

Meditation, Buddhism and Philosophy: Questions and Answers

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Meditation

1. What can meditation cultivate, reveal, and change?

Meditation can cultivate many different capacities. We may become more sensitive to bodily sensations, feelings, thoughts, moods, and subtle changes in experience—both on and off the cushion—while learning to experience them fully without automatically being carried away by them. As I sometimes put it: *“If you see the river, you are not swept away by it, but you still experience its current.”* Awareness does not mean withdrawing from experience; it can mean experiencing it more directly without being completely caught in it.

Meditation can develop greater stability of attention and reduce automatic reactivity. It can also bring genuine pleasure and tranquility, sometimes deepening into the absorbed states traditionally described as *jhāna*. In insight or *vipassanā* practice, we examine experience closely enough to see its changing and conditioned nature. Sensations, feelings, perceptions, and thoughts arise, change, and disappear. With sustained observation, impermanence (*anicca*) and not-self (*anattā*) become things we can investigate in experience rather than merely ideas we are asked to believe.

Meditation, then, is not one activity with one goal. It can cultivate attention and sensitivity, allow us to experience life more fully without being swept away by it, develop calm and pleasure, and provide insight into the changing, conditioned, and impersonal nature of experience.

2. Am I supposed to stop thinking?

No. Thinking is part of experience. The practice is to notice when thinking is happening without automatically following each thought or turning it into a story. Counting each exhalation from one to ten, then beginning again at one, can help settle the mind, reduce mental chatter, and steady attention.

3. What should I do when my mind keeps wandering?

Notice that the mind has wandered, and gently return attention to the object of meditation. The returning is not a failure of practice; it *is* part of the practice. In mindfulness of breathing, much of the training is simply remembering to come back to the breath, again and again, without frustration or self-judgment.

4. How do I know whether my meditation is “working”?

Not necessarily by how calm a particular sitting feels. Look instead at whether you are becoming more aware, less reactive, and better able to recognize habitual patterns in everyday life.

5. Is meditation supposed to make us calm?

Calm can develop, but it isn't the only purpose. Meditation may also reveal discomfort, restlessness, fear, attachment, or confusion that was already present.

Buddhism

6. What does Buddhism mean by suffering or dukkha?

Dukkha is often translated as “suffering,” but it can be understood more broadly as the friction, unease, or sense that life is not quite running smoothly. It includes dissatisfaction with present-moment experience, but also the wider friction created by craving, aversion, clinging, reactivity, and identification. Like an off-center cart wheel, life may wobble as it turns; how we relate to that wobble can either increase or lessen the friction.

7. What does impermanence mean in practical terms?

Everything we experience changes—sensations, emotions, thoughts, relationships, circumstances, and even our sense of ourselves.

8. What does “not-self” mean?

It doesn't necessarily mean that we don't exist. It asks us to examine whether there is a permanent, independent self behind experience, or whether what we call “me” is an ongoing conditioned process.

9. Do you have to believe in rebirth or other traditional Buddhist beliefs?

Not for the kind of practice we are doing. We can examine the Buddha's teachings as practical ways of understanding experience without accepting metaphysical claims.

10. What is karma in a secular understanding?

Our thoughts, words, and actions have consequences and also become conditions that influence what follows. Habits reinforce habits.

Causes, Conditions, and Conditionality

11. What does Buddhism mean by causes and conditions?

Experiences do not arise independently or out of nowhere. Thoughts, emotions, actions, and reactions emerge from many interacting conditions—past experience, habits, biology, environment, relationships, expectations, and what is happening at this moment.

12. Does everything have one identifiable cause?

Usually not. It is often more useful to think in terms of multiple contributing conditions rather than a single cause. Anger, for example, might involve what happened, our interpretation of it, previous experiences, fatigue, fear, expectations, and learned habits.

13. Why is conditionality important?

Because if something arises because of conditions, changing some of those conditions can change what happens next. We cannot control all the conditions of our lives, but we can sometimes influence them.

14. How does meditation help us understand conditionality?

Meditation allows us to observe the process as it unfolds. A sensation occurs, followed perhaps by a pleasant or unpleasant feeling, a thought, judgment, impulse, and reaction. With greater awareness, we begin to see these as connected processes rather than as one automatic event.

15. What does conditionality tell us about the self?

What we call the “self” can be understood as an ongoing process shaped by changing conditions—body, memory, experience, habits, relationships, culture, and present circumstances—rather than as something permanent and independent.

16. If everything is conditioned, how can we change?

Change is also conditioned. Awareness, meditation, reflection, relationships, education, and repeated actions can become new conditions that influence what happens next.

Philosophy and Life

17. If everything is conditioned, do we really have free will?

Perhaps not in the sense of an entirely independent chooser standing outside causes and conditions. Awareness is itself conditioned — it does not escape the causal web. But not all conditions operate in the same way. Habitual reactions tend to repeat the past automatically, while awareness can interrupt that repetition and allow a different response to arise. The freedom available, then, is not freedom from conditioning, but a shift in the conditions shaping what happens next.

18. How can meditation help when something genuinely bad happens?

It doesn't make the event good or remove pain. It may help us distinguish the unavoidable pain of the situation from additional suffering created by fear, resistance, rumination, and imagined futures.

19. Is acceptance the same as resignation?

No. Acceptance means recognizing what is actually happening. We can accept reality as it is and still act vigorously to change what can be changed.

20. How do we deal with difficult people?

Notice our own reactions first. Understanding the conditions behind another person's behavior doesn't require approving of that behavior or allowing ourselves to be mistreated.

21. How can we tell whether meditation and ethical practice are actually changing us?

Notice whether difficult states such as anger, craving, fear, or resentment occur **less frequently, with less intensity, or for a shorter duration**. None of these measures requires eliminating negative emotions. The question is whether we are becoming less dominated by them and recovering from them more readily.

22. What does a Buddhist approach say about living a good life?

Pay attention. Cause as little unnecessary harm as possible. Cultivate generosity, kindness, understanding, and appropriate action; recognize that this is an ongoing practice rather than a goal.

23. What is the reward for living a good life?

As I sometimes put it, *“The reward for living a good life is living a good life.”* Ethical behavior does not need to depend on a future reward, punishment, or metaphysical promise. Living with generosity, kindness, awareness, and less harm has value in the quality of the life being lived now.

Reflection: Has meditation changed the way you experience ordinary life? If so, how?