

Joy of Meditation Part One

Meditation practice doesn't save all its pleasure for the end. You can enjoy it now.

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When explaining meditation, the Buddha often drew analogies with the skills of artists, carpenters, musicians, archers, and cooks. Finding the right level of effort, he said, is like a musician's tuning of a lute. Reading the mind's needs in the moment—to be gladdened, steadied, or inspired—is like a palace cook's ability to read and please the tastes of a prince.

Collectively, these analogies make an important point: Meditation is a skill, and mastering it should be enjoyable in the same way mastering any other rewarding skill can be. The Buddha said as much to his son, Rahula: "When you see that you've acted, spoken, or thought in a skillful way—conducive to happiness while causing no harm to yourself or others—take joy in that fact and keep on training."

Of course, saying that meditation should be enjoyable doesn't mean that it will always be easy or pleasant. Every meditator knows that it requires serious discipline to sit with long, unpleasant stretches and untangle all the mind's difficult issues. But if you can approach difficulties with the enthusiasm with which an artist approaches challenges in her work, the discipline becomes enjoyable. Problems are solved through your own ingenuity, and the mind is energized for even greater challenges.

This joyful attitude is a useful antidote to the more pessimistic attitudes that people often bring to meditation, which tend to fall into two extremes. On the one hand, there's the belief that meditation is a series of dull and dreary exercises, allowing no room for imagination and inquiry: simply grit your teeth, and at the end of the long haul your mind will be processed into an awakened state. On the other hand, there's the belief that effort is counterproductive to happiness, so meditation should involve no exertion at all: simply accept things as they are—it's foolish to demand that they get any better—and relax into the moment.

While it's true that both repetition and relaxation can bring results in meditation, when either is pursued to the exclusion of the other, it leads to a dead end. If, however, you can integrate them both into the greater skill of learning how to apply whatever level of effort the practice requires at any given moment, they can take you far. This greater skill requires strong powers of mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, and if you stick with it, it can lead you all the way to the Buddha's ultimate aim in teaching meditation: nirvana, a totally unconditioned happiness, free from the constraints of space and time.

That's an inspiring aim, but it requires work. And the key to maintaining your inspiration in the day-to-day work of meditation practice is to approach it as play—a happy opportunity to master practical skills, to raise questions, experiment, and explore. This is precisely how the Buddha himself taught meditation. Instead of formulating a cut-and-dried method, he first trained his students in the personal qualities—such as honesty and patience—needed to make trustworthy observations. Only after this training did he teach meditation techniques, and even then he didn't spell everything out. He raised questions and suggested areas for exploration in the hope that his questions would capture his students' imagination, so they'd develop discernment and gain insights on their own.

We can see this in the way the Buddha taught Rahula how to meditate. He started with the issue of patience. Meditate, he said, so that your mind is like the earth. Disgusting things get thrown on the earth, but the earth isn't horrified by them. When you make your mind like the earth, neither agreeable nor disagreeable sensory impressions will take charge of it.

Now, the Buddha wasn't telling Rahula to become a passive clod of dirt. He was teaching Rahula to be grounded, to develop his powers of endurance, so that he'd be able to observe both pleasant and painful events in his body and mind without becoming engrossed in the pleasure or blown away by the pain. This is what patience does. It helps you sit with things until you understand them well enough to respond to them skillfully.

To develop honesty in meditation, the Buddha taught Rahula a further exercise. Look at the inconstancy of events in body and mind, he said, so that you don't develop a sense of "I am" around them. Here the Buddha was building on a lesson he had taught Rahula when the boy was seven years old. Learn to look at your actions, he had said, before you do them, while you're doing them, and after they're done. If you see that you've acted unskillfully and caused harm, resolve not to repeat the mistake. Then talk it over with someone you respect.

In these lessons, the Buddha was training Rahula to be honest with himself and with others. And the key to this honesty is to treat your actions as experiments. Then, if you see the results aren't good, you're free to change your ways.

This attitude is essential for developing honesty in your meditation as well. If you regard everything—good or bad—that arises in the meditation as a sign of the sort of person you are, it will be hard to observe anything honestly at all. If an unskillful intention arises, you're likely either to come down on yourself as a miserable meditator or to smother the intention under a cloak of denial. If a skillful intention arises, you're likely to become proud and complacent, reading it as a sign of your innate good nature. As a result, you never get to see whether these intentions are actually as skillful as they seemed at first glance.

To avoid these pitfalls, you can learn to see events simply as events and not as signs of your innate Buddha-ness or badness. Then you can observe these events honestly, to see where they come from and where they lead. Honesty, together with patience, puts you in a better position to use the techniques of meditation to explore your own mind.
