus. It is our ability to engage life through these states of mind that secures us in happiness.

By cultivating virtue we reduce and eliminate the impact of non-virtue. We get rid of those negative states of mind which cause us problems and cause problems to others. In time we become free from them.

So with meditation we lessen our anger, our tendency to react, our attachment, grasping and greed. We reduce our pride and jealousy, our fear and anxiety.

All the states of mind which cause us problems and cause problems for others disappear with consistent meditation and mindfulness.

Meditation begins this journey and takes us where we want to go.

## **How we practice meditation**

To begin with, we will learn how to practice mindfulness of the breath. In this meditation we get a sense of how we can gather our attention and release our pre-occupation with the external world while we bring our focus inwards.

We spend most of our life occupied with the external world. This is the world of sense objects: sights, sounds, smells, tastes and tangible things.

Our sense data triggers a continuous range of internal responses. It sets off thoughts and opinions, feelings, emotions, abstract intuitions and the verbal and physical expression of these.

Life then propels us from one experience to the next with no gap for reflection or self-analysis. Mindfulness of the breath puts a break in that process and allows our inner world to settle and become calm.

After a little practice we find a place of calmness and a freedom to change the way we view ourselves and our opportunities and relationships in life. We then learn meditation techniques to continue creating the changes we want in all areas of life.

I hope this article stimulates you to try meditation. Once you get the hang of it, you will never look back.