

ASKED ALONG THE WAY:

Questions From The Meditator's Journey

NEIL W. MCKINLAY



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*To everyone who asked a question
and anyone who ever wanted to.*

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INTRODUCTION

In the years I have been offering meditation instruction, many questions have come up. A lot of these are unique. Mentioned by one person in one situation, I never hear them repeated. At least an equal number, however, are voiced again and again. "What is it we're doing?" "Why do we do bodywork?" "Am I doing it wrong?" Such inquiries are raised by people of all ages and backgrounds.

Asked Along the Way is a direct response to this phenomenon. It is a collection of quick replies to ten of the questions I commonly encounter in my work leading classes and workshops, and in the one-to-one guidance I offer. It is not meant to be exhaustive in its presentation, nor is it hoped to be definitive. Rather, it offers a brief resource to people who are beginning to explore this unique meditative tradition.

This booklet is certainly not - as one friend assumed - an attempt to silence all future raising of these questions. "So once they see it in the booklet, they'll know not to ask it?" she ventured. As is suggested in the very first entry here, I believe almost any question about meditation is a good question - one that should be asked and responded to.

Such exchanges can be incredibly valuable to us as practitioners. To the extent that they clarify our understanding of meditation, they allow us to more easily and more fruitfully continue on our journey.

Far from silencing, then, it is hoped *Asked Along the Way* will encourage people to keep asking these questions. These pages are intended to be a place beginning practitioners can return to again and again - whether in response to a particular uncertainty or a more general curiosity. "What does this mean today?" we might ask, reading an entry for the fifth time. "How does this compare with my own experience?"

At root, then, it is hoped this booklet will help others continue along the path of meditation. I truly hope it will assist people as they move ever more deeply into a tradition that has the power to reinvigorate lives that have become wearied with speed, disconnection, and discontent.

WHAT IS MEDITATION?

It's a good question: What is meditation? Having entered North America's mainstream culture only a few decades ago, many of our ideas about the practice remain vague and incomplete. Making an effort to clarify these can have real value for practitioners.

Take the issue of peace, for instance. Many of us believe meditation is about peace. More specifically, we think the practice is about finding relief from our relentless minds. In some ways, this is true. To some extent, meditation is about peace. But this does not mean the practice is going to allow us to escape our wild minds. Instead, meditation encourages us to abide with whatever arises in our lives. The practice involves staying present with joy and sorrow, calm and tumult - with all of it. Such staying is considered 'peace' from the meditative perspective.

This is very different from the relieving sort of peace many of us associate with meditation practice. Understanding this difference can profoundly affect our ability to continue along this path.

If we expect meditation to get us away from the turmoil of our lives, our experience of the practice will likely be

undercut. When we find ourselves encountering discomfort while practicing, we are likely to feel we are doing it wrong. "This isn't for me," we'll conclude. "I'm just not very good at it," we'll decide. Soon we will stop practicing.

If, however, we come to the practice knowing that, among other things, meditation is a means for us to accommodate a fuller range of human experience - if we arrive knowing mental activity or distress are not reasons to stop practicing, but rather suggest we're entering territory where we can actually deepen this work - we are far more likely to stick with it. It may not be pleasant. It probably won't be easy. But we might not be so quick to think we're messing this up. As a result, we are more likely to stay on the cushion and with the breath.

So it is an important question: What is meditation? In the meditative tradition, such an inquiry is considered an examination of the view - of the conceptual framework that reflects our understanding of the journey we are making. Put another way, view is the map of the path we follow while practicing. It points out the landmarks and the major routes of the meditative terrain. As is the case with any map, the more detailed our view, the more easily our journey will unfold. So it is an important question for us to ask. A very important question.

SO, WHAT IS MEDITATION?

Meditation is an invitation to connect. The practice encourages us to begin to experience our bodies, our relationships, the world around us, and the endless stream of feelings, hunches, and intuitions that often flow unnoticed through every moment. It offers a way for us to engage our lives more fully and directly.

So many of us pass our days distracted. We hurry from thing to thing. We plan for our next meal and dream of our next vacation. We exert a tremendous amount of energy pushing away anything that's unpleasant, trying to attract what we deem desirable. Rather than connect, most of us fight the given shape of our lives. We strive to predict and control, to force every experience into our personal mold of 'how things should be'. As a result, we find ourselves at odds with life - estranged, distant, and disconnected.

Meditation stands in contrast with this. By sitting down and taking a good posture, by entering the body and placing our attention upon some aspect of the breath, we start to settle into ourselves. We take a slight step back from the manic pace of daily living - or, more correctly, from our habitually reactive approach to daily living - and

allow experience to simply arise. If we're speedy, we feel speediness. If we're drowsy, we feel drowsiness. If angry, we feel anger and so on.

When we meditate, we allow our lives to happen according to their own logic and dictates. Our task is to simply connect with this happening in a very immediate, direct, and open way.

WHY DO I FEEL EVEN CRAZIER?

Often the question arises after some experience with meditation: Why do I feel even crazier? After sitting down and using the technique for a while, we commonly find that our thoughts seem to be moving faster and more furiously than ever. "I'm connecting," we correctly observe, "but it's like I've connected with a hurricane!"

This is frequently the way it is. When we begin to practice, one of the first things we connect with is how much we normally think - how quickly, how constantly, how compulsively. It seems endless. It can even seem hopeless.

Engaging this hurricane can be frustrating, of course. Seeing it and feeling it can be both painful and disheartening. But it is a necessary step. There is a wonderful book entitled *Start Where You Are* by Pema Chodron. This title alone offers wise advice to anyone - not just beginners - on the path of meditation. The journey of connecting with our lives must begin right here, right now with what is occurring in this moment. Thinking we can begin anywhere else is fantasy. We can do nothing but start where we are. For a great many of us, this involves coming face-to-face with the difficult experience of distraction and

disengagement.

Which raises another point worth mentioning. When we encounter this stage of practice, many of us feel we must be doing it wrong. Understanding that the practice is about connecting, however, and that this connecting has to begin with whatever pleasantness or discomfort we are experiencing right now, it is possible to see the experience of a wild mind as a signal we're on the right track. In fact, a traditional teaching affirms that the first sign we are actually meditating is an awareness of the rushing river of mind. So please, keep going.

WHERE IS THE PEACE?

After a few sessions - or even a single session - spent connecting with our distracted, thinking minds, we might start wondering where the peace is. For many of us, this is why we come to the practice in the first place. We want some tranquility in our lives, and we had heard, read, or come to understand that meditation offers this. To some extent, this issue has already been addressed in this booklet. Because the question arises so often, though, some additional attention will be given to it now.

It is a mistake to think meditation will bring us a life free from stress and struggle. It is an understandable mistake, but a mistake nonetheless. This erroneous view of the practice arises from our typical way of engaging life - pushing away discomfort, trying to attract ease, and working endlessly to manipulate our lives to these ends. In our daily living, we try to direct everything toward favoured outcomes, and we impose this approach upon our ideas about meditation. We develop the idea that the practice will help us get what we want.

But meditation encourages us not to control but connect, not to manipulate but accept. Thus, while we all

want to sit down and suddenly feel freed from stress and anxiety, meditation directs us away from what we want and toward what actually is. The practice helps us to start where we are and begin to experience our anxiety.

Which is not to say meditation cannot offer peace and relaxation. It is just a different sort of peace and relaxation than most of us arrive hoping to find. To begin understanding this, it may be helpful to think of there being two types of stress in our lives.

The first kind of stress can be called the 'given' stress of our lives. Speaking to a group of university students some time ago, I pointed out that student life is inherently stressful - the demands, the deadlines, the competing pressures. "There is really little that can be done about this," I said. "This kind of stress comes with the territory." And it is the same for any human being - we all encounter circumstances and situations that tax us. This is just the way it is.

The second kind of stress, however, is not inherent in living. This is the stress we place on top of our lives by expecting things to be different. This secondary stress results from our endless thinking about the given stress we encounter, and the endless attempts we make to resist, deny, change, or avoid this.

It is this second layer of stress that meditation most immediately begins to address. By sitting down, and entering the body, by focussing our attention on the steady movement of the breath as it locates somewhere in the body, we gradually disengage from the frantic mental

activity that is associated with secondary stress. We slowly begin to stop resisting our lives - even though they may be fraught with difficulty. We gradually begin to settle into our lives.

There is a certain kind of relaxation that comes with this sort of settling. A certain kind of relief comes with giving up - even if only for a moment - our endless fight with life. There is, once could say, a certain measure of peace.

WHY THE BODY?

There are several reasons for engaging the body in this practice.

As the centre of thinking, the head is an insistent and seemingly irresistible place for us to hold our attention. We engage almost all of our lives from this location. Sometimes it feels we are, in fact, locked in the head, endlessly thinking about things.

In order to allow meditation to become something more than another mental game, then, we need to move our attention elsewhere. This style of practice - somatic meditation practice - accomplishes this by moving attention deeper into our body. It invites attention into our torso and allows us to access a far less discursive level of being. We still have thoughts, of course, but when we are more rooted in the body, we are less locked into the thinking dynamic. Rather than constantly racing, our mind has an opportunity to settle.

Settled in this fashion, we are able to go even further in the meditative journey - which raises a second reason why we engage the body in this practice. As suggested elsewhere, meditation involves connecting with direct

experience. This sort of connection can only occur through embodiment. Thinking is always at least one step removed from such immediacy. The body, on the other hand, is the very field in which our experience is encountered.

It is in the body that we feel the outside world through the medium of our senses. It is here that we feel intuition and emotion, here that we store unresolved experience. Thus, it is into this field that we must wander as meditators. It is into this terrain we must walk for it is here that the journey waits to unfold - in the body. And through engaging what happens to us and how we feel about this, we are given the chance to discover increasingly subtle layers of being.

AM I REALLY BREATHING THERE?

Early in practicing the bodywork that characterizes this style of meditation, many of us are distracted by the breathing. Knowing the lungs occupy a certain portion of the torso, it is difficult to understand how we might be breathing in other regions - particularly the lower belly and the pelvic floor. "Am I really breathing there?" we want to know.

To answer this, it is helpful to understand that the breath manifests in a few different ways. At one level is our physical breath. This is the 'gross' breath that we draw in from the outside world and return to the surrounding environment. This is our breath in its most obvious, most familiar manifestation.

Breath also exists at a more subtle level, however - as energy. This breath/energy pervades our entire body. In various traditions it is known as chi, prana, wind, life force. It is this breath that is considered to be flowing throughout our being via the meridians in traditional Chinese medicine. It is this level of breath that we most directly

work with while engaging somatic meditation practice.

The subtle breath and awareness are very closely linked. Where one goes, another follows. Thus, by directing our attention - our awareness - into the lower belly, under the lower ribs and beneath the collar bones, we are actually inviting the subtle breath to move into these regions. And many of us can actually feel this as energy as it begins to flow. The tingling, the sudden chills, or flashes of heat that are sometimes experienced, these are this level of breath making itself felt in us. And it can be directed anywhere in our body - the arms, the legs, the fingers, the toes. So yes, in this sense we are really breathing there!

IS IT OKAY TO FEEL SLEEPY?

Sometimes we feel drowsy when meditating. Sometimes, this drowsiness borders on full blown sleepiness. And occasionally - especially when bodywork is involved - we actually fall asleep.

Generally, this is not a problem. As has been mentioned many times, meditation is about connection and somatically-oriented bodywork allows us to realize a deeper level of connection than we might otherwise be able to. One of the things we sometimes connect with in this journey is how tremendously tired we are.

Busy all day. Rushing to meet responsibilities. Desperately trying to make things work out and endlessly presenting an acceptable face to the world. All these activities exhaust us. Truly, deeply exhaust us. Normally, however, there is so much momentum to our lives that we don't really notice this. And even if we do by chance notice, it is only a fleeting glimpse - we never really connect with how deep in the bone tired we are.

When we settle down and begin to engage our lives through the practice of meditation, however, it is not unusual to encounter this deep sense of fatigue. In fact, it is

very difficult to practice regularly and not sometimes run into it. When this happens, we can simply notice the fatigue as it sweeps through our body. We can also notice how much we resist really experiencing this - how we fight it or don't want to admit it or, perhaps, are even afraid of it. Then we can try to relax a little. Just let the fatigue wash through and see what happens. At worst, you'll get a nice little nap.

IS THERE ANYTHING WRONG WITH FIDGETING?

Moving around is not necessarily a problem. Especially at the beginning of one's life as a meditator, some movement is required to find a posture that works. Sometimes this can involve a lot of shifting, adjusting, crossing and uncrossing legs.

After we find a general measure of comfort, though, we can begin to watch what is happening when we fidget. Are we moving because movement is actually necessary? Or is there something else at play? Is our scratching, twisting and arching a reaction to intense sensation? Unsettling memories? A sudden rise in discursive thought?

Eventually, it becomes apparent that fidgeting occurs for a couple reasons. At one level, we are trying to relieve physical pain or misalignment - which is a very important thing to do. At another level, however, we shuffle and shift because we are uneasy abiding in the present moment. Movement, in this case, is a means of distraction and escape. A scratch of the lower arm can be a way to disperse and evade the prickly energy we are feeling.

One of the interesting things about this, though, is that we have to go through fidgeting in order to actually see such a dynamic at work. We really need to watch ourselves incessantly shift and shuffle in order to understand what it is we are up to. We have to experience it or, in the language of this booklet, connect with it.

HOW DO I PRACTICE AT HOME?

Regular home practice is an important part of the meditation path. This said, however, it is not always easy to establish or maintain such a practice. In general, I recommend people attend to the 'Three Cs' when trying to get a personal practice off the ground: consistency, commitment, and compassion.

As in any sort of practice, consistency is a crucial ingredient in both success and development. For this reason, doing a number of short practices through the course of a week is often of greater benefit than doing one longer session - though if a single session is all that is available, please make use of this! In workshops and classes, I suggest that ten minutes, three times a week is a good target for people who are interested in practicing at home. This can then be lengthened to fifteen minutes, twenty minutes, and so on.

Consistency also refers to the time and place that you practice. Having a regular time in our day and a regular place in our home that is set aside for meditation can be very helpful. It establishes a certain tone to our days and living space. It removes some of the guess work from our

practice, and increases the likelihood that we will actually sit down today.

The commitment one makes to home practice is twofold. First we commit to making meditation part of our lives. "I am going to practice twice a week for twenty minutes each time," we say. More specifically, we commit to practice for whatever length of time we have allotted. If we have decided to go for fifteen minutes, it is helpful for us to look at our watch and not get up until this span has expired. Among many other things, this keeps us from leaving a session when things get a little bit challenging.

As for compassion, we must be gentle with ourselves as we work to get a practice going. To this end, it is helpful to understand that most of us live very busy lives and have a lifetime of distraction behind us. As a result, establishing a regular meditation practice can be challenging. We need to acknowledge that there will be times we don't practice much. We need to acknowledge that there will be times when we feel we're doing it all wrong. We need to understand that there are occasions when we want to give up. In spite of all this, however, we keep going.

WHAT ABOUT MEDITATION AND SPIRITUALITY?

How does meditation relate to spirituality? Quite simply, meditation places us on the spiritual path and allows us to make this journey in its entirety. What is this journey? It is the journey of ever more fully, ever more completely, ever more nakedly connecting with our lives, with who we truly are.

So it's all right there in the beginning, really. It is there from the first moment we sit down and feel overwhelmed by the incessant speed of our minds and lives. This humbling moment marks the beginning of our spiritual journey, oddly enough. And as we continue, we go on connecting with ever more diverse and shifting and subtle levels of experience.

For this is all spirituality really is: our experience. And we're trying to strip away - or better yet, to simply relax - the many ways we resist and distort and manipulate this. We are trying to simply experience, then. To simply experience. To simply experience. To simply experience. To simply experience.

Good luck to us all. May our efforts bring benefit to this world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Neil McKinlay lives and works in Victoria, British Columbia. A longtime student of Reggie Ray and the Dharma Ocean lineage, Neil draws from his training in the somatic tradition to emphasize the accessibility and relevance of meditation in the modern world. Seeing the spiritual journey as an inherent part of our human unfolding, his teaching style is immediate and personal, always affirming the dignity and wholeness of our lives as they are.

For more about Neil's work - including guided meditation practices and a current teaching schedule - please visit neilmckinlay.com.

