

Five Benefits of Insight Meditation

The practice of insight meditation based on the four foundations of mindfulness is unique in that it involves direct and objective observation of mundane experience without expectation or inclination. As a result, it tends to challenge one's preconceptions about what meditation is and what it is for. In this chapter, I will try to outline the five key benefits of insight meditation, in order to help clarify the true purpose of meditation practice.

Purifying the mind of qualities that lead to suffering

The first benefit resulting from the practice of this meditation technique is the cleansing of one's mind of all defilements. This actually takes place every moment in which one is clearly aware of an experience. By reminding oneself of the essential nature of the experience, one's mind will be free from any judgement; one will simply experience each phenomenon as it is.

In the beginning, like any form of training, it may be difficult to actually attain this sort of objectivity. Eventually, though, if one is patient and persistent (or has a teacher who is so), one will become proficient in creating clear awareness from one moment to the next. This in turn will lead to purity of mind free from all forms of greed, anger, fear, anxiety, arrogance, conceit, and so on.

It may be argued that this level of mental purity can be attained through almost any type of meditation; focussing on a concept—a colour, for example—can create the same sort of objective awareness as focussing on experiential reality, perhaps even more easily, given the relative stability of concepts over reality.

Meditation on concepts, however, cannot lead to understanding, and so the objectivity it provides is based only on the power of concentration that comes from focussing exclusively on a single object. By cultivating objective awareness of mundane reality, one can change one's outlook on all of the various objects of experience, until one is able to experience all aspects of reality without giving rise to impurity (i.e., mental states that cause suffering for oneself and others).

For example, when one is confronted with harsh speech or mindless chatter, it may threaten to bring about anger or aversion. Conversely, if one is confronted with pleasant stimulus at any of the senses, it will tend to lead towards desire and potential addiction. When one reminds oneself

of the essential nature of the experience—for example, “hearing, hearing”, etc.—the tendency towards desire or aversion is replaced by a new habit of objectivity. Eventually, the mind begins to incline towards the purity of the objective awareness, even replacing one’s old habits completely.

Purifying the mind is the main purpose of practicing this type of meditation; to cleanse the mind of those bad habits that are the primary cause of our suffering is really what the meditation is designed to accomplish. The other four benefits are merely the positive results that come from a pure mind. Nonetheless, they are important in helping to understand why purity of mind is so beneficial, and as such it is important to describe them as well.

Offering a potential cure for mental illness

The second benefit is that one will be able to overcome all types of mental illness—that is, any sort of mental condition, clinically recognized or otherwise, that causes suffering. This type of meditation has the potential to cure, or at the very least ameliorate, a wide range of clinically recognized mental conditions including addiction, phobia, depression, and anxiety, as well as more common ailments like anger, sadness, worry, doubt, etc.

In this meditation tradition, it is understood that the building blocks of reality are phenomenological experiences, not impersonal physical particles; as a result, every condition is understood to be reducible to individual moments of experience that combine together to create the various states of mind that in turn create an individual personality. If enough unwholesome moments combine together, they can form into debilitating mental conditions that can cripple or even destroy a person’s mental well-being.

Fortunately, the same is true of wholesome moments; enough moments of wholesomeness can gather together like the so-called white blood cells in the body that provide a systemic response to physical sickness. With enough accumulated wholesomeness, one can cultivate an immunity to unwholesomeness and drive out any previously-acquired mental illness. Provided one is patient and persistent in one’s cultivation, one can even overcome so-called ordinary states of suffering like covetousness, irritability, conceit, etc. that are otherwise considered to be a fundamental part of ordinary existence.

It's important to understand this point; that meditation is not simply a means of returning to an "ordinary" state of mind, allowing one to merely fit in with society. One should not think of meditation as something only useful for those suffering from extreme states of mental turmoil. While it can potentially help such individuals become ordinary members of society, meditation is something that takes a person beyond the ordinary, allowing one to train and strengthen one's mind beyond what ordinary non-meditators are capable of.

An example of this is in regards to patience. To the untrained eye, ordinary non-meditators appear patient enough as long as they are not confronted with extreme states of discomfort or desire. Yet to one who has cultivated meditation to a significant degree, a non-meditator at rest will be seen as highly disturbed, shifting their body at the slightest discomfort, diverting their attention in search of something to satisfy their desire, their mind wandering into pleasant or unpleasant thoughts that plague their every waking moment, and often their sleep as well.

The state of mind of a trained meditator, on the other hand, will be free from the distractions and concerns that plague others. Their physical environment will neither upset nor entice them; even physical discomfort will fail to distress them, to the point that they will not feel the need to shift or adjust their posture at every unpleasant sensation. As a result, their minds will be at peace, not a slave to their experience. This is considered to be true mental health; where one's mind behaves in such a way as to only bring peace and happiness, not torture itself with reactions and judgements of the ever-changing experience of reality.

Overcoming physical and mental suffering

The third benefit of meditation practice is that it allows one to overcome both physical and mental suffering. By now, it should be clear how this is understood to come about. Still, it bears mentioning that the two types of suffering are not the same; it is possible to experience one without the other, and the emphasis in meditation practice is on freeing oneself from mental suffering first.

As mentioned before, it is a common misconception that meditation must be a pleasant endeavour and that if it is not, one is practicing incorrectly. Newcomers to meditation are often discouraged at the first hint of unpleasantness, feeling that perhaps they are ill-suited to the meditation practice or that the meditation practice itself is a fruitless endeavour.

Actually nothing could be further from the truth. Meditation is designed to allow one to confront and overcome suffering, not run away and hide from it. It is easy to see how the latter strategy is untenable over the long-term; eventually, whatever one cultivates avoidance towards will return and bring increased suffering in proportion to the amount of aversion one has developed towards it.

Meditation, on the other hand, seeks to find a universal solution to suffering; one that makes one impervious to the vicissitudes of life. Ideally, one should be able to face the entire spectrum of experience without falling into suffering. In this regard, one has to make a distinction between physical and mental suffering.

It goes without saying that the only way to be truly free from physical suffering is to not possess a physical body; for as long as we are connected with this human organism we will always be subject to both physical pleasure and physical pain. Mental suffering, on the other hand, is a product of our reactions to both the physical and mental experiences we encounter, and by no means a necessary part of life.

Meditation, then, places great focus on our ability to bear with unpleasant experiences, encouraging the cultivation of equanimity and non-reactivity towards both pleasant and unpleasant experiences. Once one is able to interact with the full spectrum of experiential phenomena without judgement or attachment, one will find oneself with peace of mind even in the face of extreme physical discomfort or distress.

This is the true power of meditation—that we can live our lives fully without fear or dread of any experience, instead of settling for a peace of mind that is dependent on a certain subset of experience our minds deem acceptable.

Finding a right path by which to live one's life

The fourth benefit of meditation is that it sets one on what is considered to be the right path. All religious traditions try to lay down a set of guidelines for living deemed to be right and proper, as well as a set of rules and regulations designed to help one avoid that which is deemed wrong or improper. Likewise, if one wishes one's meditation to bear fruit, then one must consider it to be a religious undertaking of sorts, even though there is no requirement of belonging to one religion or another.

Meditation is something that must be taken seriously (i.e. religiously)—if one undertakes meditation as a hobby or occasional pastime, it is unlikely to provide any profound or lasting benefits. If, on the other hand, one is determined and methodical in one's application of the practice in all aspects of one's life, one will find that it provides guidance and support in all areas of activity both spiritual and mundane.

Unlike organized religion, however, the meditation practice itself is considered to be the right path without all the accoutrements of ritual and ceremony that accompany most other religious practice. Meditation places no real requirements on the type of life one lives, the culture or traditions one follows, or even to what religion one belongs. Instead, it allows a practitioner to find answers to all of life's problems from within oneself, based on very real and objective principles of what truly brings peace and happiness to oneself and others. Once one understands what are the building blocks of reality and how they work together, one need not rely on any external body of knowledge or instruction to live one's life. One will truly be able to discern for oneself the right response in any situation, simply because one understands it firsthand on a level of absolute reality.

In this book and its predecessor, I've tried my best to avoid any reference to religion, not just because I want these books to appeal to a larger audience, but because it is truly the case that meditation, if undertaken sincerely and properly, requires no religious affiliation whatsoever. As mentioned in the first book, there are certain moral guidelines one should undertake as a means of supporting one's practice, but even those are understood to be self-evident; given enough time and practice, one will see for oneself why things like killing, stealing, and even taking drugs and drinking alcohol are contrary to spiritual growth and development.

Because the meditation practice provides clear understanding of the building blocks that make up all of experiential reality, it is therefore applicable in all realms of experience. By allowing one to interact appropriately with the entire universe, it frees one from limitations of any specific sphere of activity or interaction. This is the true definition of the right path, since it is capable of leading one to true peace, happiness, and freedom from suffering.

Discovering peace, happiness, and freedom.

The fifth and final benefit is the state of true peace, happiness, and freedom from suffering itself. It is the reality called by its Sanskrit name “Nirvana”, a word which roughly translates to “freedom” (literally, it means “unbinding”: *nir* = un, and *vana* = binding). Nirvana is simply a name for true freedom from stress and suffering. It describes both the meditative attainment of release from experiential existence, which can last for moments, hours, or even days; as well as the result of attaining such an experience, which has the lasting effect of settling the mind in true contentment and peace. This we consider to be the greatest happiness there is.

It is true that there are many worldly experiences considered by the majority of human beings to bring happiness. Yet, those same human beings would be unlikely to value the happiness of less developed beings like dogs or cats, which find pleasure in more coarse pursuits like toying with a dying mouse or rolling in excrement.

Likewise, an advanced meditator will be uninterested in the coarse pursuits of the mundane world, not due to repression of desire for said activities, but because their minds have become refined to the extent that they truly no longer find such pursuits enjoyable. For someone who has experienced true freedom from suffering, there is no longer any interest in carnal pursuits, simply because they’ve found something that is orders of magnitude better.

Nirvana is often described as indescribable, ineffable. Really, this is only because it is not possible to describe happiness to someone who has never experienced it. Just as dogs and cats cannot understand the joy of human pursuits like romance and the accumulation of wealth, so too, for a person immersed in worldly affairs, spiritual happiness is like the moon and stars—something beautiful and majestic, but ultimately outside of one’s realm of comprehension.

Through meditation, one is able to purify one’s mind, overcome mental suffering, and attain the right path by which to live one’s life; beyond this, however, meditation is actually capable of bringing an individual to a state of complete and absolute freedom from all stress and disturbance; a state so pure and free that one will never suffer from doubt or uncertainty about what is truly valuable or beneficial.

The experience of true freedom from suffering has a lasting impact on one's being in that it frees one completely from addiction to worldly pleasures that cannot hope to satisfy, in favour of a stable and certain reality that provides real and lasting satisfaction and peace of mind.

True peace and happiness must be stable and constant to fit the definition. It is not that worldly pleasures and pursuits are incapable of providing pleasure and even happiness, it is that because such happiness is dependent on that which is inconstant, it can never hope to truly satisfy one's desires. The happiness that comes from freedom, however, is independent—it can persist no matter what experience one encounters and in an ultimate sense is defined as freedom from the inconstancy of experiential reality.

Since this happiness is something one must experience to truly appreciate, there is not much more to be said, except that it is simply an extension of the gradual practice of freeing oneself from the reactivity to ephemeral experience that causes stress and suffering due to its inability to satisfy one's expectations.

Together, these five benefits provide a basis for why one should cultivate the practice of meditation. To recap, in brief, they are:

1. Meditation purifies the mind of those qualities of mind that lead to suffering;
2. Meditation provides a cure for mental illness;
3. Meditation allows one to overcome physical and mental suffering;
4. Meditation allows one to find the right path by which to live one's life;
5. Meditation leads to complete peace, happiness, and freedom.

This chapter is meant to provide reassurance for those who have begun to undertake the meditation practice as outlined in the first book on how to meditate. The following chapters will focus on various stages of the path in sequential order, starting with a description of the building blocks that make up experiential reality in the next chapter.

Thank you as always for taking the time and making the effort to cultivate meditative insight into reality; since your own purity of mind can only benefit the world around you, your practice of understanding reality is a gift to the rest of us as well. May your practice bring all of the benefits described in this chapter to you in no long time!

Source: This article is a chapter of a book that is part of an innovative *social book-writing* experiment by Venerable Yuttadhammo who is writing his second book. While it is fully understood that a work is traditionally well-edited before it is submitted to the public, this venture offers people an opportunity to be a part of the creative process! If you wish to make any comments, please feel welcome to do so via this link:

<http://yuttadhammo.sirimangalo.org/>

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