

Types of Meditation

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TYPES OF MEDITATION

The following discussion will offer descriptions of five types of meditation. Two are non-Buddhist and three are variations of Buddhist practices. The examples provided will illustrate the differences and similarities between basic meditation disciplines, offer information regarding the strengths and limitations for each type, as well as furnish guidelines for the appropriate use for each of them.

Non-Buddhist Meditation

Non-Buddhist meditation is generally goal focused. In goal-centered meditation the practitioner's motivation is to gain something from their activity. The individual seeks to heal a sense of lack and strives to achieve a desired objective, such as a calm mind. Goal-centered meditation is essentially dualistic. In a dualistic practice there is always a gap between one's actual state, and the desire for some improved state of being. This dualism can generate increased anxiety when expectations for a particular result are not met. Intrinsic to this dualism is attachment to a permanent, independent self that the practitioner aims to perfect. However, relief from the human condition of seeing oneself as separate from the world is never accomplished through the drive for perfection in a dualistic practice. Nonetheless, goal-centered meditation is not without value. Many positive changes for the practitioner are possible. This form of meditation should be considered a significant step toward an expansive spirituality, not available to those who regard the world only from an intellectual assessment.

I. Meditation for Self-Improvement

Goal-centered practices employ a myriad of methods seeking such outcomes as a calm demeanor, physical and psychological well-being, mental acuity, development of the chakras, and greater awareness of human spirituality, with the practitioner looking for the opportunity to enhance their sense of self. Practicing these methods teaches concentration of mind, and an astute connection with one's inner life. Most people mistakenly believe that they are in control of their own mind. Meditation for self-improvement helps the practitioner to go beyond that commonly held belief. That insight opens the way for creative self-discipline and the possibility of severing attachment to negative unconscious impulses. These changes

strengthen character, and open the way for harmonious development of the intellect, emotions, and physical health of an individual.

II. Contemplation

Contemplation is a form of spirituality practiced widely in non-Buddhist traditions.

Contemplation can bring about a great deal of peace, because it directs the mind toward a union with God. Its goal is to gain a living awareness of God. Methods of contemplation are penitential prayer, analytical introspection, and mind concentration. Others form hope to generate mystical powers. They correspond in some ways to Buddhist meditation practices. However, these methods are limited because practitioners place themselves in an exclusive relationship to the object of meditation, considering the object as unique, looking at it from afar. They are non-Buddhist because they maintain a separation between self and other.

Buddhist Meditation

Buddhist meditation ultimately leads to goalless meditation. This is a significant difference from dualistic practices. The non-dual approach contains the central theme of Buddhist thought and practice that sets it apart from other traditions. It teaches the non-reification of the self. The self is realized as having no permanent or independent existence, the same as all other phenomena. Buddhism does not deny the *sense of self* we all experience, and it is a necessary component of our make-up and required for our functioning in the world.

Buddhism does not seek to directly fix the inevitable inadequacies of the self, but points out again and again that the self consists of transient aggregates that are stimulated to action by a constantly changing web of causes and conditions. The major focus of the will in Buddhist meditation is applied to maintaining a continuity of awareness. Not trying to get anything, and staying aware of the flow of consciousness, ultimately eliminates anxiety, revealing awareness as a combination of seamless tranquility and dynamic insight.

Our “normal” perception of the natural world is misleading as to the true nature of reality. We must probe our sense of the world through our observation and inquiry, and not diminish what emerges. Most often our effort yields a completely different picture of the world than the one we commonly experience. The solidity of “things” and “objects”, mental or physical, internal or external, dissolve in the Buddhist teaching of impermanence. The

modern conception of mind as a psychological and mental entity fails to convey the mind transmitted from Buddhas and Ancestors. The mind of non-dualistic meditation validates that all phenomena express universal truth, that mind extends throughout all phenomena, and that all phenomena are not separate from mind. Mind is not an epiphenomenon. The inseparable nature of reality goes far beyond the implications of the modern theories of psychology. Non-dualistic goalless meditation practices deal with unity of being, one that recognizes and accepts the self as impermanent and interdependent.

I. Stabilizing Meditation

Everyone begins Buddhist meditation through the practice of one of the many stabilizing methods taught by the various schools. They are applied for a period of time, often for years, until the mind attains basic clarity. Common meditation practices include breath awareness exercises, both counting and following the breath. This method provides an anchor for the attention to return to after inevitable distractions. Some teachers suggest a very precise form of posture, using the body position as the gauge of awareness. Still others teach noting where the attention has alighted momentarily and mentally vocalizing the place or activity. One would say “thinking, thinking” if a thought occurred, or “pain, pain” if a leg cramped, and so on. All of these techniques, and many more like them, intensifies and focuses the mind to observing mental contents and processes. Practitioners become aware when conditioned states arise and unfold. One gains the ability to observe and differentiate between being unconsciously trapped by a conditioned state and being consciously aware of how it manifests.

II. Koan Introspection, Conscious Use of Thought

In koan introspection, a teacher assigned koan is studied within the meditation. The study consists of penetrating the inner meaning of the koan. If the koan is resolved, the practitioner gains experiential insight, leading them beyond discursive thought and habitual emotional responses. This method points directly to the awakened mind of Buddha. Study of assigned koans is done with a guiding teacher experienced in this form of meditation. The teacher, based on their assessment of the student’s understanding, chooses the koan. The koans themselves are the recorded interactions between masters and disciples from ancient

times. They are compiled in books such as the Blue Cliff Record and the Book of Serenity. Koans offer support in the slippery process of spiritual training.

Conscious Use of Thought is an advanced form of meditation where one applies the awareness of practice directly. It is similar to koan introspection practice of non-discursive penetration of the koan. In conscious use of thought, an individual brings a question that has naturally arisen, or a daily life issue to the practice, engaging with it in the same manner as an assigned koan, penetrating to the existential meaning of the question or issue.

III. Shikan Taza

Shikan Taza, Zazen, and Just Sitting are interchangeable terms that denote a particular meditative practice. The mature form of Shikan Taza is one of spiritual power, independence, and freedom. The emotions and intellect are refined and sensitive, open to appreciation of human endeavor and the beauty of nature. Daily activities are infused with compassion and application of effort for the good of others. Mastery of Shikan Taza frees the practitioner from the tyranny of conditioned states.

Shikan Taza is the ultimate non-dual practice, one with no theme or object of meditation. In Shikan Taza, practice is realization.

Both the Stabilizing and Introspection methods described above retain dualistic aspects because they all use an object meditation. However, Shikan Taza is truly goalless because it does not use an object of meditation. It does not create preferences for gaining any particular state of mind, nor tries to disengage from an unpleasant one. The mind and body engages in Shikan Taza without self-consciousness. Body, breath, and mind are an integrated and unobstructed whole. The contents of the mind exist within a limitless mentality, with no desire for any particular experience.

Summary

All types of meditation look the same to an outside observer. The intention and mental state of the practitioner determines what type of meditation is practiced. Intention serves as a mirror that helps us recognize where we are with our practice, and what form of study is best in relation the needs of our life at that time. Intention is a guide, a personal precept.

Care must be taken not to judge one type of meditation better than another. Each type has an absolute value answering the immediate needs of an individual. The wise practitioner learns many different types, and employs them to meet the ever-changing conditions of their life. For example, if one is extremely upset or anxious a calming practice, such as following the breath, may be advisable. It is possible for one to practice all the types outlined in this discussion in even one meditation period. It all depends on the intention and state of mind of the individual.