Meditation is Understanding

World-Renowned Spiritual Teacher J. Krishnamurti explains why simply concentrating on something to tune out our thoughts is not meditation in his famous book The First and Last Freedom

When you sit down to meditate, you fix your mind on a word, on an image, or on a picture, but the mind wanders all over the place. There is the constant interruption of other ideas, other thoughts, other emotions, and you try to push them away; you spend your time battling with your thoughts. This process you call “meditation.”

You are trying to concentrate on something in which you are not interested and your thoughts keep on multiplying, increasing, interrupting, so you spend your energy in exclusion, in warding off, pushing away. If you can concentrate on your chosen thought, on a particular object, you think you have at last succeeded in meditation. Surely that is not meditation, is it? Meditation is not an exclusive process—exclusive in the sense of warding off, building resistance against encroaching ideas. Prayer is not meditation and concentration as exclusion is not meditation.

What is meditation? Concentration is not meditation, because where there is interest it is comparatively easy to concentrate on something. A general who is planning war is very concentrated. A business man making money is very concentrated—he may even be ruthless, putting aside every other feeling and concentrating completely on what he wants. A man who is interested in anything is naturally, spontaneously, concentrated. Such concentration is not meditation, it is merely exclusion.

So what is meditation? Meditation of the heart is understanding. How can there be understanding if there is exclusion? How can there be understanding when there is supplication? In understanding there is peace, there is freedom. That which you understand, from that you are liberated. Merely to concentrate or to pray does not bring understanding.

What, then, do we mean by understanding? Understanding means giving right significance, right valuation, to all things. The very nature of stupidity is the lack of comprehension of right values. Understanding comes into being when right values are established. And how is one to establish right values...the right value of property, the right value of relationship, the right value of ideas? For the right values to come into being, you must understand the thinker, must you not? If I don't understand the thinker, which is myself, what I choose has no meaning. That is, if I don't know myself then my action, my thought, has no foundation.

Therefore self-knowledge is the beginning of meditation—not the knowledge that you pick up from my books, from authorities, from gurus, but the knowledge that comes into being through self-inquiry, which is self-awareness. Meditation is the beginning of self-knowledge and without self-knowledge there is no meditation. If I don't understand the ways of my thoughts, of my feelings, if I don't understand my motives, my desires, my demands, my pursuit of patterns of action, if I do not know myself, there is no foundation for thinking. The thinker who merely asks, prays, or excludes, without understanding himself, must inevitably end in confusion.

The beginning of meditation is self-knowledge, which means being aware of every movement of thought and feeling, knowing all the layers of my consciousness, not only the superficial layers but the hidden, the deeply concealed activities. To know the deeply concealed activities, the hidden motives, responses, thoughts and feelings, there must be tranquility in the conscious mind—the conscious mind must understand the right significance of its own activities and thereby bring tranquility to itself. It cannot bring about tranquility, stillness, by mere regimentation, by compulsion,

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by discipline. It can bring about tranquility, peace, stillness, only by understanding its own activities, by observing them, by being aware of them, by seeing its own ruthlessness and so on. When the superficial, conscious mind is thus fully aware of all its activities, through that understanding it becomes spontaneously quiet, not drugged by compulsion or regimented by desire. Then it is in a position to receive the intimation, the hints of the unconscious, of the many, many hidden layers of the mind—the racial instincts, the buried memories, the concealed pursuits, the deep wounds that are still unhealed. It is only when all these have projected themselves and are understood, when the whole consciousness is unburdened, unfettered by any wounding, by any memory whatsoever, that it is in a position to receive the eternal.

Meditation is self-knowledge and without self-knowledge there is no meditation. If you are not aware of all your responses all the time, fully cognizant of your daily activities, merely to lock yourself in a room and sit down in front of a picture of your guru, of your Master, to meditate, is an escape. Without self-knowledge there is no right thinking and without right thinking, what you do has no meaning, however noble your intentions are.

When there is right action, there is no confusion and therefore there is no supplication to someone else to lead you out of it. A man who is fully aware is meditating; he does not pray, because he does not want anything. Through prayer, through regimentation, through repetition and all the rest of it, you can bring about a certain stillness, but that is mere dullness, reducing the mind and the heart to a state of weariness. Exclusion, which you call concentration, does not lead to reality—no exclusion ever can. What brings about understanding is self-knowledge, and it is not very difficult to be aware if there is right intention. If you are interested to discover the whole process of yourself (not merely the superficial part but the total process of your whole being) then it is comparatively easy. If you really want to know yourself, you will search out your heart and your mind to know their full content and when there is the intention to know, you will know. Then you can follow, without condemnation or justification, every movement of thought and feeling, by following every thought and every feeling as it arises you bring about tranquility which is not compelled, not regimented, but which is the outcome of having no problem, no contradiction. When the mind is still, then that which is immeasurable comes into being.

J. Krishnamurti was a world-renowned spiritual teacher whose lectures and writings have inspired millions. For more information on his life and work visit www.kfa.org.

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