

WHEN THOUGHT TURNS TO LIGHT

A Practical Guide to
Spiritual Transformation



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*When Thought Turns to Light: A Practical Guide to
Spiritual Transformation*

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PART 2
TRANSFORMATION

CHAPTER 5
MEDITATION: LOOKING CLOSELY
AT OUR MINDS

*Meditation practice improves your life
by showing you, first of all,
with some difficult clarity, the mess you are in.*
— Norman Fischer, *Taking Our Places*

THERE IS PERHAPS NO IMAGE of meditation more iconic than that of the Buddha sitting beneath the Bodhi tree, seeking to obtain enlightenment. Born a prince who led a sheltered life, Siddhartha Gautama left his palace walls to see true suffering in his people. Once he learned of how immense his people's suffering was, he set forth to find a way for all to escape suffering. After realizing that intense practices of asceticism (whereby he ate little and flogged his body) were not the way, Gautama sat beneath the Bodhi tree and meditated, vowing to attain enlightenment. After some forty-nine days

of meditation, he overcame illusion, experienced the loss of self, and became the Buddha.

Fast-forward to the present day, and meditation has become all the rage. No longer an esoteric practice associated with the Buddha, meditation has been repackaged as a self-improvement technique. Newspapers and blogs applaud its many benefits, and it's often presented as a way to be more productive and less stressed. A cynical person might say that meditation is no longer about enlightenment, but about coping with capitalism.

The upshot is that meditation is now a mainstream practice. No one needs to abandon their work or families and enter a cave or an ashram and meditate all day to receive its benefits. But being more productive and less stressed are only a tiny portion of what meditation can provide. Meditation is a powerful tool for transformation because it allows you to realize that you are not your thoughts. The real you is not your ego. Your life will change as a result, but not because you leave it all behind or find a way to better cope with it. Your life transforms with meditation because you transform your relationship to your thoughts, and in doing so, your relationship to the world around you.

MUDDY WATERS

EZRA BAYDA OFFERS A USEFUL ANALOGY: Think of your mind as a glass of dirty water that has been stirred up.¹ With meditation, the water settles and slowly but surely the sediment or dirt begins to fall to the bottom, leaving still, clear water. Your thoughts are the dirt, and the “real” you is the clear water. This clear water is the Light, or what Buddhism calls the witnessing consciousness—the part of you that watches those thoughts. The clear water contains those thoughts, but so much mental agitation is being stirred up that you can’t separate the dirt from the water. With meditation, the churning stops and the dirt settles to the bottom, leaving the water clear again. Meditation thus allows you to separate the water from the mud of your mind, and to begin to distance yourself from your ego’s incessant thinking. This is the first step toward clearing your mind of negative thoughts.

Eliminating negative thought patterns is not an easy task. Many books simply tell the reader to ask for divine assistance or stay in the present moment. As legitimate as that advice may be, it has been reduced to an intellectual formula; our minds are still trying to do most of the work. Unfortunately, the ego cannot be controlled through the mind alone. To borrow

from Albert Einstein, the problems we face due to the influence of our minds cannot be solved with the same level of thinking that created them. To put it differently, our egos alone cannot raise the frequency of our consciousness. Meditation is a critical step in the process of undoing the patterns and habits that keep us attached to the ego, clinging to negativity and lower vibrations, and keeping us in a space of self-loathing. Meditation allows us to recognize that those thoughts are an illusion. When we stop believing our thoughts and let them go, we are able to connect more deeply with our true divine nature.

MEET YOUR MIND

WITH MEDITATION, WE TURN TO OUR EGO, to the part of our mind that prevents us from being our true self, and become deeply intimate with it. Although meditation has become exceedingly popular and mainstream, it remains profoundly misunderstood. Most people incorrectly believe that when you meditate, you are supposed to stop thinking—that meditation is the *absence* of thought. As a result, many people say that it's too hard, that it can't be done because the thoughts never cease. Many people say that they want to clear

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their head of all thought in order to be less stressed or worried, but they abandon meditation all too quickly under the erroneous belief that they're doing it wrong or they're not good at it.

However, the purpose of meditation is not to clear one's head of thoughts. Rather, the initial stage of meditation is to watch your thoughts. One common analogy, often used by Zen Buddhists, is that thoughts are like clouds in the sky, and when you meditate, you are merely watching them pass by. Why watch your thoughts? Through meditation, you become very intimate with your own mind; you get up close and personal with all of it. By watching your thoughts, you learn not to identify with them or treat them as if they were real. Importantly, you learn not to *react* to those thoughts with words and actions that are not productive or, worse still, that you will later regret.

When you meditate, you slowly begin to create a gap between your thoughts and your consciousness. You will realize that these thoughts emanate from one part of your mind, and that there is some other part of you—the witnessing consciousness (the clear water, the Light), that is separate from those thoughts. As you begin to allow that witnessing consciousness to

come forward, you can watch those thoughts as if they were pictures in a movie theatre—with ever increasing detachment. The witnessing consciousness (the part of you that watches and does not judge, but simply observes) is always watching. The part of you that is watching is also a name for your soul, for the Light in you. Meditation strengthens your awareness of that divine witnessing consciousness. As that awareness grows, your identification with the ego's incessant stream of thoughts diminishes.

By meditating, you are training your mind to consistently step out of the way, to make way for the Light to shine through. The mind can be compared to a muscle or a computer program. It requires “exercise” or needs to be “reprogrammed,” whichever metaphor resonates with you. Our minds did not become what they are today without practice. We just exercised them in ways of which we were not always conscious. As discussed previously, we received ideas, notions, and beliefs from others (i.e., our parents, friends, and society) and adopted them as our own. Many of us remain unaware of what our blocks are or what patterns we keep repeating. For most of us, habitual thought patterns are rooted in experiences that can

be traced to childhood. Meditation is the first step in identifying them.

We have also trained our minds to act in certain ways by watching TV, checking Facebook, playing with apps on our smartphone, texting, and emailing. In fact, many people are addicted to television, email, and the Internet. They are addicted to mental stimulation, streams of data, or constant communication. When you are out and about, notice how many people are staring at their smartphones, mindlessly reviewing texts and emails, and scanning their apps repeatedly. They will put their phones away, and then thirty seconds later, pull them out and start all over again. People are literally addicted to their devices.

The same thing happens at work: People surf the Internet constantly and look at email again and again, thinking that they are “multi-tasking.” I understand the pull when the mind says that it must check email. It’s just like the tug of the body that craves sugar. There is scientific evidence that the anticipation of communication via email or text creates a dopamine response, so that every time you go to look at email, your mind gives a little burst of dopamine, creating a pleasurable sensation. The Internet provides infinite

possibilities for constant mental stimulation, filling your mind with thoughts and the opinions of others and allowing you to generate lots of thoughts and opinions in response. Twitter and Facebook provide a perfect outlet for the ego's desire for constant reinforcement; they allow the ego to express the random bursts of thought that it continuously generates.

Controlling the influence of the ego means operating between twin poles: between emptying yourself of the "I" (the wants, desires, repulsions, fears, limiting beliefs, and other aspects of the negative, wounded ego), and learning to truly love yourself. There seems to be a paradox here. How do you love yourself fully and unconditionally without reifying a unique sense of self, separate from others? If you empty yourself, what "self" is left to love?

The key is to recognize what you truly are and what you are not. The answer is quite simple: You are not your fears, or any other expression of emotion that is not rooted in love. This also means that, no matter how radical it may sound, you are not your personality. Much of your personality is part of your ego. The person who feels the need to be sarcastic or bitchy as a means of connecting with others, or who always deflects with

humor, “tells it like it is,” or “just wants to keep it real,” is acting in ways that serve his or her ego. The part of your personality that reflects your true self will always be there, even if you move beyond your ego. What you find when you begin to see the ego and loosen its grip may surprise you.

HOW TO MEDITATE

TO REWRITE OUR DEEPLY INGRAINED programming, we must set up a new routine. The ego will resist. It will try to make you sleep in, skip meditation, and find something more “interesting” to do. Set a time and place to do it every day, even if only for five minutes. Five minutes a day every day will do a great deal more to teach the mind to step aside than one hour twice a week. It is important to acknowledge that routine does not mean *rigidity*. It is important to be disciplined and at the same time flexible.

There are many approaches to meditation; any of them can be beneficial. A very basic form of meditation is to meditate on your breath. Breathing meditation is quite simple to perform. The first step is to sit, either seated in a chair or on a meditation cushion that raises your hips off the floor, with your back

relatively straight and your head resting comfortably on the top of your spine. Then either close your eyes or let your gaze soften so that you are not focused on any particular object. Once you are in this comfortable seated position, begin to focus on your breath, as you inhale and exhale. Notice how the breath feels as it fills your lungs and exits through your nostrils. When your mind drifts, simply turn your focus back to your breath.

To help focus on the breath, you can also count each inhalation and exhalation. Once you reach ten, start over. If you find yourself following your thoughts or getting caught up in a particular image, as soon as you realize that you've been distracted, return to the breathing and begin counting again, starting at one. There's no judgment and no goal. You needn't strive to get to ten, nor should you fret if you can't get past one—keep breathing and counting. Over time, your ability to not get caught up in any particular thought will grow, and you will eventually reach higher and higher numbers. Start with ten minutes a day, and then increase the time slowly. Thirty minutes to an hour of meditation each day is an ideal goal.

This is a wonderful meditation for many reasons, and chief among them is that our breath

symbolizes our fundamental connection to life. We associate a baby's first breath with the beginning of life, and a dying person's last breath with the end of life. As Stephen Cope reminds us, "We all have experienced the breath as a direct link to some aspect of our inner world."² Indeed, there's a great deal of wisdom to be learned from our breath on how to relate to life. We can exert conscious control over our breath, deciding whether to breathe fast or slow, shallow or deep. Our bodies can also breathe without any effort on our part, so we can simply trust and let our breathing naturally take care of itself.

There are other forms of meditation that give your mind a different object to focus on besides the breath. For example, light a candle and focus on the flame. When you notice your mind drifting and getting caught up in a thought, you simply bring your attention back to the candle's flame. You can also do this type of concentration meditation without a specific object. You can simply find a fixed point on the floor, called a *drishti*, and maintain your focus there. When you realize your mind is drifting, simply bring your attention gently back to the *drishti*.

With meditations that require focus on something outside of us, rather than our breath, there

is an added benefit. You learn to relate to objects outside of yourself in a different way; you learn to be with them, without engaging them with your thoughts. Much of our mental activity has to do with the analysis of physical objects as they enter our visual field, and concentration meditations like this type allow you to regard the physical object without immediately falling into mental analysis.

Another meditation practice is to give yourself a simple phrase or a word that you can repeat again and again to relax your mind. This is a form of *mantra* (a topic explored more at length in the next chapter). You can pick a simple one-word mantra like *om* or *love* or *peace* and then you repeat that mantra silently at brief intervals of five to ten seconds. If you find your mind wandering and pursuing thoughts that have popped into your head, simply bring your attention back to the mantra and resume repeating it internally. As with the other meditations, a mantra meditation gives your mind an object to return to when it has wandered. You are repeatedly drawing your mind away from what it wants to engage with and training it to maintain a single point of focus.

For those who grapple with anxiety, meditation can be difficult. (If you are dealing with a particularly

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powerful trauma or have been diagnosed with a mental illness, meditation should only be done under the guidance and supervision of a qualified therapist.) Meditation can stir up that anxiety by allowing the mind that was previously distracted (or numbed by the Internet, TV, drugs, shopping, or just constant verbalization) to be exposed suddenly to thoughts related to the events that led to the anxiety. For those individuals, if basic breathing meditation is too intense, guided meditations, which can be found on Amazon or iTunes, can help gently lead you into a meditative state. Guided meditations are wonderful for all practitioners as an alternative to the basic breathing and concentration meditations described above.

If you are new to meditation, you may be surprised at how many thoughts cross your mind, uncontrolled and involuntarily. You will soon get a glimpse of how frantically your mind works to revisit the past and predict the future. It works to stay in control according to its agenda, and create what it believes it needs to ensure your safety and security. You may also be surprised at how repetitive those thoughts are; they are often the same, or follow similar patterns. Finally, you may be surprised at how many of those same thoughts

are negative. Most of us don't want to confront the fact that our minds are constantly generating one negative thought after another—usually thoughts of judgment about others and ourselves. This is the essence of the negative ego. It is a fearful and wounded part of us. Many who are new to meditation may not even realize how negative their mind has become.

Once you become aware of your negative thoughts, you can begin to keep track of how often you say or think something negative. Keep a pen and paper handy to jot down or draw a mark whenever a critical thought arises. At the end of the day, notice how many negative thoughts you've tracked. You might be astonished at how much negativity your mind is generating. However, be careful not to fuel your ego by turning that into another criticism. It is simply a measure for you to recognize the negativity that you are producing.

Once you are aware of how much negativity your mind produces, notice whether there are recognizable patterns in the thoughts. Certain themes will quickly emerge. Your thoughts are often repetitive, and they may be focused on security, the need for approval, fear of punishment, or a lack of lovability. You may also

find that the ego oscillates between two poles, with thoughts of being told that you were wrong or made a mistake, coupled with thoughts of superiority in which you're telling someone else *they* are wrong. From the viewpoint of the ego, you are both victim and victimizer. The ego maintains its hold by insulting others and you, often at the same time. It is helpful to identify what the core issues are and work on them with some of the techniques presented in later chapters (and, depending on the severity of those issues, with a qualified therapist). For example, I found anger to be a recurring emotion in my life, which was related to control over situations. I would get angry when a situation did not occur in ways that I thought it should. Under that anger was a fear that if I were not in control, something could go wrong, and harm of some sort would befall me.

It has been critical to my growth to pay attention when negative parts of myself surfaced, like an angry or petulant side, or a judgmental side, or even a nasty, spiteful, and vengeful side of myself. It is important not to judge or suppress that portion of your ego, and we will revisit this topic in the final chapter. Repression merely strengthens the ego, because that part of you is wounded. To respond with

judgment, anger, or resentment toward that part of you only compounds the trauma that gave rise to it in the first place. Meditation gives you the ability to see that negative emotion come up—and react to it with tenderness and equanimity. As is true of all healing, the key is to approach that part of yourself with love—the very thing that it feels it was originally denied. By learning to watch our thoughts without judgment and to love them as they go by (knowing that despite appearances, they simply are not real), we stop our efforts to fortify our fragile egos.

MEDITATION IS ONLY THE BEGINNING

THE BUDDHA'S MOMENT OF ENLIGHTENMENT under the Bodhi tree is said to have occurred after he battled *Mara*, a demon who sought to prevent the Buddha's progress. Mara sent many distractions, among them one of his daughters, Boredom. The Buddha was not dissuaded, but for many who meditate, boredom is one of the pitfalls. When you meditate, you are giving yourself a break from the mind, to enjoy the peace that comes when the chatter quiets down. Those thoughts still persist, and although you react less to them, they are still there. Meditation becomes an act of watching the

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same thoughts repeatedly. Over time, for many of us, meditation can become stagnant and boring, and lose its appeal.

Yet boredom can be a guidepost and not a pitfall, because it shows us where the ego still resists. Meditation alone is often not enough. Many who have been practicing it for a long time have never truly opened to the Light. They sit and meditate, but they are still operating with the same patterns and belief systems they had when they began. Anxious and frustrated, angry or depressed, they treat meditation like pushing the pause button, or putting the computer to sleep for a bit; once they get up from the meditation cushion, the programs resume. If the ego is a dark and noisy room, meditation allows us to become comfortable with sitting in the dark. Once we are at peace with the darkness of our minds, we have to take the next step and turn on the Light.



Have you ever found yourself immersed in a scene where you were watching, completely detached, but also keenly

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aware? You may have been sitting by a lake watching the water, or laying in the grass staring at the sky. Pause to consider that this was a form of meditation.

Do you believe that you could never meditate? Do you regard meditation as impossible, because your mind can't stop thinking? Pause to consider that the very part of you that is resisting meditation is the part of you that wants to stay in control of your mind.

If you have a meditation practice, reflect on how you view it. Is it something you undertake begrudgingly or sporadically, or is there pride or an identity forming around your practice? Do you think of yourself in a positive way because of your meditation practice?