

Meditation and the Butterfly Way

by Nell

Have you ever watched a butterfly flying across a garden or a meadow? They don't fly in a straight line. They go this way and that way, changing their course every few feet. It isn't because they have a hangover from all the nectar they drank last night: it's because butterflies navigate by smell. A butterfly takes a sniff and perhaps it detects the scent of a plant that has yummy nectar. So the butterfly flies a little further and samples the air again. If the smell is weaker, it will go in a different direction. It zigzags back and forth, smelling as it goes, and little by little approaches the plant with the nectar it wants.

Aren't our lives often like that? Isn't that the very definition of channel surfing on the TV? Or think about driving through traffic, changing lanes because the other lane is moving faster, then changing back when we decide the first lane is moving faster after all. When we walk into a room where there are people, we may act very much like the butterfly, sampling here and there until we find the cool people.

This doesn't happen because we have to navigate by smell—it's because we're constantly on the look-out for "the best" in any situation. We're always trying to figure out what is going to give us the most satisfaction, or the least discomfort—however we define satisfaction or discomfort. We're looking for the bigger slice of the pie, or we're trying to at least stick our finger in the pie, or we're trying to storm the door to the room where the pie is kept, or we're saying what a terrible pie it was anyway so that we don't feel bad about missing out, or we're sharing our piece with someone else because we feel good when we do that. Life is a constant search for satisfaction and we can look a lot like a butterfly in flight as we navigate through our day.

This behavior is totally normal, not just for human beings but for all living things. So what does this have to do with meditation?

Many people begin meditation because they aren't happy. Their strategies for finding satisfaction and avoiding pain aren't working so well. I certainly started meditation that way: in the throes of a crushing depression. Meditation worked for me then. For a few moments out of the day, my emotional pain lessened and that was a tremendous relief. Eventually my circumstances improved and I stopped sitting every day. In fact, I meditated less and less. My usual strategies for finding satisfaction seemed to be working again...until the next disaster...

When our minds continually present us with thoughts of our failure, of our dismal future, of the chaos and hazard in our world, meditation can be a great relief. When our emotions are on a roller coaster or we are sunk down in the dumps, meditation can be a balm. When things get better and we cheer up, meditation is no longer so important. We will go back to our other strategies for happiness, back to flitting from here to there in search of what seems best for us at the moment.

What could be more different from our butterfly way of seeking satisfaction than to sit down and be still? The very fact that we sit in meditation seems to say, "Ok, right now I'm not going to run after anything. Whatever satisfaction or relief from pain I find, I will find right here." We stop physically flitting about—and then we see that the mind, too, is flitting. Our thoughts go here and there, seeking excitement, dredging up memories, projecting fears, anticipating pleasures. Flit flit flit...flit flit flit...

When I began meditating, my meditation brought relief from depression. But when things got better, the relief wasn't so noticeable. What I noticed was how hard it was to get my mind to stop flitting. I could concentrate on my breath for only a few moments at a time. Then some thought would take over. It was a struggle. I quit meditating. I went back to it. I quit again. I went back to it. Although I couldn't have told you so at the time, I think I sensed that meditation was something fundamentally different from my usual strategies for coping with life. I didn't want to give up on it. But it was hard and often frustrating. And yet, when I could keep it up, I noticed a difference not in how well my meditation went, but in how I felt day to day—calmer, not so easily upset by things, and less prone to bouts of obsessive thinking about situations that were not at all pleasant to think about.

The Perfect Day and the Genie of Happiness

It is a rare and wonderful moment in life when we say, "I am so happy: I wish things could be like this forever. I don't want anything to change." But even that happy state is vulnerable because we begin to fear that it will change. We

become conscious of the fragility of that happiness and even before the happy state has changed, we may be thinking about how we will miss it when it is gone!

Happiness is a tricky business. We all think we know what happiness is, but do we really? Has there been anything in your life that has made you permanently happy? All happiness is fleeting and that's why we wind up like the butterfly, flitting from one good time to the next, or when our luck isn't so good, fleeing from one bad thing to another.

Here's an experiment. Think of an absolutely ideal situation, the perfect setup, the circumstances that would make you sublimely happy. Is it a relationship? Does it involve financial security? Your dearest friends? Walking out the doors of prison? Cars or houses or clothes or piles of money? Natural beauty, sunsets, mountains, oceans? Imagine that you are experiencing that moment when you say, "Life is perfect. I don't want anything to change." Look at that fantasy and notice what things (physical or emotional) go into this picture.

Now imagine that a genie or fairy godmother appeared to you, magic wand in hand, and said, "I will make you that happy, as happy as you were in that fantasy, but I won't give you any of the things that you put into your fantasy. I will only give you the happiness directly. That happiness won't need any things or circumstances or other people in order for you to feel it. Nothing in your life will change from how it is right now, except that you will feel completely happy." (We're not talking about being high, just being happy.)

When I first did this experiment, I noticed a feeling in me that to just have the happiness without the things or "happy situations" felt unsatisfying, almost like I would be cheated! I found it very strange that I reacted that way. If I want to be happy, why wouldn't I just want the happiness? Do I really want the other things so much or am I holding on to a belief that I can't be happy without all the things or circumstances that I associate with happiness?

After all, if it doesn't take my house, my food supply, my partner, my family, my friends, my pets, my job, my car, my clothes, my health, my TV, my music, my haircut, my figure, financial security, the respect of my coworkers, the appreciation of my boss, the weather, my freedom, the government staying out of my life and the fair and equitable distribution of wealth in the world so that no one is starving or living in misery to make me happy then...can I just be happy right now?

Sometimes we make lists of things we want and call them "wish lists." It seems harmless, it seems like setting goals or just expressing ourselves. But is that list also your list of happiness requirements? Are you saying you can't or won't be happy until you have those things?

Is it possible to be happy without the things on your list? For each thing on your list, think about a time in your life when you did not have that thing and yet you were happy. And if you can't come up with a time when you were happy without that thing, think about the millions of people in the world who live without that thing and yet they do experience happiness, even if it's fleeting.

I'm not saying you should be happy if the things you want are missing or if bad things are happening. I'm not saying, suck it up! I'm only saying: stop flitting and think about the true cause of happiness. Where does it really come from? Where does it really live?

Meditation Will Make You Happy ~ True or False?

In the ordinary pursuit of happiness, we look outside of ourselves for the thing, or the situation, or the person who will make us happy. Meditation takes a fundamentally different approach, based initially on the belief (and later on the awareness) that lasting happiness cannot be found in the ephemeral, ever-changing world of things and persons outside of us. Meditation cultivates happiness and satisfaction from the one source that will always be with us: ourselves.

What do we have to do to develop this inner source of happiness? Well, what we don't have to do is sit in meditation trying to make ourselves happy! What is required is simply to follow the basic meditation instructions: be still, focus our attention gently on the breath (or other object) and notice when our thoughts wander. In other words, stop flitting. By following, or attempting to follow, the basic instructions, we are forced to give up the constant seeking, moment by moment, for comfort or escape or advantage.

This is a challenge! You may sit for one minute and your mind will say, "This is boring! I'd rather read a book. What is that person reading? Am I missing my TV show? I have an itch. I wish I had a donut. I don't think this meditation is doing any good."

You want to jump up and go do anything but meditate. Right there, you have caught your mind, you have exposed it in its never-ending Quest For Something Better. And the problem with the Quest For Something Better is that the mind can't stop. It can't actually be still and experience betterness in the here and now. It has to keep moving on. And on. And on.

If we stick with our meditation and eventually slow our thoughts down, even a little, we begin to take the edge off our fear of discomfort. Restraining our impulse to bolt away from boredom or anxiety, we begin to tap into our natural courage for facing life. Through watching our thoughts come and go, come and go, come and go, we see that most uncomfortable situations involve two elements: an actual event or circumstance in the world and our thoughts about that event. (Some so-called uncomfortable situations involve only our thoughts—there isn't anything "in reality.") As we learn to see our thoughts as separate from the events to which they are attached, we see that most of the discomfort in any undesirable situation actually comes from our thoughts, not from the external world.

For example, say my boss has scheduled a meeting with me and I don't know what it's about. For a day, I worry. I think of all the things I've done at work lately that have been not-so-good. Pretty soon I'm having a fantasy of hunting for a job...running out of money...losing my house...living on the street! Or maybe I think he has noticed my great work and my fantasy is of a raise or commendation. Then the meeting happens and my boss calmly says, "I notice you've been a little late getting to work. Please be on time."

Now I'm hurt and angry. "Doesn't he see what a great job I'm doing? It's petty to be so rule-bound! What a blockhead he is, a true bureaucrat! Other people come to work way later than me." The anxiousness I experienced before the meeting and the mental reaction afterward bring me hours of discomfort. In reality, my boss said a dozen words that took less than a minute. Which actually caused me the most distress, the words he said or the thoughts I had before and after?

Being a meditator does not mean that we don't react to things. Notice that the meditation instruction does not say, "Don't react, don't get upset." It only says, "focus your attention on your breath." But by working with our mind directly, we learn the difference between our thoughts and the world "out there," the world we think we are describing with those thoughts. How can we hope to reduce the suffering in our lives if we do not correctly understand the source of our suffering? How can we hope to improve our experience of our own life if we believe that our thoughts and feelings are dependent upon external circumstances, circumstances which we cannot control?

Unlike some programs of self-help or attitude adjustment, meditation does not teach us to reinterpret the world. The answer is not to convince myself that my boss is a great guy, that he was looking out for me, that he was just doing his job, that I should be more understanding, that I should admit I was wrong—whatever! Through meditation we see that thoughts are just thoughts, arising and vanishing, coming and going, hot one moment and cold the next, and that we can relate to them just like we relate to other phenomena in our lives—like the weather, for instance.

When we meditate, when we stop flitting, when we are still enough to actually see what is happening in our heads all the time, a change occurs in the quality of our experience, a change that is not dependent on "good fortune" or "good things." As this happens—and without anyone teaching us, without adopting any dogma or system of beliefs—our meditation practice begins to become a positive experience. It becomes less and less about escaping the stress and squalor of our lives and more an expression of the natural goodness of being alive. We don't have to make this happen, we don't have to work at it, we just keep practicing and over time it happens.

If you become a really good meditator, will you go through life with a smile on your face, never upset? Probably not. When you stub your toe, it will still hurt. When someone you love dies or goes away, you will still grieve. But you will not be consumed by these feelings. You can learn not to add anything to them. You experience them, fully, and then they're over. You know how to stop flitting, stop fleeing, stop seeking: wherever you are, in a solitary cell, on a park bench, riding a bus, standing in line, at home, at work.

You can just be, exactly the way you are, and amazingly, astonishingly, radically, that will be enough. Even more than enough. We may find a true and abiding satisfaction in things (including ourselves) just as they are. This doesn't mean we turn into a blob and never assert ourselves again. It means that we choose to act instead of being driven to act by fear of pain or boredom. And it means that we can face the consequences of our actions without arrogance or fear, whether things go our way or not.