

## Meditation

JOHN TARRANT

Is there a way we can extend and deepen these moments of awakened mind that coexist with our confusion? Or just to notice them when they occur? That's the point of Buddhist meditation, which is never about doing or creating anything. We simply rest in everything as it is. It sounds so easy, yet nothing is more profound or mysterious.

# Surprises on the Way

*This is the stone,  
drenched with rain,  
that points the way.* —SANTOKA

*The true traveler has no destination  
and no fixed time of arrival.* —LAOZI

BUDDHIST MEDITATION is something to do, not to believe, so the measure of it is always related to what is happening to your mind and your life. It is a practice—something you do over and over again, as in, “I’m practicing the guitar” or “I’m practicing my computer game.”

If you practice meditation in this regular way, Buddhism has a mysterious and unpredictable healing power. By mysterious, I mean that while the effect of meditation is more or less as advertised, you are on a journey that does not reveal all its features at once, and even the destination is uncertain. And by unpredictable, I mean that surprise is one of the consequences of meditation. You arrive at places you never intended to reach and didn't know existed. The first thing that's surprising is that meditation changes you, and so after a while you are not the same person who set off.

A lot of things happen in the long arc of a meditation practice—it's a journey, not a plan. I took the mysterious path through

the koan forest, but all of the Buddhist traditions have key discoveries in common. And you might come to some very similar roadside inns in the Vajrayana mountains and the plains of insight meditation.

So let's look at some of the landmarks of meditation practice, some features you might notice along the way.

### Escaping from the Burning House

The reasons for starting a practice are usually different from the reasons for keeping one going. When it comes to starting, any reason will do. The Buddha used the metaphor of a burning house. The idea is that people are in a house that has caught fire but they haven't worked out what is going on yet. You want to help, so you tell them anything that will get them out of the house. You offer a cover story, “Oh look, there's Britney Spears, half dressed, with her paparazzi” or “Come and listen to my new iPod; it's awesome.” When you begin meditation these ploys get you out of the burning house, at least for the moment.

Usually we start for reasons that are acceptable in a given culture. In North America we like to be told that a method will improve us in some way. I often teach in and sometimes do research in medical environments and in medical schools. Physicians are open to meditation because they are interested in evidence-based techniques for healing. In medical settings, meditation is called things like Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, MBSR for short. Another reason for taking up practice might be that meditation changes the pathways in the brain. While most conversations and talk therapy might involve the neocortex, the idea here is that meditation gets down to the limbic brain, where stories about trauma are stored and replayed. Meditation can weaken the grip of such stories. It also seems to enhance the immune response, to manage pain, and to shorten recovery time from surgery. Also, if you are a doctor or a nurse or an executive, then meditation probably makes you better at what you do.

These are all good reasons to begin meditation. Permanent



escape from the flames is another matter; that's where continuing practice comes in. Once you are on the journey, practicing every day, these reasons will continue to be solid, but some stranger, larger change occurs—your reasons will alter.

Reasons that get you out of the burning house all offer something positive. They offer a view about reality, saying *things are thus*. But those reasons probably won't keep you practicing. What keeps you from rushing back into the burning house is the discoveries that you make. You become interested in your inner life, you notice the nature of the mind, and you start experiencing freedom.



JOHN TARRANT is a Zen teacher, Jungian psychotherapist, and director of the Pacific Zen Institute, a venture devoted to koan study and the arts. His most recent book is *Bring Me the Rhinoceros and Other Zen Koans to Bring You Joy*.

### It Feels So Good When It Stops

There can be a blessing over early stages of practice—life seems spacious, and very possible. You can hear sounds differently, as if a bird call is inside you or the wind in the trees is meant just for you. The idea of not doing is a crucial one, and when you get to it you have stepped outside the burning house. Not doing begins with the sense that the journey is enough right now and striving isn't needed. Tasks that were boring drudgery, such as scrubbing pots, are suddenly interesting because you are not trying to hold off from them and your own mind has become interesting no matter what it is doing. Things start to flow, and it's amazing how people who were irritating become less so as a result of your meditation. Moreover, you have a sense of being on the real journey at last, which might bring tears to your eyes. It is as if after many lifetimes you have found a path.

### Practice Sets in like Weather

When practice sets in, rather the way weather does, there can be a lot of boredom and feeling clueless, so that cluelessness or plainness is something that always needs to be taken into account. There is a strong temptation to make meditation into something

good that you do, or something that makes you special. But to add striving and competence back into the equation means taking meditation back into the burning house. You are learning to ride the bicycle, and the harder you try the more you wobble. This period is a kind of purification, or initiation ordeal. One way to be during this part of the journey is not to know things, since anything you decide that you know will put you off balance. During this time, as well as experiencing struggle and disorientation, I also detected an undercurrent that was independent of my assessments. Noticing this subterranean current is the beginning of the true, deep direction of practice. It isn't influenced by what we think or feel we need, and perhaps for that reason really does lead into a more joyful life.

### Uncertainty

The core of all navigation is probably uncertainty: tolerating not knowing makes it possible to find your way. Not knowing means embracing what is not known rather than fighting with yourself over it. Since the mind always strives to know, not knowing is disorienting in a useful way. Uncertainty and not knowing teach you not to believe the stories your mind feeds you day in and day out. If you allow your own course to be mysterious, then even the hard things can become easy. This is the beginning of awakening.

### Fan Noise

This is a conversation with an eighteen-year-old student at UCLA:

Student: What is meditation about?

Teacher: Well, why do you meditate?

Student: Well, it wasn't that I hated my life and had to meditate, but I realized that my life wasn't handleable without it.

It's like a fan noise that's there all the time, and when I meditate it's silent. When the fan was on you didn't hear it, because it had always been there. There was a catalyst that happened for me too. A friend who was a musician died suddenly, and the fan noise became really loud. I was alone in New York City and lonely, and didn't even connect the stress with my friend's death. The acute stuff is what it is obvious, but even if you deal with the acute stuff you still have that chronic background pain. It's the chronic stuff in the background that is interesting to deal with. And if I don't meditate, that noise gets worse—and worse.

That's why it's good to want a different life, to be Cinderella wanting to get out of the kitchen. If you want a different life, you might learn to stop the fan noise.

The fan noise is like the dreams you have during an afternoon nap—just below consciousness, not completely garbled but not really making sense the way waking things make sense. The thoughts accumulate and get more and more tangled, but they are not necessarily in awareness and they might never rise to the level where you could ask yourself whether they were true. Meditation turns off the fan and reinstates the silence.

### What Do You Do With Your Emotions?

The UCLA student mused further about what was noise and what was not. Was her grief over the death of her friend something she wanted to let go of, or was that letting go not necessary?

Two hundred years ago, Issa wrote a haiku for his daughter. The convention in East Asia was that on New Year's Day, you got a year older. He wrote:

*Laugh, and crawl about,  
from today  
you are two!*

Then less than a year later, when she died of smallpox, he wrote:

*Autumn wind;  
The red flowers  
She liked to pick.*

Even without fan noise, there can be heartbreak. But the most heartbreaking thing is not heartbreak; it's avoiding heartbreak. Inside the transience of life is the thusness of everything, of the tree with forty crows on it in winter, the sound of death-metal drums from the kids in the barn, and the feeling of sadness when you lose someone. A lot of our suffering is resistance to the life of

feeling. If you surrender, you are surrendering to what is really going on. This is just to notice that nothing beyond your life is more important than your life.

Obstacles can be the gate. If your diagnosis is cancer or you lose people you love, there is no alternative but surrender. You can't rewind to yesterday when you were innocent. Meditation at such a moment might not take you back to the surface; it might take you down and through. Getting more emotional might be indicated; falling apart might happen. The practice is what tows you through. It doesn't take the rough crossing away from you but it gives you a degree of safety in the passage.

Once when I lost a friend, I realized that I was weeping since my hands were wet. I was giving a talk at the time, being wise and all that, and it was a revelation—I couldn't trust myself not to weep in public. I also couldn't trust myself to sleep at night, either. At a time like that we have to surrender. We are facing something vast and, really, we have always known that we would have to face it. It is an enormous, shaggy beast blocking the way. And there is something exhilarating about the inevitable when at last it arrives; awakening is not a choice or a matter of technique anymore, it's the only place left. The huge animal rolls over us, and suddenly we find that we are riding







on its back. It has become a vehicle. The obstacles really have become gates.

Ultimately, we go into the processes before the feelings get made, before an inquiry is needed. If you just lose yourself in a koan, for example, well, there is no problem because there's no you, and whatever transformation goes on happens because the universe still operates well when there's no you. Ultimately, we learn to be kind about the places the mind goes.

### The Pull of Beauty

When you practice you can't help but notice the beauty and kindness that appears in the world. The objects and people you encounter have a glow about them, a completeness. The practice becomes something that draws you toward life, rather than pushing you away from suffering. In this way you begin to notice that you can navigate by what you love. The experience of beauty is not manufactured; it is revealed. Focusing on the beautiful means hearing the voice of beauty and healing that is already going on—the thread that gets stronger and stronger as you go. This actually amounts to noticing what you really love rather than what consoles you for the night, a consolation that may be indistinguishable from suffering.

The way Amy Winehouse sings it, "Didn't get so much in class /

but I know it don't come in a shot glass," might make you think for a moment that it probably does come in a shot glass. But what you really, really want is not Tanqueray, which has known charms, but a revelation that's deeply disturbing and changes your world. To follow what you love means to be skeptical about the first thing you seem to want and also to allow yourself to really want something. It's possible to think that you have read the fine print on Buddhism, and that it means not having a self and not wanting stuff. But *this hand is the Buddha's hand*, as a koan goes, and if this hand is the Buddha's hand, it is going to pick up things that you want, touch people you want to touch. Noticing what you really want gets you out of being namby-pamby and pretending to be spiritual, which is another form of Tanqueray.

Noticing what you really want might look like appreciation, as it in this forestry ranger's account:

A particular phrase leapt out at me for a koan: "the manifestation of one essential emptiness," the key word being "manifestation." After reading this, everything really began to shift from subject and object (me and other) to us. I am a manifestation of the one essential emptiness, so are you, the redwoods, a pot of beans, a nail in the roadway, or ticks on a dog. Everything I encounter is a manifestation. There's a lot happening around

me, what a palate this Universe is offering. I felt that the world is calling out to me, every sound, smell, feeling, all worthy of my loving attention.

This is a report of meditation experience, but the gift can come in any setting. I did a retreat with attending physicians who run a residency at Duke University Hospital. The meditation exercise was simple, just to be present without judging your experience and to notice life without praise and blame—essentially a koan exercise offering the experience of life without the usual thought forms. One of the senior physicians said immediately:

This is familiar.

*How so?*

It's like this when I'm in the operating room. I'm at peace doing surgery. It's the time I feel completely at home and at one with things.

Nice. To be so absorbed in attention that there are no prejudices, that there is not even someone doing surgery—that seems like taking meditation into action. Anything you are that good at gives you a measure of awareness of buddhanature, the fundamental beauty that we all share. And that awareness can be a reference point. It gives you a possibility for those areas of life in which you are not so free.

### What About When It's Not Working?

If you have a practice, it does some of the heavy lifting for you. You come back to it again and again, and then your life unfolds in a less desperate and more elegant way. But your practice doesn't necessarily inform you of this while you are sitting. Here is a story from a woman who thought of herself as a kind of slow learner in Buddhism:

I have had a hard time meditating, and I don't get that sense of relief and nourishment that lots of people report. I basically think that I don't get it. I've just kept doing it, though; I'm interested in spiritual things, and this seems to be the only thing that it makes sense to do. Then I was looking after someone who is sick, and I enjoyed it, being helpful, being unselfish. I thought that might be something to do with what I was aiming for. Then I noticed an old friend was there. It was someone I had fallen out with and it had caused me a lot of pain, and yet there he was, helping too, passing me in the kitchen. I had no plans to forgive him, but I did. I felt that I never understood the practice but an old saying, "I'm just a person with nothing to do," kept coming to mind, and I understood it. I thought, "That's me." Everything just does itself.

When you sit you are in a sacred place, whoever you are.

### A Thousand Hands and Eyes

The Bodhisattva of Great Compassion has one thousand hands and eyes, and one way to feel this is that everything in the uni-

verse is one of those hands and eyes. There isn't really a justification for being human but if there were, empathy might be it. It probably occupies a level underneath all the difficulty and pain. Compassion lets you know that even your pain might be the true thing that saves the world. If you are really stuck, it could be useful to include empathy or compassion, to forgive life and yourself for the place you have arrived at.

Empathy is like art, because it happens without thought and it doesn't mistake today for yesterday. Here is an account of practice by a grade school teacher:

Methods don't work for me. I don't like to gather my attention or sit still. Certain techniques didn't feel right. I liked the koans because there was a lot of room to experiment. Anything I do is practice. I brought my practice into the classroom where I work. Immediately I felt the difference between how it had been and how it manifests in the work with the kids. Now I can receive what they have to give to me.

For example, there was an unhappy kid at school. The other kids didn't like her, and she would perceive things as attacks and get mean-spirited back. Her unhappiness was spilling out around her. One day she came walking up to my desk, and my first thought was, "This kid has got to get her life together; I don't like her," and then suddenly my heart opened and none of that was there. I was sitting, I was at her height, and I felt love pouring out from me. She was about to complain. But when she looked up at me and our eyes met she couldn't remember what she was upset about. From that moment on, our relationship changed. That's how the meditation practice shows up. It doesn't have anything to do with me. But I was open enough for something to happen.

Practice gives you the opportunity to give, and that is something that makes human beings happy.

### Life Outside the Burning House

Eventually, the distinction between your spiritual practice and the rest of your life blurs and perhaps disappears. This is because spiritual practice is interesting and works, and you end up noticing it wherever you look. It appears in some form every day of your life, so we can say that there's a long arc to a spiritual practice. Within that long arc, there is always trial and error. There are lots of things you don't discover unless you happen to stumble into them. It's a nice thing to be offered a path, and the important thing is to enjoy the way station where you happen to be spending the night.

Meditation offers a path out of the burning house, without abandoning the promise and good-heartedness of being human. Practice is the last best hope of living up to that good-heartedness, the only thing that never hurts and usually helps. And even at the beginning of the meditation path, on a good day it's exciting. It actually makes you happy. ♦