

## **The Three Aims of Meditation (with Q&A)**

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People come to meditation with different aims in mind, but I would narrow them down to three principal ones. These three aims are: (1) calming your mind, (2) having more insight into your mind, and (3) awakening, or enlightenment. Each aim requires a particular virtue or habit of character in order to achieve the aim (if “achieve” can be the right word for awakening).

Calming your mind is the easiest aim to achieve; it is almost automatic when you practice some form of meditation. Picture your mind, with its restless thoughts and imaginings, as a ship with strong winds blowing into its sails. When you bring your attention continually back to the focal point of your meditation, whether it be your breath or a mantra or something else, you are taking the wind out of the mind’s sails. Instead of actively pursuing a thought and putting more energy and attention into it, you are withdrawing that energy and attention. It is not that you force your mind to become calm by some kind of effort; simply in taking some of the energy out of pursuing thoughts you are taking the wind out of the sails and the ship is going to slow down. Your mind begins to feel calmer and more focused.

The virtue that you have to have to practice in order to move into and sustain that calmness is consistency. Consistency just means to do it regularly, to find a time and place to practice meditation on a regular basis. It helps to find a time of day when you usually have a quiet moment, perhaps the first thing in the morning or just before going to bed at night, and a special place, such as a corner of your room where no one will interrupt you.

The second aim of meditation is insight—coming to know your mind better. As you watch your thoughts and catch yourself being carried away by various chains of thoughts and fantasies, you become more familiar with patterns in your ways of thinking. Whatever is on your mind during the rest of the day is what is going to crop up in your meditation, and as certain thoughts recur in your meditation you will become more aware of them when they come up in the rest of your day. You will start to see these patterns or habits more clearly as you step back and watch your mind in action.

The virtue that is necessary to gain insight is curiosity; you have to *want* to know how your mind works. If you are afraid of what is there or trying to hide things from yourself, you will block insight. It is not as automatic as the calming; there has to be a desire for insight. But if you have that desire to understand yourself, meditation is an excellent practice for coming to see how your mind works.

The third aim of meditation is the most difficult to explain. It is to be awake, to be aware of who you are and what life is about. To be “awake” is a metaphor, obviously. You are awake when you are not caught up in your mind’s thoughts and fantasies, and instead have a direct

apprehension of reality unmediated by such mind phenomena. People often have very extravagant ideas of what enlightenment is, but awakening is not a single dramatic experience. It is breaking through the veil of your thoughts and imaginings and seeing reality clearly and directly.

The virtue to help you come to awakening is commitment, which means making awakening the central aspiration of your life. That does not mean you have to spend all your time in meditation, or give up family, career, and other aspects of life. It means that all these other areas of life take their place in orbit around this certain aim of finding awakening, or God, or Truth, however you want to put it. You have to want it with a commitment that never gives up, no matter how far away it seems.

If you practice with consistency, curiosity, and commitment, you will attain calmness and insight, and discover what it means to be awake.

### Questions and Answers

Q: The term “mindfulness” gets thrown around a lot. Does that go with the third aim?

A: Mindfulness in its fullest form is a description of the awakened state. You have worked through the kinks in your mind that draw you away from being awake to what is happening in the present moment and are in that mindful state all of the time, or nearly all the time. But mindfulness is also a term for meditation practices where you sit and deliberately pay attention to whatever is happening. You notice thoughts when they come up, or physical sensation, emotions—whatever comes up. Mindfulness is thus both a practice and a state.

Q: Sometimes when I meditate I feel heavy like I could sink into the chair, all my muscles relax and I feel the weight of being a human being. My head feels so heavy it keeps going in a circle.

A: Some of those kinds of strange sensations are simply distracting illusions, but if you feel tired it may simply mean that you are tired—you didn’t get enough sleep, or it is getting close to bedtime, or your body is exhausted. When you start to relax your head will feel heavy and you will feel your body sinking and that kind of thing.

Q: There seem to be many different kinds of meditation. How do I pick the one that is right for me? Do different types of meditation go with different personalities, or will any of them work?

A: My own opinion is that it does not really matter. There are forms of meditation that I have less experience with, like concentrating on things you would like to come to pass in your life, such as achieving health and wealth—that may make you healthy and wealthy, I don’t know, I haven’t tried it! The kinds of meditation I am familiar with all have in common bringing your attention back to a focal point when it wanders. To me, that is the exercise, bringing your

mind back, bringing it back, no matter what you are bringing it back to. If there is a focal point that is more meaningful to you, like imagining Jesus for example, or whatever inspires you, go ahead and use that.

Q: It sounds like one size fits all. Is there any difference whether it is Buddhist meditation, or Hindu, or Christian? How do I utilize it as a Christian?

A: In Christian tradition meditation is a form of prayer, where you are learning to pray “unceasingly,” as St. Paul said, by always being mindful of God. Again it is mindfulness; it is being aware and being attentive. Meditation practices in Christianity go at least as far back as the early monks, although they did not call it meditation, they call it prayer or spiritual exercises. By moving away from your own thoughts and imaginings and preoccupation with yourself, you are moving into this central place where God dwells and where God speaks to you in movements of the spirit. This would be a Christian way of talking about this.

Q: When you were talking about mindfulness before, you said if you reach this level of mindfulness, of being aware of God’s presence, then all this other stuff like worry or fear or doubt becomes quieted down. That is the whole point, isn’t it? To quiet down so you can just be.

A: Think of what Jesus said in the sermon on the mount, “Don’t worry about tomorrow.” So how do you come to that state of mind where those worries are not carrying you away? This is a practice to bring you into that state, where it is possible to do that. I don’t want to give the impression that your mind ceases to operate, that you do not have thoughts or imaginings. Occasionally I encounter people who try to do that, who think that the aim is to make the thoughts stop. To me that is unnatural and unnecessary. It is really coming to see your thoughts for what they are. Most people not only have thoughts, they get lost in and identify with them, carried away to the point where the thought is more real than what is happening around them. Take anxiety about the future—the thought of what might happen becomes so real that you lose the actuality that you are living now and not in the imagined future. When you are awake, you might have a thought like that but you recognize it as what it is, whether it is a thought or a feeling or an emotional state, and it does not carry you away.

Q: I have panic attacks, and it is so easy for me to work myself into an emotional froth; just a thought comes up and that can start a panic attack. So through this discipline I am hoping I can learn to quiet my mind and put things in perspective.

A: Another thing you can try when you are experiencing anxiety is to tell yourself “I am experiencing anxiety.” That breaks your attention into two parts, the part that is having anxiety and the part that is naming it; you are getting that one step back to some extent. Now that does not mean the anxiety is going to disappear right away, but as long as you can tell yourself “this is anxiety” it has a different quality to it than if it were happening and it becomes your sole reality. I have used the metaphor a pinwheel—the little plastic toy that spins when the wind blows on it. Our mind is like a pinwheel in that any stray wind can start

it spinning, any experience or thought or memory can start it moving. What you want to do is stop blowing on it in addition to those winds! Usually it starts spinning and we immediately start blowing on it, we have a thought and we start blowing on it, making it go faster. This is an exercise in not blowing on the pinwheel.

Q: I was really caught up by what you said about meditation, that you wanted to continue being natural. I do centering prayer and in that meditation I have to let all of my thoughts go and be in a state of no thought. I find it much harder than following my breath; my breath gives me a focus and I can keep my thoughts away by thinking about the breath. But is there a way to follow your breath without that being a thought? Or is it okay?

A: Everything is okay. You are not hurting anybody by doing any of these things!

Q: Will I reach enlightenment?

A: You want a money-back guarantee? Let me bring it down to a more manageable scale. I am not sure how they teach centering prayer, but the idea of not holding on to your thoughts is very feasible. That is the same as not blowing on the pinwheel—instead of pursuing the thought, it comes up, you note that it is there, and you let it go. But the idea of having a state of no thoughts, I don't think that is something you can force. There are times when your mind calms and there are no thoughts, but that happens spontaneously, it doesn't happen because you are trying to make it happen. If you try to make it happen, maybe you can make your thoughts stop for seconds at a time, but I don't see any point to it. In the contemplative tradition as I understand it, you become practiced in this kind of focusing and calming your mind and states of calm centeredness will arise. When you become aware that is happening, just try to relax and enjoy it as long as it lasts. If you try to force it to happen you will find your thoughts moving in the direction of, "I have to hold on to this, I have to make sure it lasts;" it just takes you off in another direction. It is kind of like bird-watching. The rare bird you have been waiting to see comes hopping into view, and what you should do is sit still and watch it. Don't get all excited and try to keep it there or you are going to scare the bird away. So when these still states free of thoughts arise, just allow them to be. Don't make it a big deal if the thoughts arise again.

Q: Sounds too simple.

A: Life is complicated enough. To simplify things is a virtue, right?

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