

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

how to meditate



KATHLEEN MCDONALD

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second edition

Kathleen McDonald

Edited by Robina Courtin



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Preface

When *How to Meditate* was first published more than twenty years ago, meditation was not widely known or practiced in the West, and there were few books about it. Things are different now. Millions of Western people practice meditation regularly; doctors prescribe it to their patients as a way to deal with pain, heart disease, cancer, depression, and other problems; scientists are studying its effects on the brain and the immune system. There are dozens of books, tapes, CDs, and websites about meditation, and meditation classes are available in most cities.

This book has been surprisingly successful: reprinted seventeen times, translated into nine foreign languages. And I continue to meet people who tell me how it has helped them in their practice and their understanding of Buddhism and meditation. The purpose of this book remains the same as when it first appeared: to offer the people in the world today a bridge into the art of meditation taught by the Buddha and developed in Asia over the last 2500 years. Despite advances in technology, the Buddha's tools for opening up our inner capacities for genuine and lasting well-being retain their power and relevance.

Most of the meditations explained here come from the Mahayana Buddhist tradition of Tibet, several from the Theravada tradition of South East Asia, and a few are my own improvisations on Buddhist themes. I have tried to explain them simply and clearly, with a minimum of technical language, because I want to show that Buddhism is practical and down-to-earth, not a dry philosophy or an exotic cult. Throughout, the emphasis is on *experience*,

using meditation to actually bring about changes in our thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Part 1, *Mind and Meditation*, lays the foundation, explaining why people meditate and how they benefit from it. Part 2, *Establishing a Meditation Practice*, gives basic information and advice for beginning practitioners. The rest of the book presents the actual meditation methods, divided into four parts: *Meditations on the Mind*, *Analytical Meditations*, *Visualization Meditations*, and *Prayers and Other Devotional Practices*. Each technique has a preamble that gives some background to the meditation, shows its benefits and how best to do it, and explains its practical application. Finally, there is a glossary of terms and a list of titles for suggested further reading.

For this present edition, I have revised most of the meditations and added several new ones: on karma, purifying negative karma, compassion and *tonglen* (Tibetan for “giving and taking”), and the Healing Buddha. The revisions do not mean that the meditations in the original edition are incorrect; I simply felt that they could be improved, based on an additional twenty years of practicing and teaching meditation.

Acknowledgments

Whatever I know about Buddhism and meditation I have learned from my kind and compassionate teachers, especially Lama Thubten Yeshe, Zopa Rinpoche, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey, Geshe Jampa Tegchog, and Ribur Rinpoche.

I thank these precious teachers from my heart for sharing with us their knowledge and insight and pray sincerely that their work may continue for a long time to come.

Many people have worked to make this book possible. I extend thanks to Wendy Finster for her *Handbook of Mahayana Practices*, from which this book developed; to Thubten Wongmo, Jon Landaw, and T. Yeshe for their initial editing and translating work; to Nick Ribush, Yeshe Khadro, Thubten Pende, Steve Carlier, Lorraine Rees, Peter Rees, James Payne, Tim Young, Jan Courtin, Marshall Harris,

Sarah Thresher, Karin Zeitvogel, and the nuns of Dorje Pamo Monastery for their invaluable suggestions; to David Kittelstrom, Tim McNeill, and everyone at Wisdom Publications; and finally to my editor Robina Curtin, who has worked with me throughout both editions to rewrite and reshape *How to Meditate* in an effort to make it as clear and practical as possible.

*For my parents who have helped me so much.
May they discover the highest peace within themselves.*

Part One

MIND AND
MEDITATION

1

Why Meditate?

Everyone wants happiness yet few of us seem to find it. In our search for satisfaction we go from one relationship to another, one job to another, one country to another. We study art and medicine, train to be tennis players and typists; have babies, race cars, write books, and grow flowers. We spend our money on home entertainment systems, mobile phones, iPods, handheld computers, comfortable furniture, and vacations in the sun. Or we try to get back to nature, eat whole foods, practice yoga, and meditate. Just about everything we do is an attempt to find real happiness and avoid suffering.

There is nothing wrong with wanting happiness; there is nothing wrong with any of these attempts to find it. The problem is that we see things like relationships, possessions, and adventures as having some intrinsic ability to satisfy us, as being the cause of happiness. But they cannot be—simply because they do not last. Everything by nature constantly changes and eventually disappears: our body, our friends, all our belongings, the environment. Our dependence on impermanent things and our clinging to the rainbow-like happiness they bring cause only disappointment and grief, not satisfaction and contentment.

We *do* experience happiness with things outside ourselves, but it doesn't truly satisfy us or free us from our problems. It is poor-quality happiness, unreliable and short-lived. This does not mean that we should give up our friends and possessions in order to be happy. Rather, what we need to give up are our misconceptions about them and our unrealistic expectations of what they can do for us.

Not only do we see them as permanent and able to satisfy us; at the root of our problems is our fundamentally mistaken view of reality. We believe instinctively that people and things exist in and of themselves, from their own side; that they have an inherent nature, an inherent thing-ness. This means that we see things as having certain qualities abiding naturally within them; we think that they are, from their own side, good or bad, attractive or unattractive. These qualities seem to be out there, in the objects themselves, quite independent of our viewpoint and everything else. We think, for example, that chocolate is inherently delicious or that success is inherently satisfying. But surely, if they were, they would never fail to give pleasure or to satisfy, and everyone would experience them in the same way.

Our mistaken idea is deeply ingrained and habitual; it colors all our relationships and dealings with the world. We probably rarely question whether the way we see things is the way they actually exist, but once we do it will be obvious that our picture of reality is exaggerated and one-sided; that the good and bad qualities we see in things are actually created and projected by our own mind.

According to Buddhism there *is* lasting, stable happiness, and everyone has the potential to experience it. The causes of happiness lie within our own mind, and methods for achieving it can be practiced by anyone, anywhere, in any lifestyle—living in the city, working an eight-hour job, raising a family, playing on weekends.

By practicing these methods—meditation—we can learn to be happy at any time, in any situation, even difficult and painful ones. Eventually we can free ourselves of problems like dissatisfaction, anger, and anxiety and, finally, by realizing the actual way that things exist, we will eliminate completely the very source of all disturbing states of mind so that they will never arise again.

What is the mind?

Mind, or consciousness, is at the heart of Buddhist theory and practice, and for the last 2500 years meditators have been investigating and using it as a means of transcending unsatisfactory existence and achieving perfect peace. It is said that all happiness, ordinary

and sublime, is achieved by understanding and transforming our own minds.

The mind is a nonphysical kind of energy, and its function is to know, to experience. It is awareness itself. It is clear in nature and reflects everything that it experiences, just as a still lake reflects the surrounding mountains and forests.

Mind changes from moment to moment. It is a beginningless continuum, like an ever-flowing stream: the previous mind-moment gave rise to this mind-moment, which gives rise to the next mind-moment, and so on. It is the general name given to the totality of our conscious and unconscious experiences: each of us is the center of a world of thoughts, perceptions, feelings, memories, and dreams—all of these are mind.

Mind is not a physical thing that *has* thoughts and feelings; *it is* those very experiences. Being nonphysical, it is different from the body, although mind and body are interconnected and interdependent. Mind—consciousness—is carried through our body by subtle physical energies (see page 161), which also control our movement and vital functions. This relationship explains why, for example, physical sickness and discomfort can affect our state of mind and why, in turn, mental attitudes can both give rise to and heal physical problems.

Mind can be compared to an ocean, and momentary mental events such as happiness, irritation, fantasies, and boredom to the waves that rise and fall on its surface. Just as the waves can subside to reveal the stillness of the ocean's depths, so too is it possible to calm the turbulence of our mind to reveal its natural pristine clarity.

The ability to do this lies within the mind itself, and the key to the mind is meditation.

2

What Is Meditation?

Subduing the mind and bringing it to the right understanding of reality is no easy task. It requires a slow and gradual process of *listening* to and reading explanations of the mind and the nature of things; *thinking* about and carefully analyzing this information; and finally transforming the mind through *meditation*.

The mind can be divided into *sense consciousness*—sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch—and *mental consciousness*. Mental consciousness ranges from our grossest experiences of anger or desire, for example, to the subtlest level of complete stillness and clarity. It includes our intellectual processes, our feelings and emotions, our memory, and our dreams.

Meditation is an activity of the mental consciousness. It involves one part of the mind observing, analyzing, and dealing with the rest of the mind. Meditation can take many forms: concentrating single-pointedly on an (internal) object, trying to understand some personal problem, generating a joyful love for all humanity, praying to an object of devotion, or communicating with our own inner wisdom. Its ultimate aim is to awaken a very subtle level of consciousness and to use it to discover reality, directly and intuitively.

This direct, intuitive awareness of how things are, combined with love and compassion for all beings, is known as enlightenment and is the end result of Mahayana Buddhist practice. The purpose of reaching it—and the driving force behind all practice—is to help others reach it too.

The Tibetan term for meditation, *gom*, means, literally, “to become familiar.” What arises in our mind is what we are most familiar

with. If, when someone treats us unkindly or disrespectfully, we immediately feel hurt or angry, it is because these are the reactions that we are most familiar with, or habituated to. Buddhist meditation involves making our mind familiar with positive states such as love, compassion, patience, serenity, and wisdom, so that these become more natural and spontaneous. Then, when we encounter an unkind or hostile person, we'll be more likely to remain calm and patient, and even feel compassion for them.

There are many different techniques of meditation; each technique has specific functions and benefits, and each is a part of the framework for bringing our mind to a more realistic view of the world.

It might be best to start by saying what meditation is *not*, because there are many misunderstandings about it. For one thing, meditation is not an activity of the body: it is not simply a matter of sitting in a particular posture or breathing a particular way, nor is it done for the purpose of experiencing pleasant bodily sensations. Rather, it is an activity of the mind, and is done for the purpose of transforming the mind, making it more positive. Although the best results usually come when we meditate sitting in a quiet place, we can also meditate in a noisy environment, and while working, walking, riding on a bus, or cooking dinner. One Tibetan meditator realized emptiness while chopping wood, and another attained single-pointed concentration while cleaning his teacher's room.

First, we learn to develop the meditative state of mind in formal, sitting practice, but once we are good at it, we can be more freestyle and creative and can generate this mental state at any time, in any situation. By then, meditation has become a way of life.

Meditation is not something foreign or unsuitable for the Western mind. There are different methods practiced in different cultures, but they all share the common principle of the mind simply becoming familiar with positive, beneficial states. And the mind of every person, Eastern or Western, has the same basic elements and experiences, the same basic problems—and the same potential.

Meditation is not spacing-out or running away. In fact, it is being totally honest with ourselves: taking a good look at what we are and working with that in order to become more positive and useful,

to ourselves and others. There are both positive and negative aspects of the mind. The negative aspects—our mental disorders or, quite literally, delusions—include jealousy, anger, desire, pride, and the like. These arise from our misunderstanding of reality and habitual clinging to the way we see things. Through meditation we can recognize our mistakes and adjust our mind to think and react more realistically, more honestly.

The final goal, enlightenment, is a long-term one. But meditations done with this goal in mind can and do have enormous short-term benefits. As our concrete picture of reality softens, we develop a more positive and realistic self-image and are thus more relaxed and less anxious. We learn to have fewer unrealistic expectations of the people and things around us and therefore meet with less disappointment; relationships improve and life becomes more stable and satisfying.

But remember, lifelong habits die hard. It is difficult enough simply to recognize our anger and jealousy, much less make an effort to hold back the old familiar tide of feeling or analyze its causes and results. Transforming the mind is a slow and gradual process. It is a matter of ridding ourselves, bit by bit, of instinctive, harmful habit patterns and “becoming familiar” with habits that necessarily bring positive results—to ourselves and others.

There are many meditation techniques but, according to the Tibetan tradition, all can be classed into two categories: *stabilizing* and *analytical*.

Stabilizing meditation

In general, this type of meditation is used to develop concentration, and eventually to attain calm abiding (Sanskrit: *shamata*), a special kind of concentration that enables one to remain focused on whatever object one wishes, for as long as one wishes, while experiencing bliss, clarity, and peace. Concentration and calm abiding are necessary for any real, lasting insight and mental transformation. In stabilizing meditation, we learn to concentrate upon one object—

the breath, the nature of one's own mind, a concept, a visualized image—without interruption.

Concentration without interruption is the exact opposite of our usual state of mind. If you turn inward for a few moments you will notice your mind jumping from one thing to another: a thought of something you will do later, a sound outside, a friend, something that happened earlier, a physical sensation, a cup of coffee. We never need to say to the mind, "Think!" or "Feel!" It is always busy doing something, speeding along, with an energy of its own.

With such a scattered and uncontrolled mind there is little chance of success in anything we do, whether it is remembering a telephone number, cooking a meal, or running a business. And certainly, without concentration successful meditation is impossible.

Stabilizing meditation is not easy, but it is essential for bringing the mind under control. Although the development of actual single-pointed concentration and calm abiding is the work of fulltime meditators, we don't need to retreat to the mountains to experience the benefits of this kind of meditation: even in our day-to-day city life we can develop good concentration by regularly doing ten or fifteen minutes a day of stabilizing meditation (for example, the meditation on the breath, page 37). It can bring an immediate sense of spaciousness and allow us to see the workings of our mind more clearly, both during the meditation and throughout the rest of the day.

Analytical meditation

This type of meditation is for the purpose of developing insight, or correct understanding of the way things are, and eventually to attain special insight (Sanskrit: *vipashyana*) that sees the ultimate nature of all things. Analytical meditation brings into play creative, intellectual thought and is crucial to our development: the first step in gaining any real insight is to understand *conceptually* how things are. This conceptual clarity develops into firm conviction which, when combined with stabilizing meditation, brings direct and intuitive knowing.

However, even before we can "know how things are" we must first identify our wrong conceptions. Using clear, penetrative,

analytical thought we unravel the complexities of our attitudes and behavior patterns. Gradually, we can eliminate those thoughts, feelings, and ideas that cause ourselves and others unhappiness, and in their place cultivate thoughts, feelings, and ideas that bring happiness and peace.

In this way we become familiar with the reality of, for example, cause and effect—that our present experiences are the result of our past actions *and* the cause of our future experiences—or with the fact that all things lack an inherent nature. We can meditate point by point on the benefits of patience and the disadvantages of anger; on the value of developing compassion; on the kindness of others.

In one sense, an analytical meditation session is an intensive study session. However, the level of conceptual thought that we can reach during these meditations is more subtle and therefore more potent than our thoughts during day-to-day life. Because our senses are not being bombarded by the usual frantic input we are able to concentrate more strongly and develop a finely-tuned sensitivity to the workings of our mind.

Analytical meditation can also be used as self-therapy. Lama Yeshe said, “Each of us should know our own mind; you should become your own psychologist.” When we have a problem or we feel emotionally upset, we can sit down and make our mind calmer with a few minutes of meditation on the breath. Then, taking a step back from our thoughts and emotions, we can try to understand what’s going on. “What kind of thoughts are going through my mind? What emotions are arising?” Within the calm, clear space of meditation, it will be easier to recognize where our thinking is erroneous and to adjust it by bringing in more realistic and beneficial ideas that we have learned from our spiritual study and practice.

Some people think that meditation is necessarily stabilizing, or single-pointed, meditation, and that when we meditate, our mind should be free of all thoughts and concepts. This is not correct: single-pointed meditation is *not* the only kind of meditation there is, and thoughts and concepts, when used skillfully, play a crucial role in the positive transformation of our mind. At the root of our problems and confusion are mistaken concepts about reality, and

the only way to be free from these is to first identify and transform them by using analytical meditation. Staying focused on these new insights with single-pointedness enables the mind to become thoroughly and deeply familiar with them. This is how real, lasting transformation of the mind takes place.

Stabilizing and analytical meditations, then, are complementary and can be used together in one session. When doing a meditation on emptiness, for example, we analyze the object (emptiness) using information we have heard or read, as well as our own thoughts, feelings, and memories. At some point an intuitive experience of or conviction about the object arises. We should then stop thinking and focus our attention single-pointedly on the feeling for as long as possible. We should soak our mind in the experience. When the feeling fades we can either continue analyzing or conclude the session.

This method of combining the two kinds of meditation causes the mind literally to become one with the object of meditation. The stronger our concentration, the deeper our insight will be. We need to repeat this process again and again with anything we want to understand in order to transform our insight into actual experience.

Stabilizing meditations such as the meditation on the breath will also go better if some skillful analysis is used. When we sit down to meditate, we should start by examining our state of mind and clarifying our motivation for doing the practice, and this involves analytical thought. During the meditation itself we might find concentration especially difficult; at such times it is good to analyze the problem for a few moments, then to re-place the mind on the breath. And sometimes it is useful to check on the mind during the meditation to make sure it is not daydreaming but doing what it is supposed to be doing.

The meditations in this book are divided into four sections. The first of these, *Meditations on the Mind*, includes three techniques that help develop awareness of the mind itself. The meditation on the breath (often called *mindfulness meditation*) is primarily a stabilizing practice that uses the breath as the object of concentration. Beginners are advised to start with this practice, as it calms the mind, enabling us to see more clearly how it works.

The other meditations in this section are for developing an awareness of the clear nature of the mind, and the beginninglessness and continuity of the mind. All techniques involve both stabilization and analysis.

The next section, *Analytical Meditations*, offers eleven techniques for looking into and analyzing our assumptions about how things exist, about life, death, suffering, and compassion; and, finally, advice on dealing with our negative energy in everyday life. If you are just learning to slow the mind down with, say, the breathing meditation, you might not feel ready to tackle any of these subjects in formal meditation; however, simply reading through this section provides plenty of food for thought.

Next is *Visualization Meditations*: five techniques introduce visualization as used in tantric Vajrayana practice; all combine stabilization and analysis.

The final section of the main body of the book, *Prayers and Other Devotional Practices*, includes several more meditations as well as prayers and other practices.

It is important to go slowly and to adopt new methods only when you are ready. There is no point in trying to do meditations that seem strange or complicated or whose purpose is not clear. It is better to stick to one or two methods whose benefits you can really experience.

However, everything in this book is an integral part of balanced spiritual growth and a step on a path that is vast and profound. For example, most of the analytical meditations are from the graduated path (Tibetan: *lamrim*) tradition, a well-organized series of topics to be learned, contemplated, and integrated experientially, a process that gets us from our present unenlightened state to the fulfillment of our potential for perfection: enlightenment. (For more information about the graduated path, see the recommended reading list at the end of the book.)

Through careful and patient study and practice, you will learn to appreciate the relationship that these practices have to each other and to the entire path.