

The Heart's Longing

An excerpt from Padme Nina Livingstone's *Let's Not Call It Meditation: Practical Guidance for People Who Think They Can't Sit Still and Quiet the Mind*

Our heart's longing is essential food for our spiritual growth. We can look at other living organisms, like flowers, and see that don't long for anything. They grow, blossom, and die, nothing more. They do not have mistaken beliefs, which get in the way of experiencing their intrinsic wholeness. Flowers do not experience confusion and do not have to surrender to something beyond their understanding.

In fact, flowers point to the simplicity of our being enough, just as we are. The deeper we connect with our heart's longing, the simpler it is to keep questioning our pain-producing beliefs. And the simpler it is to remember this is the journey we want to consciously embrace. So, how does our longing fit into developing more awareness? First, the mind must at least be open a crack to notice the heart's longing. Although this longing is always available, we can be completely closed off from it. We need to understand the possibility that we can live with less suffering and confusion. Indeed, we must understand that we can grow. Our eyes must at least be open a little bit. Once we understand that we can change, we can develop the skills necessary to change. Then, we can welcome longing into our life, and open the way for our spiritual development.

“The heart's longing is the desire for more awareness.”

Usually, our experiences of longing come and go unrecognized. We hear an inspiring story or beautiful words, feel better for a moment, and then return to the status quo. Reading a self-help article may give us a temporary inkling of our possibility for growth. When that inkling becomes stronger, and we stay open, curiosity may be aroused. Activated curiosity about our present condition becomes the natural expression of our longing for wholeness. Then our curiosity can be directed towards the nature of our painful situation and the possibility for growth.

Our longing for deep healing is an essential aspect of being human. It helps us remember the path to inner growth is right in front of us, even when we experience forgetfulness and painful times. We find the strength to go on with the work; practicing being aware, even with our pain. Through our longing, we begin to heal, and glimpse a life of wholeness, of integrity. Our behavior displays our clarity and natural equanimity, disturbed less and less by chaotic circumstance. Our wholeness is uncovered when we know for ourselves what is true, grounded in the full integration of our experience and understanding.

Longing for wholeness directs us to seek out, ask for, and accept useful guidance. Especially in the beginning, we need the wisdom and support of others who have gone before us.

The beginning of my meditation practice was completely rooted in longing. My family was a confusing, often unhappy place to grow up in. I knew my family life had been a poor model for me and I wanted to be loving and feel love.

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When I first began to meditate in 1976, I had excellent guidance from Roshi Philip Kapleau and Toni Packer at the Zen Center in Rochester, New York. I felt the rightness of the path, and continued going to meditation sittings at the Zen Center out of a deep desire to stop my pain. I had faith in every word I heard about the eventual benefits from this meditation work and longed to experience those benefits first hand. I felt connected to, and grateful for, all the people who had gone before me.

For the first two years in Rochester, my husband-to-be Bill and I attended every possible sitting and talk at the Zen Center. We were hungry for more clarity and dedicated our lives to finding it. Longing is what got us out of bed for the 6AM sittings every weekday. Longing is what got us to every two-and-a-half hour evening sitting. Longing got us to attend our first all-day sitting and then, the seven-day silent meditation retreats we have attended since then.

Especially in the beginning of inner growth work and meditation, longing keeps us going. Some people feel benefits right away. However, it takes a while for some of us to feel the benefits in our daily life. We may meet others who inspire us with their behavior, and may hear inspiring stories. So, we keep going,

“Although this longing is always available, we can be completely closed off from it.”

and after awhile, we begin to notice changes. We may have more patience with our children, or take a moment before we blurt out a critical comment to our spouse. We may experience a heightened sense of being alive and happy. We may even witness family members changing because we've changed. However, unfamiliar and uncomfortable stuff can arise when we are meditating and practicing awareness, and proper guidance is essential in order to keep going.

Our longing is what brings an awakened teacher into our life. Appropriate trust in what the teacher tells us properly guides our longing to be who we really are.

Trust and guidance

The whole basis of a meditation practice is to find out what is true for one's self, through direct experience and personal understanding. All the great sages teach through their wisdom, gleaned from the understanding they have integrated from their own direct experiences. They do not teach from someone else's experience. They have found out for themselves what is true and what is not, what is loving and what is not. They have something to share.

Have you noticed how language is inadequate when you try to describe an experience? Getting home after a particularly difficult situation at work, and trying to speak about how you felt can be frustrating. Even after a wonderful experience, we want the person we are talking to feel the joy we felt. It never works, does it? We want the listener to get inside our body, so they can feel what we feel.

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Every meditation teacher lives with the inadequacy of words to describe what is. Every teacher uses his or her actions and words to point us in the correct direction, and to our own experience of what is. At some point, we want to go deeper. It can be extremely helpful to work with one person we trust to personally guide us. It is good to work with someone who knows us well enough to help us see through our confusion. It is so easy to be fooled by oneself!

We need to trust our gut feelings about who and what provides appropriate guidance. Awareness provides the inner space for our discernment to develop. We can trust the kind of questioning that is encouraged by an authentic teacher. Questioning, wondering what is happening, right here in the present moment, without expectation or judgment, allows us to remain open to what is. The benefits that come from this kind of questioning can be experienced by each of us. The teaching about how to realize the benefits is based on the personal experience of spiritual masters from the beginning of time.

“Our wholeness is uncovered when we know for ourself what is true...”

It is also good to remember that certain aspects of trust need to be questioned. Trust does not mean blindly following other people's conclusions. Just because our best friend thinks her teacher is perfect, we need to personally explore whether that teacher feels right for us. Our qualities of curiosity and understanding can help us decipher what's right for us and what's not.

Authentic teachers share their experience and wisdom as a gift to serve humanity. In addition, many historical masters left us their deeply moving, powerful personal stories, which have been passed down through their recorded teachings, writings and poetry.

We may need to read books, and listen to different teachers speak. Sometimes, we know the first time we hear about a teacher that we need to work with them.

“Every teacher uses their actions and words to point us... to our own experience of what is.”

Before we find the one we are ready to work with, we may need to travel and visit a few teachers. We may be fortunate and find one close to home. When possible, it is good to meet with the teacher privately and explore a potentially rich relationship.

Even though all meditation teachers are human and make mistakes, an authentic meditation teacher will always point the way to find out what is true and what is not. And they will leave it for us to find out for ourself what they tell us! Authentic meditation teachers have an ongoing responsibility to demonstrate through their actions, what they point to through their words.

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This is why it is so important to work with an authentically, awake meditation teacher. We are inspired by their example. The way they live reminds us to keep connected to our longing, and encourages us to remember that our hard work is worthwhile.

Importance of questioning

I learned an important lesson about proper guidance when I first began teaching meditation. I worked with a woman named Jackie, who said she longed for clarity and was new to meditating. I suggested to Jackie that she practice saying, "I am" to herself, with each out breath. Jackie worked with "I am" for a week and was strongly upset by her experience. Each time she said, "I am" her mind completed in the sentence with words like lazy, too slow, ugly, not good enough, and so on. She didn't know what to do with all this negative stuff. I had imagined something quite different. Clearly, my instructions were incomplete. I was new and had much to learn. Jackie was very unhappy and I was so startled at what came up for her, and limited in my own understanding at the time, I didn't have useful guidance for her. Without proper guidance, Jackie stopped coming. I hope her longing brought her a better teacher than I was at the time. I've often wished I could talk with her again.

Today, I would tell Jackie to listen with full attention to the mind that completes the sentence in a negative. I would suggest Jackie notice how the body responds to negative words; what does the body feel like when negative self-talk is going on? Is there a tightening, any discomfort? Believing untrue thoughts, or mistaken beliefs, literally causes the energy to get stuck somewhere in the body. Being with discomfort helps us to feel where the energy is getting stuck. The way we feel can direct our attention to mistaken beliefs and then we can explore what is true and what is not. The body is our natural Stop Sign whenever we believe untrue thoughts, like I am lazy, slow, ugly, etc. When we experience discomfort, we can Stop what we doing and bring attention to our discomfort. We can Look, and notice where it is and how it feels. And we can Listen to hear if there is a message for us.

There is a continual interplay between simply being aware, being with what is—like the uncomfortable sensations one feels when caught up in blame, and self-judgment— and growing by bringing our curiosity to life. Jackie would need to wonder if her beliefs behind the words are true or not. Questioning is wonderful because curiosity about negative self-talk literally transforms it.

Questioning creates a healthy distance from our uncomfortable feelings. We "step back" a bit from our discomfort when we are questioning what is happening in an open way, not knowing what the result will be. When we question like this, it is like we are children again, playing in the earth, looking for hidden treasure, happy with anything we find.

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Then we can explore, without fear, any dark feelings these automatic thoughts create when we are unaware. Once they are brought to light, and seen as untrue, they dissolve. At root, awareness and meditation is about finding out what is true and what is not. To find out what is true, we cultivate a questioning mind, and question thoughts that create painful experiences. I hope Jackie found freedom by exploring her pain-producing thoughts to discover what they were— simply not true.

Wondering about our thoughts allows what's true to be seen and what's not true to fall away. As we question pain-producing thoughts, find them to be untrue, and uncover more awareness, our longing changes over time. Eventually, our longing is embraced in awareness. The heart is satisfied and full. Noticing our life unfold, we are firmly rooted in what is, and spiritual longing is an invisible part of our field of play. It is such a part of our life that we no longer need to remember or forget it. We are what we longed to be. As we move through life with more compassion, clarity, and presence.



About Padme Livingstone

Padme Nina Livingstone is the Director of A Quieter Place: Practical Meditation for Living Your Life. She has a B.S. in Human Services and extensive experience with awareness meditation, self-inquiry, parenting, relationship skills, energy work, caregiving, and bereavement. As a meditation teacher and author, Padme has spent much of her life untangling her own confusion, while finding balance around her physical, mental, emotional and spiritual life. After more than 36 years of meditation and self-inquiry, and over 18 years of energy healing work, Padme discusses meditation, relationships, and energy healing using accessible, practical language with people who want to feel less stress, and enjoy more peace, clarity, compassion, curiosity, honesty, and gratitude. For more information, visit her website at www.aquieterplace.com