

Interview with Peter Fenner by Ed and Debbie Shapiro ([www.edanddebshapiro.com](http://www.edanddebshapiro.com))  
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Deb: What does meditation mean to you?

Peter: Meditation for me is the presencing of pure awareness. It's simply being in the place where there's nothing more that needs to be done. It's the culmination of all searching of any type, and arriving at the point where there's a sense of total completion. It's the point where it's impossible to conceive of anywhere further to go. We arrive at the point where there's a dissolution of any notion of a path, of having been somewhere, and looking for a more preferable place to be. It's a dissolution of being in any particular place at all. Meditation in this sense, is being connected with the unconditioned dimension of being.

Deb: How does that enable us to deal with issues within ourselves such as shadow issues, anger, fear—does meditation address those?

Peter: Meditation can address those issues and feelings. We have to clarify that I have just been describing what I would call natural meditation, which is effortless. Nothing is involved. It's just the continual arising and presencing of what is, from a place in which there's no point of reference within us. We are just a clearing within which the universe flows through. In natural meditation, there's no technique, no meditator doing anything.

That's different from what Tibetan Buddhism calls technical meditation, where there is something that we do. It's a procedure, an activity that we insert into the flow of our experience in order to try to modify our experience. We want to produce a particular result, like reducing anger, frustration, or anxiety, in order to bring about an experience of peace, tranquility, clarity and so on.

When we're using the term meditation as something that a person does, there are innumerable forms, designed for different people to produce different results. Meditation can be used to become more loving, reveal and integrate reactive emotions, heal physical illnesses, discover peace and tranquility, sharpen the intellect, see things with less projection. But this is different from the natural arising of real completion.

Ed: Many people who meditate want to achieve what you described as the arrival point.

Peter: Yes, but let me clarify that even the experience of "arriving" is something that occurs within the practice of traditional meditation. In natural meditation there's really no arriving; we could say there is just being. The very idea of "arriving" also means we can become unstuck. That's what continually happens in a traditional meditation practice. We start at a point where we feel that something is wrong, something is missing, something needs to be done, and we look to meditation as a method for arriving at a place of completion.

With meditation, an internal change happens in people's experience: thinking slows down, a feeling of tranquility emerges, and our heart can open up. If we like what is happening, we might feel that, ah, we've arrived. We feel good. This is where we wanted our practice to take us.

But we still haven't entered the space of natural meditation. We are still in time. Even when we've arrived, we're still in time. We encounter a state within our meditation that lets us stop. We let go of all ambition and endeavor and finally come to rest, satisfied with what is. But because this is a conditioned state, it will invariably change. We will lose it. Things will change in the external environment. New sensations will arise in our body. New thoughts, images, and memories will come up. We'll start to think about the future and how we will handle different situations. At some point we'll see that we are no longer resting. We'll figure that we've lost it. Wow that was great! What happened? What do I need to do now? We are thrown back into the project of recreating a goal and going after it. This is meditation as a project, and this is the way a lot of people engage in meditation. There's a meditation, a meditator, and then the project, a particular way of practicing that's meant to produce a particular outcome. This is different from natural meditation.

In natural meditation there's nothing to do, whatsoever. There's no notion of being on the path, nor any experience of having arrived, because there's no point of reference. This is often called meditation without a point of reference, or the meditation that is no longer meditation.

Ed: Within this idea of waking up without a reference point, but still living in this world; what about suffering and fear and anger? Waking up and being in this place of non-referential awareness, do we still experience suffering-- personal suffering and the suffering in the world? Are we the same person, but with awareness?

Peter: Nothing changes. What we're talking about is just our natural way of being. We're not talking about an event. This is not something that happens. We're talking about natural meditation as the presencing of nondual awareness. Because it's non-referential, because it is contentless, we can't really think about it. There's nothing to think about!

In relationship to suffering, it's quite intriguing because something happens in the state of nondual awareness that is totally unique. When we ask the question, "Am I suffering? Is any suffering occurring in this moment?" the answer is clearly, "No. I'm not suffering." There's nothing that we can pinpoint, nothing we can identify within the field of awareness that we could say is an example, an instance of suffering. At this point people can easily conclude that this is a state that's free of suffering.

*But* equally we can't find the absence of suffering either. We can't say, "Ah, now I'm no longer suffering, because nothing has dropped out of my experience. It's totally unconditioned, totally transcendental. When I say it's transcendental, it's not somewhere else. It's this state right now. If it were somewhere else, then it would be a conditioned

experience. It would only arise, for example, when we are disconnected from our sense of embodiment, with who we are as a finite discrete individual.

Deb: You were talking before about the two approaches to meditation, the two understandings of meditation and moving from “seeking and arriving” to “being.” What’s the relationship between the two?

Peter: The aim of all meditation practice, in fact of everything we do, is to arrive at the space of pure effortless being. Once we’re in the space of pure being, there’s nothing more we *need* to do. However, this isn’t where we begin. We begin with the experience that something is missing and we seek to “close the gap” between what is and how we want things to be. If we think that the goal of meditation is to “become someone” or to “be somewhere” we stay inside the cycle of practicing—making some progress, feeling thwarted and sometimes briefly “arriving.” At some point within our practice, though, we see that there’s no gap.

We see that nondual awareness isn’t different from anything. It’s not a thing. It doesn’t have a structure. It’s completely consistent with everything. It’s consistent with doing nothing. It’s consistent with a formal meditation practice. If what looks like a formal meditation practice is happening within the space of nondual awareness, there’s no internal experience of a meditator trying to be somewhere else, even though it could look that way from the outside.

The trick is to use a practice that shows us with maximum efficiency that there is only “this”—and we don’t need to be anyone, or do anything, to be here.

Deb: Does this space of pure being impact suffering in the world?

Peter: In the space of pure being, there’s a simultaneous identification and disidentification with everything that’s happening. So in relationship to the suffering in the world and the suffering of humanity, there’s a complete identification with everything that’s happening, because there’s no separation. There’s no one inside, and so everything is included. There’s no difference between awareness and what’s happening in the field. In a sense there is just a state of pure, unbounded receptivity that takes everything in, just as it is.

But also, there’s no center to this state. No one is receiving, and it’s this “no one” that has the power to transform the world. When consciousness is resting in nondual awareness, there’s no boundary, nothing to defend, nothing to protect. Awareness fully and comprehensively penetrates each and every reality it encounters. It fully receives these realities without any distortion, dilution, or interpretation. There’s no judgment of right and wrong. There’s a complete entry into these experiences. Contentless awareness engages reality in a way that liberates people from ideas of freedom and entrapment, because this awareness isn’t bound by judgments of right or wrong. Nondual awareness isn’t impeded by the belief that what’s happening shouldn’t be happening!

Ed: And on a certain level it doesn't even exist. It's the illusion that it exists.

Peter: There's a simultaneous appreciation of the reality and unreality of whatever is arising, including what we would call suffering. It's as though consciousness can engage with another person's suffering as though it is suffering, realizing at the same time that no suffering is happening. Suffering dissolves like sand just falling through our hand.

Deb: How can someone who is functioning from the dualistic mind reach nondual awareness and taste it first-hand?

Peter: Meditation is the royal route into the state of pure being. When we take a break, sit down and slow down, this gives us the opportunity to inquire in a particular way. Firstly it gives us the opportunity to see how we are constructing that something is missing, that we are thinking that what is happening shouldn't be happening. It gives us an opportunity to see how we create that gap, how we create the sense of deficiency and limitation.

Ed: To see how we create ignorance.

Peter: Yes. We see the functioning of our conditioned mind. We see how we're habitually engaged in this weird exercise of thinking and feeling that things should be different from the way they are. We fight reality. And this is the structure that produces all of our suffering. Meditation gives us an opportunity to see the insanity of thinking that things can or should be different from the way they are in the moment. This insight lets us close the gap. We say, "Wow, what's going on here? All there is, is this. This moment right now can't be different, because this is how it is." We see that nothing can be added to this moment, or taken away from it. This recognition destroys our fantasies and all of our struggles. We see that right now this is all there is, and we don't need anything more than this. We are, in fact, fulfilled and fully satisfied in this moment.

Ed: But is it actually real anyway?

Peter: That's a great question because in the nondual space, we're no longer involved in the dualistic question about what is real or unreal. It's sufficient to say we know that what is, is. We don't need to go anywhere further with that question, because that's the type of question that easily keeps people on the path and produces a lot of frustration. People think, if I understand what is real, then I'll be liberated. We can grapple with this question for decades, but it's just another mechanism that keeps us on the path of struggle and temporary relief. The truth is, if we don't know this is an illusion, then it's real. If there's no question that it might be an illusion, there's no problem, no confusion. If we know that it's an illusion, we are no longer deceived, so again there's no problem.

We create a problem by thinking that this is all an illusion, and then thinking that we don't get this. People tie themselves in knots trying to work out which parts of this are real and which are unreal. We think, "Ah, something must be happening, but I'm distorting it. I need to cut through my delusions and then I'll know what's real." This is how we create a path, and find it very difficult to arrive at a point where what is, is!

Deb: And yet you are also involved with psychotherapy, yes?

Peter: Yes, I work a lot with psychotherapists. I've developed a model for offering nondual work in a clinical setting. I call it "nondual therapy."

Deb: But therapy implies dualism.

Peter: Yes just as meditation, dharma, and all paths imply dualism. There's nothing wrong with dualism. It's the starting point. It's where we are. Structurally there's no difference between someone coming into the office of a therapist and saying "Something is wrong with my life," or approaching a spiritual teacher, a guru, and saying, "I'm still suffering, how can you help me? What do I need to do?" The structure is fundamentally the same.

Nondual therapy is an adaptation of nondual teachings so they can work in the one-on-one setting in a western clinical environment. But the structure is still the same. We're still looking for whatever needs to be done in order to arrive at the point where two minds join in sharing the space where suffering simply cannot occur. This is mind-to-mind transmission happening in a therapist's office!

Ed: If people come to you for therapy and they aren't familiar with the nondual state, or even with meditation, how do you work with them? For example, how would you work with someone who is really suffering because they have been deeply abused?

Peter: I work with what is happening in the here and now because that's the only place we can access. First I get a read out on what is happening now. "Are you suffering now?" That's the critical question. "Are you struggling right now?" If the person isn't suffering in this moment, we can both acknowledge that. We can acknowledge that even though terrible things have happened, in this moment they are free. We can rest in this space and really savor it. The memories can be there, the knowledge of having been abused, let's say, but right now in this moment, they're not suffering. That's wonderful and beautiful because it points to the possibility of being free of the burden of the past.

We can then build on this experience. The focus of therapy can become nondual, because nondual awareness is the most powerful agent for healing trauma. We move into a space—a level of consciousness—where it's impossible to suffer. In the state of nondual awareness, it's possible to be present to past traumatic memories and images without any retraumatization happening. Traumatic memories, including sensations that arise at a neurological and cellular level, are neutralized in the field of nondual awareness. Not in the sense that they necessarily disappear, but they are no longer capable of disturbing us. It's impossible for any horrific image from the past, any terrible disgusting memory to produce any disturbance within pure awareness. I am currently developing protocols to support this type of healing.

If someone says, “Yes I am suffering,” then there are a lot of different possibilities. There are some really simple and effective things we can do. For example, we can just work with the idea of space. We might introduce this by saying, “One thing you can do with this pain is to create some space around it.” We then move into the idea of space. “You know space is interesting, connecting with space. Let’s do that. Space. Space. There is nothing in it, the space within which everything happens. We can’t say what it is. It doesn’t stop or start anywhere.” Slowly, through a type of induction, we connect someone’s mind with space. We can’t think about space (unless we’re an astrophysicist), so connecting with space takes us out of our minds, out of our thoughts, out of our pain. This is a very simple method for reconditioning consciousness.

We can also help people to develop a more robust relationship to the whole breadth of human experience, which includes suffering. We approach our suffering in an unrealistic way. We think that when we suffer something has gone wrong, but that’s not the case. If suffering is happening, it’s a function of the fact that we’re operating from needs and preferences. It points to the fact that we’re still functioning in terms of what we like and don’t like. Suffering is just evidence that we are regular human beings. We all suffer. It’s inevitable so long as we have desires and preferences. So instead of thinking that something has gone wrong with the universe when we suffer, we can think, “Yes, I’m suffering now because right now I’m wired up to suffer. But I also know first-hand the state of pure being—the desireless space—where suffering is impossible.”

Ed: But if you say needs and preferences, the average person might never have heard of this. They’ll say, “How can I live in this world without needs and preferences?”

Peter: My usual answer is, “You don’t need to worry about that. If the structure and strength of your needs and preferences is going to change, it will happen slowly. What we are initially doing is opening up some spaces in your life, perhaps some times each week where you’re complete within yourself, where you don’t need anything, where you are being refreshed and nourished by your connection with the space of pure being.”

It’s possible to periodically open up the pressure-free space of pure awareness. At the beginning, this is sufficient. Over time it’s possible to become less driven by needs, preferences and desires. It’s essentially a process of becoming more and more familiar and comfortable with less struggle and suffering.

Deb: You were talking about how non-duality can be of the greatest influence in the world because it can enter into each situation. Where does the motivation come to actually move the world into a more positive or compassionate place?

Peter: There’s no motivation. This just happens. We’re talking about a consciousness that’s at the point of total complete evolution beyond which there’s no more evolution possible. That consciousness has no boundary, no protection. It’s a force for transformation purely through its presence in the world without doing anything beyond being in that state-- being embodied and intimately connected with the conditioned world in which we live. No effort is involved. No motivation. No helping as such.

Deb: I want to ask a personal question. It feels important for our readers. How did you get to this place?

Peter: There are two answers. From one perspective, there's no place where I am, so I can't tell you how I got here because there is no "here." There's just "this." The other answer would be autobiographical. This will tell you something about me, but it doesn't illuminate how nondual awareness can emerge for anyone else. There are many people who've followed similar paths, who are still frustrated by the lack of results of their practice. Many people, for example, continue to think that they can understand the nondual state. They keep trying to work it out. And there are many people who have done little or no meditation practice who suddenly realize the unconditioned dimension of being.

Ed: I quite understand that, but which traditions have you practiced? Were you a yogi? What circles did you move in before coming to this point?

Peter: I've followed the same path as tens of thousands of Westerners who began searching in the 1970s or earlier. I journeyed the 70s, received Buddhist teachings in India and Nepal, spent nine years as an ordained monk, did a PhD in Buddhist Studies, and then augmented these practices with Western forms of clearing, depth psychology, group dynamics, and psychotherapy. So there's nothing particularly distinctive about that.

Perhaps one thing I've been aware of is how spiritual practices can condition us. Meditation is meant to decondition the mind and provide entry into an unconditioned space. I've born that in mind when I've engaged in different practices. It's easy to check if a practice is conditioning us. We just need to stop doing it for a little while and see what happens. Does it produce any fear, or any guilt? Do I think I'm missing out on an opportunity? If it does it means I'm being conditioned by the practice, and that's not what the practice is meant to do. So that's one thing.

Also, like most Westerners, I look for results. I became dissatisfied with practices that I couldn't do thoroughly, properly, in a way that felt relatively complete. I'm not a great meditator so a lot of practices produced frustration. I'd be trying to visualize myself as a divine, radiant, enlightened being and the result was pathetic! I'd be doing some type of breathing practice and half way into it, I'd forget what I was doing. So I looked at this and thought, "I want to do something that I can do, rather than something I can't do." This was a big breakthrough: how to close the gap between where I was and where I wanted to be. So in a sense the objective changed from doing a practice to closing the gap—to simply being where I was, rather than wanting to be somewhere else.

I found that "pointing-out practices" were very helpful-- simple, traditional forms of self-inquiry, asking, "Who is seeking? Who is meditating?" At a certain point, when we're not in a heavily conditioned experience, we can ask questions like, "What is this? And then the second question follows—"What is what?" And then we find that we don't know

where we are. We are in the nowhere that is everywhere. There is no reference point. Then we might ask, “Who is here?” And we can’t find ourselves. Then we might think, “Can I do more of this? Do more of what? I’m not doing anything, there’s nothing to do. Who is doing nothing? Can I do less of this? No I can’t. Can this stop? No it can’t, because it’s actually not happening.” Our thoughts effortlessly guide us into the nondual.

Ed: What you call meditation—how can it make a better world?

Peter: When consciousness rests in the nondual state, no one can threaten us because there’s no one to attack and nothing to defend. Nothing, no one is an enemy. Pure being is the only space where conflict is impossible. So the state of pure being has a profound impact on interpersonal relationships. When this becomes embedded within a community, it changes social and political foundations at the core. Realizing nondual awareness is also *the* most ecological activity possible, because in this state, we make no demands on ourselves or the environment.

Just imagine that at a global level, each person is able to find 10% more fulfillment internally, by connecting with pure awareness. The demands we would make on the environment and other people for our happiness would reduce dramatically. The world would become unrecognizable. The changes would reverberate through every sphere of life—the political, social, inter- and intra-personal. Instead of destroying the planet and each other, we would move into an era of global healing, reconciliation, and profound appreciation of the value of life. If you think this through, it’s clear that nondual awareness is the most powerful agent for healing the planet.

Ed: What about addictions and people with illnesses such as AIDS? What about people who are living in appalling physical situations—can meditation help them?

Peter: Definitely, nondual meditation can heal people of chemical and other addictions. Meditation gives us access to a source of inner fulfillment. We discover that our own nervous system and awareness can deliver pleasure without the need for external agents. We discover the possibility of being fulfilled simply by connecting with pure awareness. We learn to nourish and replenish our nervous systems and vital energy by connecting with the bliss of nondual awareness.

Nondual awareness is called the “ultimate medicine,” because when we’re in this state, we’re totally complete, nothing is wrong or missing. Even if we have a life-threatening illness, we are fulfilled because we are in a space where the flux of conditioned experience flows through awareness without any friction or grasping. We’re beyond the dualistic considerations of loss and gain. We have everything we need, because we don’t need anything. A side-effect is that it eliminates stress, tension and conflict. This puts our mind, body and nervous system in the optimal state for physiological and psychological healing to happen.

And the reality is that in order to enter into the state of natural meditation and self-healing, most people need supporting conditions. In order simply to meditate, our minds



need to be relatively settled, and we need some level of health, material wellbeing, and an overall feeling of security. So it's also vital that we also address such needs at whatever level they are manifesting—the psychological, physical, social and political. So, yes, meditation can definitely help, even in critical situations you are speaking about, and in order to arrive at the point where meditation becomes possible, a lot of other work is often necessary.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my understanding of meditation with you.