



The benefits of meditation

By Dominique Side

The purpose of meditation in Buddhism is to purify the mind, put a complete end to suffering and its causes and lead people to enlightenment. Primarily meditation has a spiritual purpose, not a worldly purpose. Even though meditation can help people relax and feel less stressed, these are considered secondary benefits and not the main point. The Sanskrit and Pali term for meditation is *bhavana* which means ‘cultivation’ or ‘development’, that is, mental cultivation or development; a way of training the mind. A Buddhist meditates to free the mind of greed and craving, anger, ill will, laziness, anxiety, sceptical doubts, pride, hesitation and so forth, and to cultivate positive qualities such as concentration, awareness, intelligence, will-power, diligence, confidence, joy and tranquillity.

Ultimately, meditation enables one to cut through thoughts and emotions and see the very nature of the mind, and this is how the highest wisdom, compassion and peace are attained. The Burmese master Ajahn Chah explains:

Examining the nature of the mind, you can observe that in its natural state it has no preoccupations. It's like a flag on the end of a pole or like a leaf on a tree. By itself, it remains still; if it flutters, that is because of the wind, an external force. In its natural state, the mind is the same, without attraction or aversion, without ascribing characteristics to things or finding fault with people. It is independent, existing in a state of purity that is clear, radiant and stainless. In its natural state the mind is peaceful, without happiness or suffering. This is the true state of the mind.ⁱ

Buddhist meditation is not a way of escaping from life or papering over difficulties, rather it gives us the strength and confidence to face them better and to live life well. The paradox is that even though its main purpose is a long-term one, meditation brings tangible benefits in the short term, too.

In general, then, meditation eliminates the Three Poisons of craving, aggression and ignorance. More specifically, *samatha* eliminates craving and aggression while *vipassana* eliminates uncertainty and ignorance, but in practice they work together. In addition to eliminating negative emotions, meditation develops positive emotions—for example the *brahma viharas* develop love, compassion, joy and equanimity.

Mental qualities

Each type of meditation acts as an antidote to negative emotions or attitudes and helps to develop the positive counterpart. Sustained meditation practice carried out correctly over many years brings about the corresponding qualities and virtues: mental calm, kindness, love and compassion, joy and equanimity, freedom from doubts and hesitation, clarity and insightfulness. You may wonder how one can tell whether one is meditating correctly or not. Buddhist masters often say that the main sign of successful practice is an increase in love and compassion.



'Magical' powers

Advanced *samatha* meditation is said to develop supernatural powers such as clairvoyance, clairaudience, the knowledge of others' thoughts and the recollection of former lives. However, Buddhists underplay the importance of such powers, and monks are forbidden to boast of their powers to others or to display their powers in public. The reason for this is that such powers are not considered essential for gaining nirvana; on the contrary, they can become a distraction on the spiritual path because one might become quite attached to them and proud of them. It is interesting to note that similar powers are attributed to holy men in other religions. They are perhaps spoken of in a symbolic way, but Buddhists do believe they are possible to achieve in reality.

One striking example of the type of extraordinary power that meditation can bring was the tragic burning of the Buddhist monk Thich Quang Doc during the Vietnam War. On 11 June 1963 he drove to a busy road junction in Saigon, sat in the road and poured petrol on himself to draw the world's attention to the inhumanity of the war. Watched by a horrified crowd of passers-by and reporters, he lit a match and, over the course of a few moments, burned to death. As he burned he continued to sit in meditation posture and did not move a muscle or utter a sound. His silence and composure were haunting. This event was shown on television around the world and it became a turning point after which Vietnam protests became widespread in the USA. This was not a suicide from desperation but out of self-sacrifice.

Social benefits

Meditation is not only beneficial to the individual, it can also benefit society. Meditation practice has been introduced in prisons, for example, to remarkable effect. The first experiments occurred in Indian jails, where the Burmese teacher Goenka taught ten-day meditation retreats open to prisoners of all religions. The first three days focus on *samatha* and the last seven days on *vipassana*. Meditation helped many inmates come to terms with the crimes they had committed, ask forgiveness of their victims, and gave them the strength to change and begin a new life. This has obvious social benefits. Similarly, meditation has been introduced on a voluntary basis in prisons in the USA and the UK with positive effects. It is acknowledged as a more effective method for bringing about a change of heart in criminals than a penitentiary system that lacks compassion and understanding.

Meditation in Zen

The purpose of meditation in Zen is to develop a state of mind beyond thought, the state of 'no thought' where there is no separation between subject and object. Once this state has been attained, it is not confined to meditation sessions but continues throughout the day and night. The benefit of this pure concentration is that one is completely present and mindful in whatever one is doing, hence the Zen saying 'when I eat, I eat; when I sleep, I sleep.'

Zen Buddhists in Japan also developed formal ways of expressing the peaceful and harmonious qualities of meditation in life. These formal expressions include calligraphy, painting and drawing, archery, the tea ceremony, gardening and flower arranging (*ikebana*). These are all examples of how Buddhist meditation infuses the Japanese culture and of how the culture is conducive to meditation.



Meditation in Tibetan Buddhism

In order to understand the benefits of meditation in modern terms, Tibetan Buddhists have been particularly active in exploring the physiological and mental effects of meditation from a scientific point of view. Lamas have volunteered for experiments in Harvard, Wisconsin and New York universities. As a result, there is now documented evidence of a wide range of physical benefits arising from meditation. Some findings provide measurable evidence for emotional benefits, too. For example:

- The journal *Stroke* published a study of 60 African-Americans with arteriosclerosis or hardening of the arteries who practised meditation for 6-9 months. The meditators showed a marked decrease in the thickness of their artery walls while non-meditators showed an increase. Meditation brought about a potential 11% decrease in the risk of heart attack and an 8-15% decrease in the risk of stroke.
- Researchers at Harvard Medical School have monitored the brain activity of meditators. They have found meditation activates the sections of the brain in charge of the autonomic nervous system which governs bodily functions we cannot normally control, such as digestion and blood pressure. This may explain why meditation helps to ward off stress-related conditions such as heart disease, digestive problems and infertility.
- The journal *New Scientist* reported brain-scanning experiments on experienced Buddhist meditators in the University of Wisconsin, USA. Both during meditation and afterwards they showed persistent activity in the left prefrontal lobes which are associated with positive emotions and good moods.
- Research at New York University suggests that Buddhist mindfulness practice might tame the amygdala, a subcortical area of the brain involved in relatively automatic emotional and behavioural responses. This would explain why meditators in the experiment did not become as flustered, shocked or surprised as ordinary people by unpredictable sounds, even those as loud as gunshots, and did not become as angry.

Paul Ekman of University of California San Francisco Medical School has concluded, “The most reasonable hypothesis is that there is something about conscientious Buddhist practice that results in the kind of happiness we all seek.”

Scientific findings on the effects of Buddhist meditation have been instrumental in the development and success of the ‘mindfulness movement’ in the 21st century. They have helped to make the practice of secular mindfulness acceptable in professional and educational contexts. Even though mindfulness is based on Buddhist meditation it is not exactly the same and does not have the same objectives. It focuses on the physical, emotional and mental benefits that mindfulness can bring over relatively short time periods, whereas the focus of meditation in Buddhism is soteriological: it frees the mind from the Three Poisons and, ultimately, is the way to be free from samsara altogether.



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ⁱ Ajahn Chah, *Being Dharma*.