

WHAT IS INSIGHT MEDITATION?

Barbara: At Deep Spring Center we teach insight, or vipassana, meditation. The Sanskrit word “passana” literally means “seeing.” Vipassana is a deeper, clearer seeing. This practice derives from Buddhist teachings, but at Deep Spring it’s not taught as a religion, but as spiritual practice. The practice includes no religious ritual and requires no special religious beliefs. People are free to follow a form, such as bowing at the start of a sitting, if they choose, but there is no pressure to do so or not to do so. The meditation practices are harmonious with and enriching to any belief system.

Some people come to meditation simply looking for a practice to relieve stress. It can be that, but as we look deeper into ourselves, we do seem to find that spirit is included; thus, we call it a “spiritual practice.” The reason we call it “spiritual” practice is twofold.

Much of our stress and our scatteredness comes from not knowing who we are. We mistakenly view ourselves as separate, not knowing from deep experience that core which connects us to the earth and each other.

As Thoreau succinctly phrased it, “most men lead lives of quiet desperation.” What is that desperation about and how does it lead us into stress and suffering? Meditation is not just another attempt to fix the pain in our lives, to finally find a workable solution outside of ourselves that we may grasp at and lean on, but a way of finding the truth within ourselves. Rather than striving to get rid of stress and scatteredness of focus, we start to look at what separates us from our natural state of focus, calmness and joy. Then we’re not creating additional stress and fragmentation by continuing the lifelong patterns of grasping and aversion, but letting go of those patterns and coming back to our true selves, resolving our fragmentation. I consider this work to be inherently “spiritual”-not “religious,” that’s different-but spiritual.

We start to learn the difference between pleasure and happiness. We grasp at pleasures but find they’re fleeting. Then we look to the next pleasure. True happiness lies within ourselves and is not fleeting, doesn’t need to be chased. Our culture has conditioned us to pleasures. I find that happiness, once again, comes

from knowing who we are, knowing our relationship to all that is, and befriending ourselves with an unconditional acceptance which transcends the oft-learned judgments of our lives-again, “spiritual practice.”

Another way we create much pain for ourselves is by our inability to live in this moment. There’s nothing wrong with planning, but when we’re planning, we seldom KNOW we’re planning. We use it as a way of escaping our lives. Often, attention is scattered. We find little real joy and peace in this moment. We stop for a cup of tea; while we drink it, we plan the afternoon, trying to free the schedule to fit in the game of tennis. We rush through the work, and reach the courts. Through the tennis match, thoughts of the evening meeting intrude.

How we may learn to live more fully in this moment is a primary focus of insight meditation. We find much peace and happiness, and deeper ability to concentrate on the work at hand, when we learn such focus. We begin to understand what continually pulls us out of the moment and to not need to do that so much . And we find more kindness and patience toward ourselves when we DO repeat those old patterns! In learning kindness toward ourselves, we learn it toward others!

Outgrowths of the practice for students are often stress reduction and lessening of long-standing physical ailments like back pain and migraine. However, the teachings are not to reduce stress and pain, but to help people see their patterns of being more clearly, see for themselves what really has created that dissatisfaction or pain and begin to let go.

If we meditate to get rid of stress, that so easily becomes just another goal to grasp, another place to succeed or fail. We just repeat the pattern using meditation as we’ve used success with work, money, power, relationship and other such goals, and create still more suffering when we can’t get rid of stress. This only reinforces the patterns of grasping and denial which fragment us. Also, if the focus were just to reduce pain or stress, people would become dependent on a technique. The meditation technique is only a tool to deeper awareness. That awareness is what offers freedom from stress. We’re not learning this to become

meditators but to become more whole, free, loving humans. These teachings offer freedom, not dependence-freedom through deeper inner awareness.

I'm often asked how vipassana differs from other forms of meditation. There are infinite styles of meditation which seem to fall into two categories. One (the one vipassana is NOT) is a fixed focus meditation such as the mantra meditation used by TM. Here, concentration is developed and the practitioner is led to deeper levels of calmness and a different experience of the world through that deepened focus. Coming out of the meditation, the meditator may carry the calm with him/her for some length of time, and may learn to restore that calm by moving back into the meditative state. However, there is often difficulty integrating meditation and daily life.

Insight meditation uses concentration too. It is not one focused but what we call "natural concentration." The breath is our primary object and we begin there, resting attention lightly on the experience of the inhalation and exhalation. We find we can't stay there except by force. Mind shifts naturally to whatever moves through us. We simultaneously remain concentrated and allow focus to move to whatever is predominant in the experience at the moment, to rest there lightly and watch the sensation, thought, emotion or whatever is present with as much clarity, as little clinging or aversion as is possible. If aversion or clinging do arise, we watch that! As whatever has arisen dissolves itself or changes, we return to rest again in the experience of the breath. And again! Thus, insight meditation emphasizes a combination of focused concentration (quietness of mind) and penetrative, transcendent awareness.

We differ from various schools of Zen in that we don't use anything outside of the moment, like a koan, but find the natural koan in our lives. There is also no form and ritual as in Zen. Since it is free of Buddhist ritual, it often feels more suitable to those who do not consider themselves to be Buddhist. Yes, one can also be Buddhist; vipassana is the core of traditional Theravadin Buddhist practice. But it fits very comfortably with other religious beliefs. Finally, this working with natural concentration and observing the conditioned nature of arising is unique to vipassana. Through deep awareness we come to see how that arising and dissolution is empty of a self, how everything arises when the conditions are

present for it, and ceases when the conditions cease. Such understanding allows us much space and freedom from old reactivity, as we see the habitual patterning of our thoughts and feelings and begin to let go of ownership of these patterns. Zen comes to the same understandings of the characteristics of suffering, emptiness and impermanence through a somewhat different route.

The deepest focus in vipassana is moment to moment mindfulness. It's really a very simple practice, just resting calmly in whatever is, noticing the movements of mind without fixation on what arises. It opens us deeply to all we have closed off in ourselves, ends our fragmentation and dissolves our sense of separation from ourselves and the world. It's a gentle practice yet it takes commitment and courage to look that deeply. Those who choose to take this route inevitably find a deeper sense of peace and at-one-ment with themselves and the world. We don't meditate to fix or change anything, just to be with what is, but as we see deeper into the truths of what is, we do let go of our fears and rigidity and allow a softness and kindness that have been hidden inside us to emerge.