

The Obstacles of Meditation

A presentation with Susan Piver

[0:00:09.7] Susan Piver: Hello, welcome to the Science of Meditation summit, presented by Shambhala Mountain Centre. I'm Susan Piver, I'm a meditation teacher and founder of the open heart project. Today we will be discussing meditation for attention balancing, focus and relaxation.

And as we begin this exploration together it's useful to examine a few foundational questions such as; what is meditation? How does it help with these things that we long for like the ability to focus and relax and so on? What are some of the obstacles that basically all of us encounter? What are some of the key misconceptions that we should just dispatch immediately as we begin? And what can really help us create a sustainable practice, because, let's face it, pretty much anyone can learn to meditate but most of us, myself included, don't find it as easy to continue to meditate. So let's look at these things briefly before the day begins. So we're living in a time where amazingly and wonderfully there is a lot of data on mindfulness-meditation that has been created in the last ten to fifteen years and it has proven without doubt that meditation is awesome. It can help you with all sorts of things like managing pain, helping with treatment for depression, should you be undergoing such a treatment, it can help reduce stress by reducing the stress hormone cortisol, it can even raise the so called happiness set point, it enables you to be happier in your life and in your relationships and in your world, so yay, that is amazing, that is fantastic. There is also a lot of attention being paid to how mindfulness can help you be a better leader, a better golfer, a better parent, a better you name it. So while all this is wonderful, as mentioned, and fascinating, it can also create some distraction from the main point of what meditation is, how it works and how you can derive the most benefit from the practice. So to begin with, all meditation is, is substituting for your discursive mind another object of attention. So let's break that down a little bit, by discursive mind I mean that part of you and me and everyone that is always commenting, judging, critiquing, hoping, fearing and so on and perhaps in this very moment is saying something like "What? I've never heard that before, I don't think that's right" or "why is there so much orange in that screen? Does she know she's wearing an orange shirt with an orange background?" "What if I hadn't said that thing to her eight years ago, would my life be what it is now?" and "I just felt a kind of twinge in my knee, I hope I don't have cancer of the knee" and "oh my god, I hope this meeting today goes well" and you get the idea, it's this continual cascade of basically thought, commentary and for many of us judgment, very harsh judgment of ourselves. So in meditation we take our mind off of that and place it on a different object, and you may be wondering "well, what are you going to think about if not your thoughts?" Which is a very sensible question, so although our attention is almost always absorbed in our thought, you already know what it means to place attention elsewhere. If you have ever taken a yoga class, if you have ever gone for a swim or a run, if you have ever baked a cake or gone for a long drive or made out with someone or just taken a walk, you know what it's like to take your attention off your thoughts and place it instead on what you are doing, on the present moment. These things, yoga and kissing and walking and so on do what is called synchronising mind and body, in other words our mind is on what our body is doing and our body feels connected to our mind, and often it feels like they're going in two different directions, for example your body lies down to sleep, this happened to me last night as a matter of fact, and your mind starts answering email, or you want to sit down and answer email, your mind wants to respond to emails, but your body lies on the couch to watch television. So in other words they split constantly and the argument could be made that that is the source of stress, when that mind and body go in two different directions, because when they come together as they do in meditation and these other activities I described, we relax. This is

how we're built. So in some meditations the object that we place attention on other than thought is a sound, like you chant Om or you say a mantra to yourself silently or semi-audibly. In other practices that object is an image, something you'd gaze at, or visualise in your mind's eye and when your attention strays from either the sound or the image, depending on your chosen practice you notice that and you let go of your thoughts and you bring your attention back to that object. In many meditation practices, certainly many of the ones that you'll hear discussed today and the practice that I'm happy to lead you in later, that object is your breath. This is very convenient, it's very practical and it's also mysteriously magical, and I can't explain why because it's mysterious, so I don't know. So in other words, in meditation, this particular kind, you place your attention on the breath, meaning you feel yourself breathing, and we'll go into this in more detail later as I say, and you notice that your mind has become distracted by thought, doesn't matter what the thought is, beautiful, important, trivial, ambitious, boring, when you notice that you're absorbed in thought you simply let go and bring attention back to breath and begin again. So that is all meditation is, placing attention on an object other than your thoughts and when your attention strays, because it will, no big deal, you simply come back to that object. So I want to mention some of the key misconceptions about meditation that can really create tremendous obstacles, they've created obstacles for me and I've seen in a lot of people the same problem, so I want to help you just <inaudible 0:08:41.8> on the misconceptions made. The first misconception, the biggest misconception, the <0:08:48.8> misconception, the numero uno misconception about meditation is that, in order to do it you have to stop thinking. You don't, you just have to stop thinking that, there is no effort made to stop thinking or clear the mind of thought, there's certainly no effort made to just think happy, perky thoughts, your mind is invited to the party as is. In meditation, you can think whatever you want, that is not a problem, however, when you notice that you're absorbed in it as mentioned you just let go and come back to the breath that is the practice. Your mind exists to produce thought, just like your eyes exist to see, or if you're visually impaired your ears exist to hear, and so to demonstrate the silliness of trying to stop thinking, please do this with me, look out through your eyes, you're probably already doing that or hear out through your ears and now try to stop seeing anything or hearing anything, seriously, try that. Try really hard not to see or hear, depending on your chosen sense. Right? That's how hard it is to stop thinking and not necessary. Instead we relax with our thoughts as they are, and this is a profound gesture of friendship and gentleness towards ourselves. So you may think "this is what's stressing me out, I needed to shut up" dig, I feel you on that. There are two ways to sort of work with this internal stress, one is to try to ensmallen the mental space (I know that's not a word) and just sort of push out the stress by forcing your mind into a different arena, very difficult and actually stressful, or the second way, you can embiggen (also not a word, I know) the interior mental space to include whatever is in the field of awareness. So when you try to limit or cordon your awareness it's painful, but when you allow what is there to be there, allow the field of awareness to be as spacious and enormous and vast as it truly is, you find that you can include anything and still remain relaxed. Relaxed doesn't mean sleepy, it means allowing, allowing and relaxation in this sense is synonymous. So misconception number one, to meditate you have to stop thinking, no. The second misconception that I want to mention, this is becoming increasingly important I think as the literature on meditation grows, not to mention the apps and the websites and the helmets and all sorts of other things that people are creating to assist you, some of which are quite useful and some of which are quite silly, in your meditation practice, and it is that the misconception is that meditation is a form of self-help. And it's much more than that. Of course, we all come to it because we want help with something, that's fine, that's no problem, we want to be nicer, we want to feel less pain, we want to be more creative, and we want to just get a break, that's fine. However, when we sit and as our practice develops, it is interesting, instructive and essential to let go of that agenda, because in meditation we don't tell ourselves how to be or who to become,

instead we discover who we are and it's very hard to make that discovery when we're constantly applying our agenda to what we need the practice to do for us. So in that sense it's un-American or un-western to think "wow, it's not about self-improvement, it's actually a chance to stop with all the self-improvement machinations, which I'm sure you're already like super engaged in, it's a chance to rest from all of that. Meditation is not a life-hack, it is not a short-cut, in fact, there is no short-cut and it is the opposite of an escape, rather it is a way of sitting down, allowing yourself to be who you are, opening to yourself and leaning in to what you see and feel and experience. This gives you the ability, quite precious, to do the same in your post-meditation experience, which is what meditators call the rest of your life, so when you go about your life you can relax, you can open, you can lean in, you can allow your world to touch you, you can experience your life. So in my book this is better than self-help. So number two, meditation is a form of self-help, no actually, and it's a path of transformation, wisdom, joy, gentleness and fierceness. The final misconception that I want to mention is that meditation will make you more peaceful, and you know, that's a little bit overstating it, because it does kind of make you more peaceful, but if we come to it because we just want to "I don't want to deal with anything, I just want to shut it all out and relax" it doesn't quite work that way in my experience, if you have a different experience then it does work that way for you, so you have to verify this and everything I'm saying and everything you hear today and PS for the rest of your life, you must verify using your own intelligence. When you sit as mentioned, you relax, when you relax, the walls that we have built start to come down because we're not holding them so tightly, we're not guarding and we're not grasping as much. When the wall comes down, we notice how vulnerable we are, and almost immediately we notice then how vulnerable everyone is and how everyone, including you and me, is pretending they aren't. This is called gentleness and it is the root of true compassion, because we can't be compassionate if we're not open and if we don't let things touch us, then it's just some kind of concept. So to become vulnerable is the gateway to compassion, compassion, as it is said is the gateway to a life of joy. So when we let the wall down, things touch us and sometimes it feels good and sometimes it really doesn't, we discover something better than implacable peace. We discover authenticity, because we're actually living our life and letting things touch us. So rather than making you more peaceful, meditation makes you more genuine. Something to contemplate. So three misconceptions, to recap, you have to stop thinking, it's a form of self-help, and it will make you more peaceful. Not really, but sort of. So to make your practice sustainable, I would say three things are required, I'm just going to mention them very briefly because there's so much to be discussed today and learned, which is really really fantastic. First, some consistency in the practice is important. It doesn't mean you have to meditate for an hour every day, it means five minutes Monday through Friday. Some consistency is more important than duration, so an hour a week is not as good as ten minutes a day for six days, say. So some sense of consistency in the practice as best you can, and when you can't practice you must immediately do another practice which is even more difficult, and that is the practice of being gentle towards yourself. I'm not kidding, that's a very high and important practice. The second thing that is required to create a sustainable practice, is some sense of understanding of what begins to unfold for you as your practice develops. You may notice, as I did and others have, some version of my mind is becoming more sharp, my heart is becoming more soft and I'm noticing things, patterns and colours and connections that I haven't seen before, that's your path, so some connection to the rhyme and reason of that is important. You can get that connection by studying the practice, reading about it, watching videos about it, just some sense of connecting with great teachers of whom there are many, about what it means when this or that happens in your practice. You don't have to go overboard, but it's very important to have some connection to the path quality. And the third thing that creates a sustainable practice is practicing with other humans from time to time. It seems that when we sit in a room with other people or in an online summit with other people, because you're doing

this with others, it lifts our practice in a way that sitting alone in our house simply does not do. It gives us inspiration, it gives us strength, it gives us intention, it's very very helpful and useful and I would say even essential to sit occasionally with other people, you can go to a meditation centre, you can do this online summit and the next online summit from Shambhala Mountain Centre and still have that sense of togetherness, you can have a deal with a friend that lives in a different country than you, like at seven am my time, let's practice together and you can just text each other good luck and at the end of ten minutes have a good day, because some sense of connection to others is very useful. So you can do it, I know that what you're going to learn from the wonderful teachers that are to come in this summit will support you, and I wish you well with all my heart, in your journey.