

Only Ever Here and Now: The Benefits of Buddhist Meditation

By Peter B. Williams

In this class you will learn vipassana, also called insight or mindfulness meditation, a common sense technique that helps you live a happier and fuller life by paying attention to the present moment. The technique, although based in Buddhist teachings, does not require you to become a Buddhist to practice it. In fact, Buddhism is ultimately compatible with any faith you may already have. Buddhism does not require you to adopt a new set of beliefs. It just asks you to check out the teachings and see if they work in your life.

What is Buddhism? At its core, Buddhism is a teaching on realizing the deepest possible happiness. We all want to be happy, it is our birthright. But, says Buddhism, we look in the wrong places; we look for it in experiences and events and relationships that are all subject to change. All these things can provide us with much happiness, but a happiness dependent on conditions is ultimately unreliable because all conditions change. What is most amazing to me about the discoveries of the Buddha is that he discovered a happiness that is free of conditions, that does not depend on anything. The Buddha called his discovery nibbana, a happiness so profound that it transcends, while still including, all the ordinary ups and downs in our lives.

Just as amazing as the Buddha's discovery of nibbana is the fact that he boiled down the realization of it to a very simple technique: mindfulness, the simple act of knowing what is happening in the present moment. While the ultimate

expression of nibbana is not fully felt until one becomes enlightened, a deep freedom and happiness is available to us right now by applying mindfulness to our lives. A moment of mindfulness is a "mini-nibbana," a moment of freedom. This is because whatever you are mindful of is not a problem, because in that moment you are bigger than it.

A key point is that vipassana practice is not about learning to fly away to some enlightened cloud where we forever abide, untouched by the joys and sorrows of life. Rather, as Pema Chodron says, it is about "starting where we are." Vipassana is about learning to be at peace with the chaos in our minds, to find freedom in the very midst of our jealousies, quarrels, heartbreaks, joys and triumphs. In this class, we will start by being aware of our breath, but eventually we will learn to become aware of all experiences, and bring our practice to bear on the real thing: our work, our relationships, our play, our joy, our sorrow.

Craving and Suffering

The Buddha said, "I teach one thing and one thing only, suffering and the end of suffering." He was not interested in philosophizing or speculating on the origins of the universe; he was interested only in solving the human predicament, in how we cause ourselves to suffer. How do we do this? By craving. The Buddha used this word in a very specific sense: as the reactions of desire, aversion or ignorance, respectively, to the pleasant, unpleasant, or

neutral qualities that color every experience. This craving is the cause of suffering because it is a struggle against what is true. Eckhart Tolle, in "Practicing the Power of Now," says that all suffering is reaction. Wanting things to be different than they are is a subtle but constant restlessness in the mind and this is a form of suffering. I think suffering can be too heavy a word; maybe unsatisfactoriness is better. In any case, even in the midst of happy experiences there is a lack of satisfaction because we are afraid of the experience ending. Mick Jagger was right, we can't get no satisfaction. Of course, our dissatisfaction goes way beyond not having enough cigarettes, booze and sex. We can't get no satisfaction, in the deepest sense, if we are seeking it in experiences that do not last.

Mindfulness is the opposite of craving. Our reactions to pleasant and unpleasant experiences rob us of awareness. But if we are aware of experiences as they arise, we let go of reacting and just accept things as they are. Mindfulness can be with an object of desire just as easily as an object of revulsion. Mindfulness is the antidote to reactivity, and it allows us to join fully with experience. If you are stuck in a stall with a kicking horse, the safest place to be is on the horse. You can't get kicked there. Mindfulness is the act of getting in the saddle, of cutting through our separation from experience and becoming it. As our practice develops, we begin to see that this lack of separation is the satisfaction we so deeply want. We begin to love paying attention! As this inward satisfaction grows, all sorts of positive qualities begin to shine forth - peace, calmness, patience, generosity, morality, love and wisdom. Sorry, Mick, but we can get satisfaction if we just let go and

accept the present moment. This kind of satisfaction is truly reliable because it is always available. Mindfulness can be with anything.

Wake Up! It's Only Your Life

All this might sound a bit too far away from the practicalities of your life. You might be wondering how meditation can benefit you more immediately. It does so in many ways.

Relaxing In Our Bodies

The most immediate benefit of meditation, which you may have already noticed in the first class, is that it helps you relax. A busy mind tends to cause tension. Slowing down and paying attention to a simple object like the breath can really help us relax and regain calmness. The simple in and out of the breath, like the rising and falling of the tide, can help us feel centered, whole, and somehow deeply satisfied. The breath does not tell us scary stories about the future or cause us to feel remorse about the past. The blessed neutrality of breathing helps your mind find itself, like a flag unfurling in a gentle breeze.

We all tend to have a lot of stress in our lives - in our jobs, our relationships, our responsibilities at home. Although stress is often caused by external circumstances, stress does not happen outside of us, but in our minds. We compound our difficulties by obsessing about problems, mulling them over again and again. Much anxiety and depression is caused by such obsessive thinking. Meditation helps cut such thinking by training you to return again and again to the present moment. It teaches you

to trust the potency of the moment, the fact that as you focus more and more on the present, the past and future have a miraculous way of taking care of themselves. Sure, at times we need to problem solve and imagine creative solutions to the challenges we face, but to be stuck in endless worry about our lives is not in any way helpful.

A common phenomenon on silent meditation retreats illustrates how much our stress and tension is caused by excessive thinking. For participants of such retreats, as the mind becomes more and more concentrated, the body needs less and less sleep. On retreats longer than a few weeks, highly advanced practitioners might reduce their sleep to three, two and even one hour a night. This is because the chief cause of fatigue is not physical activity but compulsive thinking.

A second more immediate effect of meditation is that we become much more in touch with our bodies. Vipassana teaches us to become mindful of body sensations as we go through our days, of our feet contacting the ground, of our hands touching things, of our limbs moving through space. We are usually so lost in our thoughts that we forget to pay attention to our bodies. For me, this can manifest in overeating. If I am paying attention to my body, I sense when I am full and stop. However, in social situations it is very hard for me to keep this awareness going, and I often find myself eating too much at dinner parties. If I could just pay attention my body would tell me loud and clear when it was time to stop.

This mundane example shows how out of touch we can be. As we get in touch we

may start to be very surprised by the mind-body relationship. We may start to learn that our minds dramatically affect our bodies. The reduction of sleep for meditation retreatants shows this. A more extreme example is that of Tibetan Buddhist monastics who practice tum-mo, a technique that allows them to raise their body temperature solely through meditative means. In what amounts to monastic Olympics, monks in Tibet are known to hold competitions in the winter to see who is most adept at tum-mo. Participants strip down and wrap themselves in wet sheets and sit outside on ice cold nights to see how many sheets they can dry with the body heat they generate. These mind-body feats have been documented by Herbert Benson, MD, from Harvard Medical School, and published in *Mind Science: An East-West Dialogue*.

Shredding the Gnarl: The Wild Ride of Emotions

An extremely important benefit of meditation for our lives is that it puts us in touch with our emotions. As the course advances, we will learn to be mindful of the emotions, those large waves that crash without warning in our hearts. Normally, we deal with our emotions in two ways – by repressing them or by acting them out. Repressing an emotion is an obvious form of avoidance. But unconsciously acting out an emotion, say anger, is also avoidance because we want to effect change in the world in order to alleviate the anger, to get it out of the body. The meditative trick is to fully allow the anger, which avoids repression, but to also be still and just feel it in the body, which avoids acting it out. We allow the emotion not by indulging the

story line of the anger—I can't believe they did that to me!--but by feeling the raw energy and heat of anger in the chest. We take an interest in what it is like to be angry. Where else do we feel it in the body? What happens to it if I just pay attention to it? Does it change? The trick is to keep noticing the thoughts without feeding them and keep grounding the attention in the less charged body sensations. If we pay attention long enough, eventually the anger will disappear all by itself.

Strong emotions tend to be colored by black and white thinking. Once the heat of the emotion has passed, we can begin to assess our situation more clearly and with more nuance. From calmness and clarity, we can then decide what kind of action needs to be taken. As we become better at being mindful of emotions, we begin to allow them much more fully. We begin to feel our emotions are beautiful expressions of our wild and free heart.

Loving Better

As our emotional lives become more workable, our relationships become easier as well. The main difficulty we have with others is how they make us feel. As we learn that we can not only accept and tolerate, but even celebrate our difficult emotions, we become much friendlier and open with people. This is because we are less afraid of how someone might make us feel. I have an old friend from New England who is very sweet and considerate, but who also can go on at great length about trivial matters like the stress of selecting a good camping spot on a road trip. It's hard for me to admit (because I care about this person a lot), but they can bore me, and this makes

me sometimes want to avoid them. Applying meditation can help a lot because rather than trying to change my friend, I can just become interested in what it is like to feel bored. Where do I feel it in my body? What are the thoughts associated with it? How long does it last? If I make my job just being aware, whatever my friend does is fine. I'll just be with my reaction.

This is especially helpful in intimate relationships, where we can get provoked most deeply. My sweetie Lisa has given me permission to share a story with you. She was very angry with me once last year as we were driving between Marble and Redstone. Because of my own conditioning in a family of taciturn males, I can get very claustrophobic and afraid in the face of strong displays of emotion. I immediately began arguing, trying to point out how she was wrong. At one point, I felt so uncomfortable I had to stick my head out the car window. Eventually, this feeling passed and I was able to be more open and less defensive and we worked through it. The benefits of meditation were driven home a year later, in almost the exact same spot on the highway, when Lisa was angry at me again. We had spent the day hiking near Marble, and spent much of our time being quiet and meditative. Because meditation was going strong, I remained calm and open in the midst of Lisa's accusations, with no reaction at all. Rather than coming to my own defense, I simply listened to the pain I had caused her. It seemed so easy. I had the startling realization that most of my interactions with her and others were attempts by me to control them in an effort to manage my own emotions! I don't want Lisa to be angry because it makes me feel guilty, so I try to

talk her out of it. How crazy is that? This time, I was able to just let Lisa be Lisa and be interested and curious in her process because I could handle whatever came up in mine. I could feel compassion for her pain and apologize for my insensitivity. Once I had gotten out of the way, I could love Lisa so much more clearly. This is a huge benefit of meditation – it helps us love so much better.

Meditation also helps our relationships because it teaches us to be more compassionate. Maybe the most scary thing for people to do is to sit still and face their own minds. I think some of us would rather be dragon-slayers, or at least bungee jumpers or bus-jumping motorcyclists, than face our own minds. I think this is because we are filled with so much negativity. At times, the only way to be with ourselves is to face the pain in our psyches. Compassion is the emotion that makes this possible. Compassion is a caring, a tenderness, and an openness in the face of pain. Compassion allows us to accept difficult mind states and stop blaming ourselves for them. In our culture, we are taught that if one is in pain, then something must be wrong. Buddhism teaches that pain is inevitable – one cannot avoid sickness, aging, disappointment, heartbreak etc... Rather than thinking something is wrong if we are in pain and trying to fix it, which is a way of avoiding it, meditation teaches us that we can solve our pain by accepting it and giving ourselves the care we need in the face of it.

Any compassion we feel for ourselves is automatically available to others. Compassion for the pain of others is such a strong way to connect with them.

We can actually start to rejoice in the midst of compassion because it can help us feel so connected to people. We are not rejoicing in someone else's pain, but in the fact that we share something so basic and personal with every other human being on the planet.

Payday: A Better Work Life

Because work is made up primarily of relationships, meditation can help us a lot in our work issues. As we learn to be more comfortable with our emotional lives, we can face our problems at work more clearly. Work can trigger a host of negative mind states - fear, stress, uncertainty, exhaustion and a lot of more positive ones – excitement, interest, joy, etc.. Meditation helps us accept the wild ride we can have in a work day, and can also provide a vehicle for calming the mind in the midst of that ride. If one could add even just five minutes of quiet attention to breathing twice a day at work, it could help one ease stress, gain some peace, and also help put things into perspective. We can save ourselves a lot of stress by not sweating the small stuff, but we are often too speedy to stop and see the difference. Perfectionism is a huge problem for many people at work. If one can stop and feel the pain and pressure that this causes in one's body, little by little one can begin to let go of perfection, and let good enough be good enough.

As you learn to live more in the present, you also learn what you can and cannot control. My work motto is "Do your best, let go of the rest." We are so results oriented that we often take responsibility for things that are out of our control. When I used to teach wildlife biology at the University of Vermont, I could get quite stressed about

whether my classes were well received or not. But that was out of my control. I could control that I could do my best to assess my students, prepare material accordingly, and deliver it in what I felt to be an engaging manner. But I could not control the interest level of my students, or whether they were hung-over from the night before, or were apathetic from too much passive entertainment like TV, movies and internet.

In this culture, we invest so much in our work identities. The first question when we meet someone is often "What do you do?" Meditation, over the long haul, can help us stop being so identified with our work role because we can become more satisfied and fulfilled from the inside. As we get clearer inwardly, we start to see the real importance of work – that it helps other people. As noted above, I could get quite focused on my performance as a professor. Something really shifted for me when I heard The Dalai Lama being interviewed and was asked if he ever got nervous at his many public speaking engagements. He said he usually did not, but if he ever did, he stopped and remembered his motivation – he was speaking to help people. As soon as he remembered this, his tension would ease. This helped me so much as a teacher. If I kept focusing on the fact that I was teaching to help people learn and not to be impressive, my concern for others would tend to erase any self-consciousness.

The End of the Yellow Brick Road – The Wizard of Oz

I hope this outlines many of the benefits of meditation. All of these occur on the path of meditation, and I hope you see how good this path can be. But where does this path

lead? What is enlightenment? Theravada Buddhism defines it as the complete absence of the three root negative mind states – greed, hatred, and delusion – and all their derivative emotions – lust, envy, irritation, fear, anxiety, boredom, guilt, etc... An enlightened being, in the classical definition, does not even have the potential for such mind states to arise. However, because an enlightened being is human, they still suffer the unavoidable pains of life – sickness, aging, etc... - but they do not compound them with suffering, with reactions that wish it were not so. What mind states remain if the negative ones disappear? Compassion, sympathetic joy, loving-kindness, patience, generosity, wisdom, diligence, wishing others well, and so on. I find this possibility incredibly inspiring. It is inconceivably wondrous to me that such a state exists.

Does it sound too good to be true? Not to me. An experience from my practice can illustrate. I have learned, bit by bit, to become more comfortable sitting with physical pain during meditation periods. Pain in the knees or back will certainly arise if one sits still long enough, usually after an hour or so for me. The exhortation in the Thai monastery I practiced in last spring was to just be still and sit with the pain and be aware of it. I learned over repeated trials that as long as I could apply mindfulness to the pain, it was not so problematic. All my reactions to the pain were what made it unbearable. The pain itself was just unpleasant sensation. I could watch it change over time and also notice that it was only in one part of my body. I could sometimes see that I was only in pain because the mind chose to exclude being

aware of the other parts of my body that were fine.

Occasionally, mindfulness would grow so strong that I could be perfectly calm in the face of strong pain. My mind was unaffected because I was no longer in reaction to the pain. I can imagine that if I got better and better at mindfulness, I could have a mind that would be unaffected by physical pain or emotional distress. If an Olympic athlete, such as Yelena Slesarenko, the 2004 gold-medalist in the women's high jump, could heave her body over a bar 6' 9" high after a lifetime of training, it is conceivable to me that a lifetime of training in mindfulness could lead to enlightenment.

What would an enlightened being be like? I met a few masters who had progressed to some stage of enlightenment on my trip to Asia earlier this year. They still had personalities and ordinary looking bodies subject to pain and difficulty and could even be a bit quirky at times. But they also beamed calmness, kindness, alertness, and great spontaneity. They would speak in ways that were surprisingly fresh, direct, and unfiltered by fear or confusion. Some

were rumored to be able to read their students minds so that they could address their questions most accurately. Contrary to stereotypes of enlightenment, these beings were not disconnected from life, but deeply connected to it, totally aware of what was happening in the present moment. In truth, our normal distractedness is detachment because we are out of the present moment and caught in the fantasy life of thinking, in the home movies that our mind continually churns out.

Well, here we are at the beginning of our meditative careers. If enlightened beings are Olympic athletes, we might feel like kindergartners on the see-saw. If all this talk about enlightenment seems impossibly far away, forget about it. A path that leads to the end of human suffering is so wonderful that any step along that path is also magnificent. The only way we can step down that path, is to let go of the goal and just pay attention to this moment. Are you on an in breath or an out breath? Do you notice any sounds? What colors do you see? This is the path of practice. This is the path of liberation.