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*We meet for mindfulness meditation, discussion and laughter on Wednesdays from 7:15pm at Newtown Community Centre on the corner of Rintoul and Colombo Streets. You are welcome to come along and learn to meditate.*

*From time to time, we may hold a daylong, silent meditation retreat on a weekend, as well as longer workshops and residential retreats.*

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# W H Y *meditate?*

*by  
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**M**editation is not easy. It takes time and it takes energy. It also takes grit, determination, and discipline. It requires a host of personal qualities that we normally regard as unpleasant and like to avoid whenever possible. We can sum up all of these qualities in the English word gumption.

Meditation takes gumption. It is certainly a great deal easier just to sit back and watch television. So why bother? Why waste all that time and energy when you could be out enjoying yourself? Why? Simple. Because you are human. Just because of the simple fact that you are human, you find yourself heir to an inherent unsatisfactoriness in life that simply will not go away. You can suppress it from your awareness for a time, you can distract yourself for hours on end, but it always comes back, and usually when you least expect it. All of a sudden, seemingly out of the blue, you sit up, take stock, and realize your actual situation in life.

There you are, and you suddenly realize that you are spending your whole life just barely getting by. You keep up a good front. You manage to make ends meet somehow and look okay from the outside. But those periods of desperation, those times when you feel everything caving in on you – you keep those to yourself. You are a mess, and you know it. But you hide it beautifully. Meanwhile, way down under all of that, you just know that there has to be some other way to live, a better way to look at the world, a way to touch life more fully.

You click into it by chance now and then: You get a good job. You fall in love. You win the game. For a while, things are different. Life takes on a richness and clarity that makes all the bad times and humdrum fade away. The whole texture of your experience changes and you say to yourself, “Okay, now I’ve made it; now I will be happy”. But then that fades too, like smoke in the wind. You are left with just a memory – that, and

straight in the eye means you are on your way up and out of it.

As your concentration deepens, you will have less and less trouble with monkey mind. Your breathing will slow down and you will track it more and more clearly, with fewer and fewer interruptions. You begin to experience a state of great calm in which you enjoy complete freedom from those things we called psychic irritants. No greed, lust, envy, jealousy or hatred. Agitation goes away. Fear flees. These are beautiful, clear, blissful states of mind. They are temporary, and they will end when the meditation ends. Yet even these brief experiences will change your life. This is not liberation, but these are stepping stones on the path that leads in that direction. Do not, however, expect instant bliss. Even these stepping stones take time and effort and patience.

Mindfulness of breathing is a present-time awareness. When you are doing it properly, you are aware only of what is occurring in the present. You don’t look back, and you don’t look forward. You forget about the last breath, and you don’t anticipate the next one. When the inhalation is just beginning, you don’t look ahead to the end of that inhalation. You don’t skip forward to the exhalation which is to follow. You stay right there with what is actually taking place. The inhalation is beginning, and that’s what you pay attention to – that and nothing else.

This meditation is a process of retraining the mind. The state you are aiming for is one in which you are totally aware of everything that is happening in your own perceptual universe, exactly the way it happens, exactly when it is happening: total, unbroken awareness in present time. This is an incredibly high goal, and not to be reached all at once. It takes practice, so we start small. We start by becoming totally aware of one small unit of time, just one single inhalation. And, when you succeed, you are on your way to a whole new experience of life.

thinking. You will find this sort of thing happening, especially in the beginning. This too is a passing phase. Simply note the phenomenon and return your attention toward the observation of the sensation of breath. Mental distractions will happen again. But return your attention to your breath again, and again, and again, and again, for as long as it takes until it does not happen any more.

When you first begin this procedure, expect to face some difficulties. Your mind will wander off constantly, darting around like a bumblebee and zooming off on wild tangents. Try not to worry. The monkey mind phenomenon is well known. It is something that every advanced meditator has had to deal with. They have pushed through it one way or another, and so can you. When it happens, just note the fact that you have been thinking, daydreaming, worrying, or whatever. Gently but firmly, without getting upset or judging yourself for straying, simply return to the simple physical sensation of the breath. Then do it again the next time, and again, and again, and again.

**S**omewhere in this process, you will come face to face with the sudden and shocking realization that you are completely crazy. Your mind is a shrieking, gibbering madhouse on wheels barreling pell-mell down the hill, utterly out of control and hopeless. No problem. You are not crazier than you were yesterday. It has always been this way, and you just never noticed. You are also no crazier than everybody else around you. The only real difference is that you have confronted the situation; they have not. So they still feel relatively comfortable. That does not mean that they are better off. Ignorance may be bliss, but it does not lead to liberation. So don't let this realization unsettle you. It is a milestone actually, a sign of real progress. The very fact that you have looked at the problem

the vague awareness that something is wrong.

You can't make radical changes in the pattern of your life until you begin to see yourself exactly as you are now. As soon as you do that, changes will flow naturally. You don't have to force anything, struggle, or obey rules dictated to you by some authority. It is automatic; you just change.

But arriving at that initial insight is quite a task. You have to see who you are and how you are without illusion, judgment or resistance of any kind. You have to see your place in society and your function as a social being. You have to see your duties and obligations to your fellow human beings, and above all, your responsibility to yourself as an individual living with other individuals. And finally, you have to see all of that clearly as a single unit, an irreducible whole of interrelationship. It sounds complex, but it can occur in a single instant. Mental cultivation through meditation is without rival in helping you achieve this sort of understanding and serene happiness.

The *Dhammapada*, an ancient buddhist text, says: "What you are now is the result of what you were. What you will be tomorrow will be the result of what you are now. The consequences of an evil mind will follow you like the cart follows the ox that pulls it. The consequences of a purified mind will follow you like your own shadow. No one can do more for you than your own purified mind – no parent, no relative, no friend, no one. A well-disciplined mind brings happiness."

Meditation is intended to purify the mind. It cleanses the thought process of what can be called psychic irritants, things like greed, hatred and jealousy, which keep you snarled up in emotional bondage. Meditation brings the mind to a state of tranquility and awareness, a state of concentration and insight.

**M**editation is called the great teacher. It is the cleansing crucible fire that works slowly but surely, through understanding. The greater your understanding, the more flexible and tolerant, the more compassionate you can be. You become like a perfect parent or an ideal teacher. You are ready to forgive and forget. You feel love toward others because you understand them, and you understand others because you have understood yourself. You have looked deeply inside and seen self-illusion and your own human failings, seen your own humanity and learned to forgive and to love. When you have learned compassion for yourself, compassion for others is automatic. An accomplished meditator has achieved a profound understanding of life, and he or she inevitably relates to the world with a deep and uncritical love.

The purpose of meditation is personal transformation. The “you” that goes in one side of the meditation experience is not the same “you” that comes out the other side. Meditation changes your character by a process of sensitization, by making you deeply aware of your own thoughts, words and deeds. Your arrogance evaporates and your antagonism dries up. Your mind becomes still and calm. And your life smoothes out. Thus, meditation, properly performed, prepares you to meet the ups and downs of existence. It reduces your tension, fear and worry. Restlessness recedes and passion moderates. Things begin to fall into place, and your life becomes a glide instead of a struggle. All of this happens through understanding.

Meditation sharpens your concentration and your thinking power. Then, piece by piece, your own subconscious motives and mechanics become clear to you. Your intuition sharpens. The precision of your thought increases, and gradually you come to a direct knowledge of things as they really are, without prejudice and without illusion.

This sounds easy, but it is trickier than you think. Do not be discouraged if you find your own will getting in the way. Just use that as an opportunity to observe the nature of conscious intention. Watch the delicate interrelation between the breath, the impulse to control the breath, and the impulse to cease controlling the breath. You may find it frustrating for a while, but it is highly profitable as a learning experience, and it is a passing phase. Eventually, the breathing process will move along under its own steam, and you will feel no impulse to manipulate it. At this point you will have learned a major lesson about your own compulsive need to control the universe.

Breathing, which seems so mundane and uninteresting at first glance, is actually an enormously complex and fascinating procedure. It is full of delicate variations, if you look. There is inhalation and exhalation, long breath and short breath, deep breath, shallow breath, smooth breath, and ragged breath. These categories combine with one another in subtle and intricate ways. Observe the breath closely. Really study it. You find enormous variations and a constant cycle of repeated patterns. It is like a symphony.

Don't observe just the bare outline of the breath. There is more to see here than just an in-breath and an out-breath. Every breath has a beginning, middle and end. Every inhalation goes through a process of birth, growth and death and every exhalation does the same. The depth and speed of your breathing changes according to your emotional state, the thought that flows through your mind, and the sounds you hear. Study these phenomena. You will find them fascinating.

This does not mean, however, that you should be sitting there having little conversations with yourself inside your head: “There is a short ragged breath and there is a deep long one. I wonder what's next?” No, that is not vipassana. That is

experienced directly without a need for thought. Furthermore, it is a very living process, an aspect of life that is in constant change. The breath moves in cycles-inhalation, exhalation, breathing in, and breathing out. Thus, it is a miniature model of life itself.

**T**he first step in using the breath as an object of meditation is to find it. What you are looking for is the physical, tactile sensation of the air that passes in and out of the nostrils. This is usually just inside the tip of the nose. But the exact spot varies from one person to another, depending on the shape of the nose. To find your own point, take a quick deep breath and notice the point just inside the nose or on the upper lip where you have the most distinct sensation of passing air. Now exhale and notice the sensation at the same point.

It is from this point that you will follow the whole passage of breath. Once you have located your own breath point with clarity, don't deviate from that spot. Use this single point in order to keep your attention fixed. Without having selected such a point, you will find yourself moving in and out of the nose, going up and down the windpipe, eternally chasing after the breath which you can never catch because it keeps changing, moving and flowing.

Make no attempt to control the breath. This is not a breathing exercise of the sort done in yoga. Focus on the natural and spontaneous movement of the breath. Don't try to regulate it or emphasize it in any way. Most beginners have some trouble in this area. In order to help themselves focus on the sensation, they unconsciously accentuate their breathing. The result is a forced and unnatural effort that actually inhibits concentration rather than helping it. Let go and allow the process to go along at its own rhythm.

Vipassana is the oldest of buddhist meditation practices. The method comes directly from the *Satipatthana Sutta*, a discourse attributed to the Buddha himself. Vipassana is a direct and gradual cultivation of mindfulness or awareness. It proceeds piece by piece over a period of years. The student's attention is carefully directed to an intense examination of certain aspects of his own existence. The meditator is trained to notice more and more of his own flowing life experience.

Vipassana is a gentle technique, but it also is very, very thorough. It is an ancient and codified system of training your mind, a set of exercises dedicated to the purpose of becoming more and more aware of your own life experience. It is attentive listening, mindful seeing, and careful testing. We learn to smell acutely, to touch fully, and really pay attention to the changes taking place in all these experiences. We learn to listen to our own thoughts without being caught up in them.

The object of vipassana practice is to learn to see the truths of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and the selflessness of phenomena. We think we are doing this already, but that is an illusion. It comes from the fact that we are paying so little attention to the ongoing surge of our own life experiences that we might just as well be asleep.

Vipassana meditation is inherently experiential, not theoretical. In the practice of meditation you become sensitive to the actual experience of living, to how things actually feel. You do not sit around developing subtle, aesthetic thoughts about living. You live. Vipassana meditation, more than anything else, is learning to live.

There are a variety of methods within the vipassana tradition, but the method we are explaining here is considered the most traditional and is probably what Gautama Buddha taught his students. The *Satipatthana Sutta*, which was the

Buddha's original discourse on mindfulness, specifically says that one must begin by focusing the attention on the breathing and then go on to note all other physical and mental phenomena which arise.

So we sit, watching the air going in and out of our noses. At first glance, this seems an exceedingly odd and useless procedure. The first question we might ask is: why have any focus of attention at all? We are, after all, trying to develop awareness. Why not just sit down and be aware of whatever happens to be present in the mind?

In fact, there are meditations of that nature. They are sometimes referred to as unstructured meditation and they are quite difficult. The mind is tricky. Thought is an inherently complicated procedure. By that we mean that we become trapped, wrapped up, and stuck in the thought chain. One thought leads to another which leads to another, and another, and another, and so on. Fifteen minutes later we suddenly wake up and realize we spent that whole time stuck in a daydream or sexual fantasy or a set of worries about our bills or whatever.

There is a difference between being aware of a thought and thinking a thought. That difference is very subtle. It is primarily a matter of feeling or texture. A thought you are simply aware of with bare attention feels light in texture; there is a sense of distance between that thought and the awareness viewing it. It arises lightly like a bubble, and it passes away without necessarily giving rise to the next thought in that chain. Normal conscious thought is much heavier in texture. It is ponderous, commanding and compulsive. It sucks you in and grabs control of consciousness. By its very nature it is obsessional, and it leads straight to the next thought in the chain, with apparently no gap between them.

The difference between being aware of the thought and

thinking the thought is very real. But it is extremely subtle and difficult to see. Concentration is one of the tools needed to be able to see this difference.

Deep concentration has the effect of slowing down the thought process and speeding up the awareness viewing it. The result is the enhanced ability to examine the thought process. Concentration is our microscope for viewing subtle internal states. We use the focus of attention to achieve one-pointedness of mind with calm and constantly applied attention. Without a fixed reference point you get lost, overcome by the ceaseless waves of change flowing round and round within the mind.

We use breath as our focus. It serves as that vital reference point from which the mind wanders and is drawn back. Distraction cannot be seen as distraction unless there is some central focus to be distracted from. That is the frame of reference against which we can view the incessant changes and interruptions that go on all the time as a part of normal thinking.

The next question we need to address is: why choose breathing as the primary object of meditation? Why not something a bit more interesting? Answers to this are numerous. A useful object of meditation should be one that promotes mindfulness. It should be portable, easily available, and cheap. It should also be something that will not embroil us in those states of mind from which we are trying to free ourselves, such as greed, anger and delusion.

Breathing satisfies all these criteria and more. Breathing is something common to every human being. We all carry it with us wherever we go. It is always there, constantly available, never ceasing from birth till death, and it costs nothing.

Breathing is a nonconceptual process, a thing that can be