

CHAPTER 1

Meditation: Why Bother?

MEDITATION 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 American 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 the vague awareness that something is wrong.

You feel that there really is a whole other realm of depth and sensitivity available in life; somehow, you are just not seeing it. You wind up feeling cut off. You feel insulated from the sweetness of experience by some sort of sensory cotton. You are not really touching life. You are not “making it” again. Then even that vague awareness fades away, and you are back to the same old reality. The world looks like the usual foul place. It is an emotional roller coaster, and you spend a lot of your time down at the bottom of the ramp, yearning for the heights.

So what is wrong with you? Are you a freak? No. You are just human. And you suffer from the same malady that infects every human being. It is a monster inside all of us, and it has many arms: chronic tension, lack of genuine compassion for others, including the people closest to you, blocked up feelings and emotional deadness—many, many arms. None of us is entirely free from it. We may deny it. We try to suppress it. We build a whole culture around hiding from it, pretending it is not there, and distracting ourselves with goals, projects, and concerns about status. But it never goes away. It is a constant undercurrent in every thought and every perception, a little voice in the back of the mind that keeps saying, “Not good enough yet. Need to have more. Have to make it better. Have to be better.” It is a monster, a monster that manifests everywhere in subtle forms.

Go to a party. Listen to the laughter, those brittle-tongued voices that express fun on the surface, and fear underneath. Feel the ten-

sion, the pressure. Nobody really relaxes. They are faking it. Go to a ball game. Watch the fans in the stand. Watch the irrational fits of anger. Watch the uncontrolled frustration bubbling forth from people that masquerades under the guise of enthusiasm or team spirit. Booing, catcalls, and unbridled egotism in the name of team loyalty, drunkenness, fights in the stands—these are people trying desperately to release tension from within; these are not people who are at peace with themselves. Watch the news on TV. Listen to the lyrics of popular songs. You find the same theme repeated over and over in variations: jealousy, suffering, discontent, and stress.

Life seems to be a perpetual struggle, an enormous effort against staggering odds. And what is our solution to all this dissatisfaction? We get stuck in the “if only” syndrome. If only I had more money, then I would be happy. If only I could find somebody who really loved me; if only I could lose twenty pounds; if only I had a color TV, a hot tub, and curly hair; and on and on forever. Where does all this junk come from, and more important, what can we do about it? It comes from the conditions of our own minds. It is a deep, subtle, and pervasive set of mental habits, a Gordian knot that we have tied bit by bit and that we can only unravel in just that same way, one piece at a time. We can tune up our awareness, dredge up each separate piece, and bring it out into the light. We can make the unconscious conscious, slowly, one piece at a time.

The essence of our experience is change. Change is incessant. Moment by moment life flows by, and it is never the same. Perpetual fluctuation is the essence of the perceptual universe. A thought springs up in your head and half a second later, it is gone. In comes another one, and then that is gone too. A sound strikes your ears, and then silence. Open your eyes and the world pours in, blink and it is gone. People come into your life and go. Friends leave, relatives die. Your fortunes go up, and they go down. Sometimes you win, and just

as often, you lose. It is incessant: change, change, change; no two moments ever the same.

There is not a thing wrong with this. It is the nature of the universe. But human culture has taught us some odd responses to this endless flowing. We categorize experiences. We try to stick each perception, every mental change in this endless flow, into one of three mental pigeon holes: it is good, bad, or neutral. Then, according to which box we stick it in, we perceive with a set of fixed habitual mental responses. If a particular perception has been labeled “good,” then we try to freeze time right there. We grab onto that particular thought, fondle it, hold it, and we try to keep it from escaping. When that does not work, we go all-out in an effort to repeat the experience that caused the thought. Let us call this mental habit “grasping.”

Over on the other side of the mind lies the box labeled “bad.” When we perceive something “bad,” we try to push it away. We try to deny it, reject it, and get rid of it any way we can. We fight against our own experience. We run from pieces of ourselves. Let us call this mental habit “rejecting.” Between these two reactions lies the “neutral” box. Here we place the experiences that are neither good nor bad. They are tepid, neutral, uninteresting. We pack experience away in the neutral box so that we can ignore it and thus return our attention to where the action is, namely, our endless round of desire and aversion. So this “neutral” category of experience gets robbed of its fair share of our attention. Let us call this mental habit “ignoring.” The direct result of all this lunacy is a perpetual treadmill race to nowhere, endlessly pounding after pleasure, endlessly fleeing from pain, and endlessly ignoring 90 percent of our experience. Then we wonder why life tastes so flat. In the final analysis this system does not work.

No matter how hard you pursue pleasure and success, there are times when you fail. No matter how fast you flee, there are times when pain catches up with you. And in between those times, life is

so boring you could scream. Our minds are full of opinions and criticisms. We have built walls all around ourselves and are trapped in the prison of our own likes and dislikes. We suffer.

“Suffering” is a big word in Buddhist thought. It is a key term and should be thoroughly understood. The Pali word is *dukkha*, and it does not just mean the agony of the body. It means that deep, subtle sense of dissatisfaction that is a part of every mind moment and that results directly from the mental treadmill. The essence of life is suffering, said the Buddha. At first glance this statement seems exceedingly morbid and pessimistic. It even seems untrue. After all, there are plenty of times when we are happy. Aren’t there? No, there are not. It just seems that way. Take any moment when you feel really fulfilled and examine it closely. Down under the joy, you will find that subtle, all-pervasive undercurrent of tension that no matter how great this moment is, it is going to end. No matter how much you just gained, you are inevitably either going to lose some of it or spend the rest of your days guarding what you have and scheming how to get more. And in the end, you are going to die; in the end, you lose everything. It is all transitory.

Sounds pretty bleak, doesn’t it? Luckily, it’s not—not at all. It only sounds bleak when you view it from the ordinary mental perspective, the very perspective at which the treadmill mechanism operates. Underneath lies another perspective, a completely different way to look at the universe. It is a level of functioning in which the mind does not try to freeze time, does not grasp onto our experience as it flows by, and does not try to block things out and ignore them. It is a level of experience beyond good and bad, beyond pleasure and pain. It is a lovely way to perceive the world, and it is a learnable skill. It is not easy, but it can be learned.

Happiness and peace are really the prime issues in human existence. That is what all of us are seeking. This is often a bit hard to

see because we cover up those basic goals with layers of surface objectives. We want food, wealth, sex, entertainment, and respect. We even say to ourselves that the idea of “happiness” is too abstract: “Look, I am practical. Just give me enough money and I will buy all the happiness I need.” Unfortunately, this is an attitude that does not work. Examine each of these goals and you will find that they are superficial. You want food. Why? Because I am hungry. So you are hungry—so what? Well, if I eat, I won’t be hungry, and then I’ll feel good. Ah ha! “Feel good”: now there is the real item. What we really seek is not the surface goals; those are just means to an end. What we are really after is the feeling of relief that comes when the drive is satisfied. Relief, relaxation, and an end to the tension. Peace, happiness—no more yearning.

So what is this happiness? For most of us, the idea of perfect happiness would be to have everything we wanted and be in control of everything, playing Caesar, making the whole world dance a jig according to our every whim. Once again, it does not work that way. Take a look at the people in history who have actually held this type of power. They were not happy people. Certainly, they were not at peace with themselves. Why not? Because they were driven to control the world totally and absolutely, and they could not. They wanted to control all people, yet there remained people who refused to be controlled. These powerful people could not control the stars. They still got sick. They still had to die.

You can’t ever get everything you want. It is impossible. Luckily, there is another option. You can learn to control your mind, to step outside of the endless cycle of desire and aversion. You can learn not to want what you want, to recognize desires but not be controlled by them. This does not mean that you lie down on the road and invite everybody to walk all over you. It means that you continue to live a very normal-looking life, but live from a whole new viewpoint. You do

the things that a person must do, but you are free from that obsessive, compulsive drivenness of your own desires. You want something, but you don't need to chase after it. You fear something, but you don't need to stand there quaking in your boots. This sort of mental cultivation is very difficult. It takes years. But trying to control everything is impossible; the difficult is preferable to the impossible.

Wait a minute, though. Peace and happiness! Isn't that what civilization is all about? We build skyscrapers and freeways. We have paid vacations, TV sets; we provide free hospitals and sick leaves, Social Security and welfare benefits. All of that is aimed at providing some measure of peace and happiness. Yet the rate of mental illness climbs steadily, and the crime rates rise faster. The streets are crawling with aggressive and unstable individuals. Stick your arms outside the safety of your own door, and somebody is very likely to steal your watch! Something is not working. A happy person does not steal. One who is at peace with him- or herself does not feel driven to kill. We like to think that our society is employing every area of human knowledge in order to achieve peace and happiness, but this is not true.

We are just beginning to realize that we have overdeveloped the material aspects of existence at the expense of the deeper emotional and spiritual aspects, and we are paying the price for that error. It is one thing to talk about degeneration of moral and spiritual fiber in America today, and another thing to actually do something about it. The place to start is within ourselves. Look carefully inside, truthfully and objectively, and each of us will see moments when "I am the delinquent" and "I am the crazy person." We will learn to see those moments, see them clearly, cleanly, and without condemnation, and we will be on our way up and out of being so.

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 (which anticipated Freud by thousands of years), 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 tranquillity and awareness, a state of concentration and insight.

In our society, we are great believers in education. We believe that knowledge makes a person civilized. Civilization, however, polishes a person only superficially. Subject our noble and sophisticated gentleperson to the stresses of war or economic collapse, and see what happens. It is one thing to obey the law because you know the penal-

ties and fear the consequences; it is something else entirely to obey the law because you have cleansed yourself from the greed that would make you steal and the hatred that would make you kill. Throw a stone into a stream. The running water would smooth the stone's surface, but the inside remains unchanged. Take that same stone and place it in the intense fires of a forge, and it all melts; the whole stone changes inside and out. Civilization changes a person on the outside. Meditation softens a person from within, through and through.

Meditation 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.

Meditation is a lot like cultivating a new land. To make a field out of a forest, first you have to clear the trees and pull out the stumps. Then you till the soil and fertilize it, sow your seed, and harvest your crops. To cultivate your mind, first you have to clear out the various irritants that are in the way—pull them right out by the root so that they won't grow back. Then you fertilize: you pump energy and discipline into the mental soil. Then you sow the seed, and harvest your crops of faith, morality, mindfulness, and wisdom.

Faith and morality, by the way, have a special meaning in this

context. Buddhism does not advocate faith in the sense of believing something because it is written in a book, attributed to a prophet, or taught to you by some authority figure. The meaning of faith here is closer to confidence. It is knowing that something is true because you have seen it work, because you have observed that very thing within yourself. In the same way, morality is not a ritualistic obedience to a code of behavior imposed by an external authority. It is rather a healthy habit pattern that you have consciously and voluntarily chosen to impose upon yourself because you recognize its superiority to your present behavior.

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.

So are these reasons enough to bother? Scarcely. These are just promises on paper. There is only one way you will ever know if meditation is worth the effort: learn to do it right, and do it. See for yourself.