

## WHY TO MEDITATE

-Elizabeth Lesser

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*The brain brings infinite consciousness down to manageable form.*

—William James

Before I get into the “how-to” of meditation, I want to write about the “why-to.” It is said that when a student asked the Buddha why he should meditate, the Buddha answered, “Come and see.” That’s the best advice, because meditation is an experience. But if you are like me, you want to know why before learning how.

Researchers at the National Science Foundation report that the human brain processes 12,000 to 60,000 thoughts per day and that a large percentage of those thoughts are negative and repetitive. We obsess about mistakes we made in the past and worry about future worst-case scenarios. We run those thoughts through grooves in our brains all day long, and then again the next day, until they’re so well worn that we live in a negative story about the past or an anxious version of the future.

The brain studies into repetitive thinking are being done by psychoneuro-immunologists, medical researchers looking to help people strengthen their immune systems. They are finding that if you can interrupt the stream of repetitious thoughts in your head, you are less likely to contract illness—from a cold to cancer—and more likely to increase levels of concentration, calmness, and happiness. This is why they are spending millions of research dollars looking into the very common and very boring content of our brains.

This one of the “whys” of meditation: to interrupt the stream of obsessive thoughts and to bring calm to the landscape of the mind so that health and happiness can take root. This is one of the reasons I cherish the practice of meditation. But there’s another reason to meditate, and it’s not as easy to describe. Besides bringing peace to the mind and health to the body, meditation also opens a window to a whole other reality, one that our busy minds obscure. William James—the father of American psychology—believed that the brain does not generate consciousness. Rather, he said, the brain functions as a filter. (Later, Aldous Huxley would call the

brain a “reducing valve.”) “The brain brings infinite consciousness down to manageable form,” James wrote. Echoing James, the British physicist and astronomer David Darling says, “The major organs of the body are regulators. The lungs don’t manufacture the air our bodies need; the stomach and intestines are not food producers. So, if we manufacture neither the air we breathe nor the food we eat, why assume that we make rather than regulate what we think?”

In the stillness of meditation, we touch the realm of unregulated, infinite consciousness. And what a realm it is! Vast and free. By quieting the brain’s repetitive and habitual patterns, we can stop believing and reacting to everything we think, which is really a reduced, compressed, and tense form of something way more enjoyable to experience: infinite consciousness. In meditation, we begin to experience life beyond the reducing valve; life on its own terms. We become an open-minded witness, as opposed to a scared and limited judge.

But I need to add a caveat here—like a warning label on prescription medicines. There’s a side effect to meditation: when the constriction of the “reducing valve” falls away, so does a sense of control. And humans crave control! Even though we know nothing stays the same and anything can happen, still, we crave control and security. The Buddhist meditation teacher Pema Chodron says, “Scrambling for security has never brought anything but momentary joy.” She describes meditation as a way of stopping the scrambling, of getting unstuck from the need for security. “The process of becoming unstuck requires tremendous bravery,” she says, “because basically we are completely changing our way of perceiving reality, like changing our DNA. We are undoing a pattern that is not just our pattern. It’s the human pattern: we project onto the world a zillion possibilities of attaining resolution. We can have whiter teeth, a weed-free lawn, a strife-free life, a world without embarrassment. We can live happily ever after.”

But of course, we don’t live happily after, because just as one problem resolves, another evolves, and there we are again, seeking resolution, thinking we deserve resolution. “We don’t deserve resolution,” Pema Chodron says. “We deserve something better than that. We deserve our birthright—an open state of mind that can relax with paradox and ambiguity.” So, this is the other “why” of meditation: to relax into the paradoxical, ambiguous, wide-open, unregulated, infinite consciousness that some call God and others do not name at all.

Like all worthwhile pursuits, meditation takes practice. In the beginning, mindfulness practice can feel supremely boring, puzzling, uncomfortable, even scary. But over time, you begin to relax into the openness, not only during meditation, but also with other people and all sorts of situations—from most complex and the more mundane aspects of your life. You can rely on meditation to consistently stimulate a vaster outlook that brings you freedom and joy.