



Illuminating the Mind: Exploring Buddhism and Science with the Dalai Lama Meditation with Jack Kornfield

Jack Kornfield (00:08):

Hi, I'm Jack Kornfield, and I'd like to add an experiential dimension at this point in our series. Together, we'll explore three practices all called upaya or skillful means to help quiet the mind and open the heart and allow us to develop and foster both wisdom and compassion.

(00:34): The first practice, which is a practice of staying attention, follows from what Helen Wallace spoke of of shamatha, the skill of directing and steadying and focus our attention so we can see and understand more clearly. It's like focusing the lens so we can see through a telescope the galaxies and the constellations, the moons of Saturn, and so forth. With a steady and concentrated attention, we can see with greater clarity. And this brings both understanding and a sense of wellbeing. The first practice we'll do in this one point at attention is the most universal of all, one that many of you are probably familiar with, it's the practice of mindfulness of breathing using a mindful, loving awareness to notice the experience of the body breathing. Often, we're distracted and not quite attentive to where we are. There's a line from James Joyce where he wrote a one character, "Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body." So in this first practice, we bring the body and our attention, our body and mind and heart together in the same place.

(02:01): I'll do it as a guided meditation and you can practice it on your own after this. One thing important to say before we begin is that this practice of mindfulness of breathing is not intended to make you a good breather. You're already quite fine at that. Instead, it's using the fact that our ever moving breath is here with us, whatever the circumstance, using that fact as a way to softly and directly steady and concentrate our attention so we can actually be where we are. It's also important as you practice to be aware not just of the attention to the breath, but to begin to feel how the environment of the mind, the states of the mind, change. They become quieter, more at ease, steadier, all of these things that arise as you simply feel your breath.

(03:10): So let's begin. Find a posture where you can sit that is both comfortable and stable, where you're upright so there's a sense of alertness and at the same time, ease like the queen or the king seated on your throne halfway between heaven and earth in this human form. When you're ready, allow your eyes to close gently and take two or three long deep breaths. And with each breath, release whatever obvious tension you can naturally. And now, let the breath settle down to its natural and spontaneous rhythm. Relax as you begin. Let the eyes and face be soft,

loosen the jaw. Let the shoulders relax as well, and the arms and hands rest easily. Let the belly be soft and the breath natural.

(04:53): And now, with this embodied presence, begin to notice how your body is breathing. Just the fact of it. Notice wherever you feel the breath most naturally. It might be the whole sense of the body breathing with this ocean of air that surrounds us. It might be coolness in the nostrils or swirling tingling in the back of the throat, or maybe the rise and fall of chest or belly. Wherever you feel the breath most easily, bring your mindful, loving attention just there and feel the rhythm of the breath as it comes and goes, relaxing with each breath, steady and present.

(06:29): If it's difficult to sense your breath, you can put one hand on your belly and feel the rise and fall of the breath in the palm of your hand. When your attention wanders from the breath, which it will do repeatedly especially because we live in a culture of short attention span, no judgment, simply kindly return your attention to the breath when you notice. It's like training a puppy, sit, stay. Does the puppy stay? No, it gets up and runs around, pees in the corner where you clean it up and you put it back. Sit, stay. And little by little, over and over, the puppy learns to stay. In the same way, gently return the breath. You don't want to beat the puppy. We want to be kind. This breath, let me start again just now.

(08:24): For some people, it's helpful to use a soft word as you breathe, whisper in the back of the mind, Thich Nhat Hanh, the great Zen master recommends that we use words like ease and calm, breathing in, note ease, breathing out, calm, but let 95% of your attention feel the beginning and middle and end of the in-breath or the rising, the pause between breaths, and the out-breath or falling.

(09:08): (silence) Just this breath, let it be short or long, deep or shallow, any way it wants. The breath miraculously breathes itself, and you become the loving witness of this life breath. Let the thoughts and feelings, the sounds, all the other experiences that arise, let them rise and fall like waves of ocean around the breath. And your simple invitation is to be with this breath again and again, calm, ease. Invite and notice the quieting to calming the calms, the steadiness, these beautiful states of mind, let it come to you there for a few moments as you rest in the breath.

(11:21): (silence) This breath breathing itself, calm and ease. There's steady, loving awareness. (silence) No judgment, just a kind attention. As the great cook, Julia Child, said, "If you're in the kitchen and you drop the lamb, you can just pick it up. Who's going to know?" And in the same way, without any judgment, we were gently training the attention to this breath with a half smile and a sense of ease, calm and steady. (silence) One more minute.

(15:40): (silence) When you're ready, let your eyes open again and stay with the feeling of presence. This meditation, the shamatha practice or the steadying of attention with the breath, you can take it anywhere with you whenever you need to. You can pause and take 30 seconds or three minutes to center yourself, let yourself feel the breath and invite the quality of ease and calm, the presence. The steadying of attention is one of the great arts, and you can use it if

you're writing code for the computer or playing tennis, if you're making a work of art or making love. All of these asks for a steady attention and your ability to train the puppy, to learn again this beautiful skill and art of how to be steady using your own breath will serve you over and over. It's also the gateway to the deeper insights that are available through meditation.

(16:58): And so, in the second practice that we'll do together, we'll use the capacity of attention of what I'm calling mindful, loving awareness, and directed instead of the breath to another dimension of our experience. Traditionally, mindful, loving awareness can be directed to all the energies and sensations of the body, to feelings and emotions, to thoughts, and the very process of consciousness itself. It can be directed inwardly or outwardly where we can direct our attention to another person or to the processes of life around us.

(17:47): In this practice, we'll begin in a very simple way to see the power of this practice, to help us disidentify with the thoughts that we have. You, like all of us, have this huge stream of thoughts, the mind secretes thoughts the way the salivary gland secretes saliva. They just pour through you, images and words and so forth. No problem. Thoughts are wonderful, but thoughts are a good servant and a poor master. We can easily get caught up in our thoughts. We can be so lost in our thoughts that we walked down the street and don't see the faces of the people we walked by, the lavender color and the puddles from the rain storm and the sunset, the beautiful things in the windows that we pass. We lose our life when we're lost in thought. And then, there are thoughts that take us over, unhealthy thoughts of great worry and anguish and grasping and fears, all the stories that are not helpful.

(19:01): So here's how we can cultivate this same capacity of mindful, loving attention to thoughts. And we'll do it as a game. In just a minute, I'm going to invite you to count your thoughts. You become a little bit like the cat at the mouse hole waiting to see which mice come out and you're going to wait. And as soon as a thought appears, you give it a number, three, four. We'll do it for a whole minute. Now, of course, the numbers are thoughts as well. Don't count them. That's called the cat chasing its tail, and there's no end to that. Also, be aware that thoughts are sneaky like little mice. Sometimes they sneak up from behind and say, "There haven't been many thoughts yet, have there? Oh right, six," or, "You're really doing good. You're such a good thought counter. Oh, seven. I hate counting my thoughts. Oh, eight." And you just begin to notice all the commentary.

(20:08): Thoughts come in the form of images, they come in the form of words. Sometimes you get the audio and visual portion together. Sometimes it even feels like thoughts come up through your body. So let's do this little practice when you're ready. Again, allow your eyes to close gently. Take a deep breath just to center yourself. And now, your job is simply to wait like the cat at the mouse hole and count your thoughts. On your mark, get set, go.

(21:52): (silence) Congratulations. You did it. Now, if we were sitting in a room together, I would ask how many thoughts did people count? Someone would say, "I counted six," and somebody else might raise their hand and say, "Oh, I have 19." Does that mean that person who had 19

thoughts thinks more than the person who'd think 6 thoughts? Maybe the person with 6 thoughts had long thoughts, and the 19 was short thoughts. Again, I would ask how many have picture thoughts? Maybe 20% of the room, hands would go up, word thoughts, 60%, words and pictures, another group. However you experienced it, you begin to notice how your mind is working. But the most important thing in this playful meditation is that you became the mindful, loving witness of thought.

(22:48): Usually, we're lost in thought, but you could feel quite easily that you became the loving witness to notice the arising and passing of thoughts, whisper thoughts, short thoughts, long thoughts, picture thoughts. And this is part of the shift of identity that deepens our sense of freedom offered in the practices of meditation, not simply to become aware of the breath or the emotions and feelings. All of these of which are valuable to be connected with our body, our hearts, our minds, but to also realize that we are more than that. You are not just your thoughts. I hope not anyway, given the way most people think. You're not your feelings either. They come and go like weather. You're certainly not your body, which was so different as a tiny infant and now completely different as you grow each decade.

(23:48): So who are you? You are the consciousness itself, a loving witness in this practice of the play of life, of the field of thought, as it comes and goes. And to be able to practice in this way, to step back, to listen to your thoughts respectfully gives you the possibility of choosing the healthy ones, letting go of the unhealthy ones, remembering who you are, which is loving awareness consciousness itself.

(24:24): So this leads to our final and third meditation. As you heard from Anne, there is a capacity for global attention, not simply the focused attention of shamatha which steadies our awareness wherever we are, but instead as you could feel in counting thoughts, it's possible to step back and become the witness or the witnessing. Because when you look deeply for the witness, you can't find anyone sitting in there. What you find is an emptiness that is aware of consciousness itself. Now, all this is like, "Blah, blah, blah, or I've heard the Buddhist teachings on emptiness, and sunyata, and the Zen stories and so forth." Yeah, but what does it mean? How do we actually work with it and experience it?

(25:25): So in this third practice, it will give you a window, a gateway, a skillful way of understanding it. When my teacher, Ajahn Chah, had practiced in the forest and wilds of Thailand and Laos for some years, he went to the greatest meditation master of the day, another ajahn master called Ajahn Mun, and told him about all his experiences that he'd had, the pleasant ones and the dissolving into light and bliss and the painful ones and images and understandings. And Ajahn Mun looked back at him and said, "Chah, you've missed the point. Those are just experiences. If you're searching for freedom or liberation, you must do something entirely different. You must turn your attention back to the one who knows. All those experiences are like movies that arise on the screen, but what is the light behind them? Turn your attention back to the awareness itself," to what Ajahn Mun called the one who knows or the knowing.

(26:41): So as we get ready to start this last meditation, if there's any windows around you that you can open a little to get a bit more sound, do so because we're going to use sound, or if there's anything that gives you the play of sound, just natural sound, the wind, the cars driving by, whatever. And settle yourself in a way that feels quite relaxed so that we can practice for perhaps 10 minutes or so with your body being quite still. Now, allow your eyes to close gently. And instead of focusing your attention as we had on the breath or thoughts, instead of directing your attention in one of the many other ways you may have learned, we will start with the doorway of the ear and let yourself simply begin to listen to whatever sounds are present.

(28:09): There might be distant traffic sounds or soft sounds in the room from the heating or air conditioning system, sounds of people in the distance, or airplanes overhead, the gurgling of your stomach, the sound of your breath. And you just listen, nothing to do or change. You are listening with an open, receptive mind. And as you listen, let yourself feel or sense or imagine in any way you can that your mind is not limited to the size of your head, that your mind is open like the sky, vast and spacious. Let yourself feel or imagine or sense your mind so vast. And in the distance, sometimes you'll hear faint sounds, movement, cars, airplanes, people.

(30:26): Your mind is like the sky without boundaries, open and transparent. And these words appear and disappear just like the distant sounds or the sound of your breath. The sounds appear and disappear like clouds in a vast sky. And you are the openness, the vastness. You are the conscious awareness that receives the sounds, arising like these words and vanishing, leaving no trace. And notice too, just the sounds appear and disappear in the vast space of mind, no inside or outside, how thoughts and images appear just as you recently counted them. Sounds arise and vanish, and word thoughts and picture thoughts appear like clouds in the vast sky. And after a little time, they vanish, leaving no trace.

(32:42): You are the sky of awareness, open, transparent, empty yet containing all things. Sounds come and go. Thoughts and images appear like clouds, and then vanish. Nothing substantial. Moods and emotions arise in the vast sky, calm or sadness, expectation or boredom, longing, love. You are the vast sky of awareness. It can allow them to rise and play for a time like clouds or weather, and vanish. Even the breath moves like a breeze in the vastness, no inside or outside, just the cool sensations of breath floating and moving. Rest in awareness, become the knowing, the one who knows. This is your true home, your true nature, this vastness itself, consciousness without boundaries, wakeful, transparent, open.

(35:30): And finally, let this sky of awareness be filled with love for this is who you are. Love contains everything, receives everything. You are loving awareness and vastness. This is your own true nature. Rest in it. Trust it. It is home.

(36:17): (silence) Keeping the sense of openness and vastness, let your eyes open again. These are all practices that you can use. You can be sitting in a cafe on a busy street with all the sounds, and wonder how can I meditate here? Just close your eyes and listen to the play of

sound and become the vast space that hears it all. You can do this anywhere, anytime it would serve you. This points to the deeper reality and these practices can be used. You can use them when you're sitting with a woman in labor, the childbirth, at the beginning of life, or in hospice as someone leaves life, you can link your breath with theirs. You can open yourself to the sky of vastness.

(37:47): Whenever you feel overwhelmed, caught in the thoughts and fears and confusions, come back to your breathing, steady your attention. Open yourself as the loving witness to the thoughts and feelings without being lost in them. And then, open the attention in a global and vast way to remember the timeless awareness. That is who you really are. Thank you. I hope these practices and this whole wonderful series inspires you and supports you, develops your understanding and your compassion, and gives you a way to live that is freer and kinder and more awake. Blessings.