

Willingness to Encounter Silence

To Leave all Experience to Itself is Meditation

Meditation is most often approached in terms of technique—what we do when we meditate. There are countless variations, and anybody who wants to know how to meditate can find instruction in my other books or in lots of places. But what is meditation, really? What is the meditative mind? What is happening when we enter the meditative mind in an authentic way?

One of the first and most powerful aspects of meditation we encounter is its honesty: we are sitting down and facing ourselves. When you are in a quiet space free of external disturbances, like the television or conversation, you are alone with yourself. You can have all sorts of fancy spiritual ideas—we all do—but when you are sitting still and being quiet, it is like gazing in a mirror: you are seeing yourself. When we meditate, what we are doing (at least initially) is noticing the contents of our mind and of our consciousness.

Coming to see the nature of our mind is the aim of meditation, but it is also one of the unsettling things about the practice. We harbor the illusion that we direct our lives and minds, control how we feel and think, until we sit down to face ourselves in silence. This can be humbling, because most human beings do not know how active, uncontrollable, turbulent, and unpredictable the mind is until they take up meditation. Most of the time, the mind is generating thoughts of little or no importance; it is as if your mind is entertaining itself. When the average person walks down the sidewalk, you cannot see their lips moving, but odds are they are having an internal conversation with themselves, as if there were two of them—one talking and the other listening. There cannot be two of anyone, but it feels like that when we are lost in the internal dialogue.

Most forms of meditation are a way of helping us focus awareness on something other than the normal, chaotic state of mind. We enter it in a state of innocence, then we see we have a mind that is noisy—the first layer of conflict—and then our mind is telling us that it should not be so noisy, which creates its own secondary layer of conflict. The first time I ever meditated, I had no idea what was supposed to be happening or not happening. Because I had no idea, I was not adding on to that secondary layer of conflict, which is trying to get beyond the first layer of conflict—what is already there in the mind and the body.

Meditation is an attempt to connect with a deep part of our being that is not defined by the narration of the mind. Nor is it defined by the turbulent emotional waters that one sometimes meets in meditation. In its deepest sense, meditation is an encounter with the silence of your being. This is the heart of meditation: it is a willingness to be with silence.

Silence is not a big part of our cultural conversation. Instead, we are sold ever-better ways of distracting ourselves and convinced that we cannot do without our gadgets. Notwithstanding the practical uses, technology can become another means of creating chaos and disruption. If we are on social media, the room around us may be quiet, but we are not in a place of silence.

Silence can be disquieting for a lot of us. It can feel strange if you are not used to it, which is ironic, because so much of the activity of nature—of which we are a part—occurs in silence. That is why people like to go for a walk in the woods or somewhere else where they can get away from the hustle and noise of human life: it is a way of entering silence. Meditation is a focused way of doing this. The challenge is that when you start to pay attention to the silence within, that is when you hear the noise, and that is where many people engage in a subtle or overt battle with the chaos of the conceptual mind and with the images of the past or future. However, meditation has nothing whatsoever to do with controlling your mind. As a teacher of mine

once told me, “If you go to war with your mind, you will be at war forever.” What would it mean not to be at war with our minds, with our feelings, and with ourselves?

If you are not careful, meditation can become a spiritual competition—not with someone else, but between the desire to be still and the movement of mind. To be in competition is not meditation. To try to constrain all the disparate thoughts in your mind through concentration is not meditation; it is concentration. Meditation is a deep state of listening. That is the heart of it: listening to the quiet places, but as you do so, trying not to assert your will or make your mind conform to a certain pattern, whether to quiet it or to force thinking or not thinking along certain lines.

In meditation, what you are doing is letting go of all forms of conflict and allowing every single part of experience and every single perception to be exactly as it is, because it already is right. We feel the way we feel, we think the way we think, and our internal environment is the way it is in any given moment, so we might as well come into alignment with it. In that sense, meditation runs against the grain. Sometimes we think, If I could figure my problem out, then I would not have a problem. But sometimes trying to figure out your problem is creating another problem. To listen to the quiet spaces inside, you must allow every part of your experience to be the way it is. If you do not, then you are in some form of conflict with it, attempting to control how you think or feel. Meditation is the relinquishing of control, not the perfecting of control.

Try looking at it from a subjective point of view: a thought arises and then passes as if floating down a stream. If we are focused on the stream or whether there are thoughts or are not thoughts, then we are engaging in controlled, willful thinking. “Willful thinking” means intentionally engaging the process of thinking. There is a time to do that, but meditation is not that time.

The depth of your meditation depends on your capacity to listen, and most people are not listening when they meditate. They get stuck in whatever technique they are using, caught up in trying to meditate correctly or what they imagine to be correctly, and trying to quiet. There is an unspoken, sometimes unacknowledged agenda that you can carry into meditation, and if you are not careful, that agenda will become your meditation. In other words, you will be meditating on your agenda, whether that agenda is for a quiet mind, or to be at peace, or to feel bliss, or whatever it may be. Meditation is the relinquishing of agenda. It is the natural rhythm of thought when you are not consciously adding to it or trying to take anything away from it, when you are not trying to make it happen or stop it from happening.

There is a soft quality to meditation, a fluid quality, because your experience is constantly changing. It is all movement; if you try to stop the fluidity, you go against the natural flow of consciousness. In this sense meditation is about non-opposition, as it is the most subjective form of practicing nonviolence and noninterference. When you are trying to change things, or trying to stop something from happening, or chasing after what you hope will happen, that is a subtle form of violence or control. Meditation is the relinquishing of that attitude, and you cannot let go of what you do not acknowledge. So first acknowledge any desire to control and any conditional effort to control; see it and watch it play out.

Meditation is seeing all of this. It is coming to know the nature of your mind and experiencing when your mind tries to dominate itself, when there is a thought that says, I must stop thinking, which is itself a thought; it is seeing thought as thought. It is not necessarily evaluating thought; it is not measuring thought or distinguishing the good from the bad or the useful from the useless, as that is for another time. Meditation is about seeing the whole nature of experience. As you watch your mind, you start to see that trying to control it

tends to add conflict, and being too rigid about it sets up an even deeper groove of rigidity in your mind and in your body.

When the watching of the mind grows profound, what Buddhists call “one pointed,” then the quality of our awareness begins to allow us to access a deeper state of consciousness and a deeper state of silence. In essence, meditation is like getting into an elevator and taking it to the ground floor; it is a sinking down into your conscious experience of being. We do not have to know how to make it happen, because there is no “how.” It is not what we do that allows us to access great depth in meditation. It is as much what we do not do and what we let go of doing. Meditation is the art of letting go of doing.

The first thing people ask when I talk about meditation is, “Well, how do I meditate? What am I supposed to be doing?” That is an understandable question, but meditation is an entering into the unknown. The egoic self or the false self is predicated and built upon what one knows or what one thinks they know—the self that we imagine ourselves to be. But the unknown self is that dimension of being that we cannot know in the normal way; it is not a thought, it is not an image, it is not a belief, it is not a preference, and it has no history. This is what meditation can begin to uncover with a deep state of listening.

If we listen to our thoughts, then we stay in the world of the known, but when we see meditation more as an act of listening to the quiet places inside, then we are letting go of the known. Knowing who we are, knowing what is supposed to happen in meditation, knowing if we are good or bad or right or wrong or skilled or unskilled at meditation—all of that exists in thought. Meditation is letting consciousness, awareness, sink into the unknown and into that which is not speaking. It is not the thoughts that are problematic, it is the attachment to the thoughts. When we try to get rid of our thoughts, we are actually displaying an intense attachment to the thoughts we are trying to get rid of, because the idea that thinks we should get rid of our thoughts exists only within thought.

All of this is meditation. Through watching your own mind and watching your own conscious experience, you begin to access a level of being deeper than anything your mind or thoughts could create. It’s a profound and beautiful dimension of consciousness and an experience of self that is not defined by all the old notions of self—beliefs, opinions, preferences, emotions, and the feelings they generate—but is, instead, far beyond that. Leave thought to itself—do not try to get rid of it and do not indulge it. When you think it should be quiet, then it bothers you. When you leave it alone, it won’t bother you. To leave all of experience to itself is meditation.

I invite you to take a day and listen. Even when you are not meditating, focus on listening. When you are driving, listen—nothing but that. If your mind talks nonsense, listen; do not add anything to it and do not try to control it, just listen. If you feel something, feel it, but do nothing else. Just feel it, which is another form of listening. At any moment, you can experience that moment and listen, be, and access a much deeper sense of being. Feel the great silence that is always an aspect of listening. One of the things you will hear is silence—and not a silence that is controlled, not a silence that is manufactured by will or by struggle, but one that is a part of consciousness and that presents itself through the act of listening to all the senses.

The meditative mind is extraordinarily sensitive. As useful as thought is, too much makes the mind dull. It needs to be renewed primarily through silence. So take this day to make some room for listening to the quiet spaces inside. Do not make it a goal; just notice what you notice through listening and through being available to what is occurring in each moment of experience. If you do, your experience will take on transparency—it

will not feel as heavy and solid, but will start to feel translucent and ephemeral, which allows even more depth. Listen and make room for the deeper dimensions of your being to arise into your consciousness. This is a way to authentically enter a place of meditation.

Adyashanti. The Most Important Thing