



The Extraordinary Benefits of Meditation

[Discourse given on a seven day Art of Meditation Foundation Level 1 retreat in Wales]

(What is this meditation all about? What benefits might we see from learning to meditate and where might it actually lead us?)

We can have a number of different approaches to meditation and I don't think it is necessary that everybody needs to come to a point of agreement about how you should meditate and what meditation should be for. I think it should be for what you need it or want it to be for.

As far as how you should meditate, well there are lots of ways of meditating. I'm sure it's the case that some are more effective than others. I think it is important that if you want to find out whether any meditation is effective, you have to make the efforts to learn how to do it properly and don't just assume that just having a go is

going to give you insight into whether it actually works. The thing about meditation is, apart from the very first glimpse of something that you maybe got from meditating and tuning in and the initial recognition of something, “ah there is a place where I can just tune out and tune in,” if you like, which I suppose itself is enough to prompt us to see “yeah, there’s something in it.”, the thing about it is that the real richness of mediation might take some time to reveal itself to us.

Meditation is like anything that’s special, it usually takes a bit of an investment to get to a point of realising actually what’s there. Who can remember the first time they went skiing, looking out at the top of the mountain and going, wow it looks awesome up there? Putting on some skis and going phew, dear me, really? Did I really sign up for this. You don’t get a taste of what’s out there just because you have put your skis on. You certainly don’t get a real taste of what is out there just by sitting cross-legged on the floor and close your eyes and try to watch your breath.

The point is that there is a reason that some people have chosen to go off to a very quiet place and dedicate their entire life to it, and for such a very long period of time. The real depth of what’s there does elude us for quite a long time because there is no glimpse of it when we first sit down on the cushion and close our eyes and try and watch our breath. It’s a bit like if you hadn’t seen somebody skiing down from the top of the mountain and someone puts skis on you and says off you go and you think, what’s all that about?

It is a very personal thing. You can reasonably quickly get to the point where meditation is a wonderful opportunity to step aside or step forward, turn up, to dial out the things that distract you and dial into something that helps you settle, just the simple practice that brings peace and serenity has tremendous benefit to all of us, particularly if we don’t have a very good handle on peace and

serenity in our own minds. So that side of it I think is clear. I think at the moment there is a very vocal storyline behind the virtues of meditation and mindfulness. It's reasonably well expressed.

But what's less expressed is the side of it which concerns this mind that is the vehicle through which you are experiencing your life. And the quality of it is conditioning the quality of your life. Yes most definitely that is starting to make its way through to mainstream consciousness. It's not a quirky idea anymore. But in a way it's being put across as a way to get from a state in which we are struggling into one in which we might be coping better. I reorganise a messy mind and life feels a lot better and it's definitely the case, as I said, reorganising a messy mind does make life look a lot more simple.

Then there's the side that once you are coping you are inspired to keep working at this mind because that's the way to flourish. We look at how do we get to the point where we might really flourish in life. We may tend to think of it in terms of how skilfully can I work things the way I would like them to be, in my direction. Flourishing traditionally is looked at in terms of the ability to make the thing I want to happen, happen. Look at our education system, we are educated to be as informed as possible so we have the best possible handle on understanding things, but think, what if just half or say a quarter of that energy that went into educating us by a way of informing us, what if that energy went into refining the quality of the mind by which you are experiencing your life. Imagine that.

We know, don't we, that we are using about 10% of our mind, we have known that for a very long time. That remaining 90% of our experience is going on below the threshold of our awareness and it is lost to us, lost to us consciously. But it hasn't quite got through into group consciousness that, hold on, what if I was to put just a fraction of my energy into making sure that this mind is what it is

capable of being.

So, instead of stopping at, “Well, I’m a bit lazy or I’m a bit restless or I’m a bit greedy or I’m a bit intolerant, I’m a bit impatient,” we gathered ourselves and instead said, “yes, you know, what would happen if we actually did work to improve the quality of this mind instead of sitting around waiting for life to move more in our favour and thinking that the fact that it hasn’t worked out the way I wanted it to is because the world is broken.”

So this is the other side where we see meditation as an opportunity, as time out to put some time in, to improve, to refine the mind. And through this process we would come to see it is not just the mind we refine, but in doing so it’s an exercise in refinement of character. There is a world of difference between personality, which is our ability to project ourselves to the world, seeking to elicit the response we feel we would like, and character, which is the actual fabric and makeup of our being. We are very skilful at creating this personality of ours and well invested in it, but the refining of our mind is right on that sort of fringe, it’s not a mainstream idea but I think it probably should be.

So if this is your introduction to meditation, what I am hoping is not that you will see a cushion or even a comfortable chair as just a place just to stop, “pew that was a tough old day, I’ll take 15 minutes and turn up and let it drop away,” but rather to see that in your hand once you have got the basis it’s like you have been given a pair of skis and there’s the mountain and now you really want to go out find out what’s out there.

Whatever does come into your life whether it’s good or bad luck, the extraordinary or the mundane, it comes and goes all the time and even your most glorious moment isn’t going to last forever. 80%, 90%, 95% of our life is a string of ordinary moments and if

we are hankering after making those ordinary moments extraordinary or going “goodness me this is a bit boring, when am I next going to be able to do such and such”, only a very small part of our life is going to be enriching. But the one thing that is there 24 hours of every day, even while you are unconscious and sleeping, at some level is your mind. Even your best friend, your mother, your brother and sister aren’t going to be there all the time. The only thing that’s there all the time is you. You put your head on the pillow at the end of the day and go to sleep and wakes up with your head on the pillow in the morning. And if don’t get on very well with it for various reasons, instead of going “woah, this miserable old world,” what about looking at what it is made of and see what you can do as a craftsman to do something with it.

So, that’s the other side of meditation. It’s learning to play the most extraordinary instrument ever created. Forget about playing a Stradivarius violin, this mind is infinitely more exquisite and extraordinary in its capacity or in its potential than that.

And those who dedicate themselves to playing the violin, reveal its extraordinary mystery which is nowhere to be seen when you look at this strange looking piece of wood and bunch of horse hair. In the same way, nowhere is the potential of this mind seen when you have just have a brief look at it. If you are going to find out what your mind is capable of you are going to have to make a job or a pastime out of investigating it. And that’s what meditation is. And that’s a huge and extraordinary thing that suddenly opens up to us that’s there all the time that didn’t take any expensive kit like skiing. And even in your ordinary moments will give you the opportunity to find something extraordinary.