

Why is meditation important for Buddhists?

Gabrielle: Nam Myoho Renge Kyo, Nam Myoho Renge Kyo.

Ben: Gabrielle, I'm so sorry - we need to start the episode.

Gabrielle: Oh okay, I was just chanting - let's start and I can tell you all about it!

Ben: Hello and welcome to the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast. I'm journalist and broadcaster, Ben Hurst, and I'm your host for this series all about Buddhism. We'll be going over the key Buddhist beliefs and practices for your GCSE, and helping me with this is my co-host, Gabrielle Westhead.

Gabrielle: Hi Ben! Yes, I'm a writer and practising Buddhist, and in this episode, we're looking at the significance of meditation in Buddhism. My mum is Buddhist, so I grew up learning all about Buddhism, and meditation is a really important part of my life, so I'm excited to tell you about it.

Ben: Before we get into the details, grab a pen, some paper, or your notes app, because throughout the episode, we'll highlight key ideas you might want to jot down.

Gabrielle: Stay listening to the end, because there'll be a quick quiz too!

Ben: And remember, you can listen to all the episodes in this series, and ones on other faiths you may be studying at GCSE, over on BBC Sounds.

Ben: Gabrielle, I know meditation is a really important practice in Buddhism. Can you explain why it's significant?

Gabrielle: In Buddhism, we meditate to focus our mind so that we can better understand the Buddha's teachings. By concentrating on our breath, or on an object or sound, we can gain mental clarity, create a sense of calm, or bring forth energy. Ultimately, we hope this might help us reach enlightenment.

Ben: We spoke a bit about enlightenment in our episode about life and suffering. We explored how enlightenment is the goal within Buddhism. So how do Buddhists meditate?

Gabrielle: You may have seen people sitting on the ground with their legs crossed and their eyes shut. They might be quietly breathing and looking very calm. This is what you might typically picture when you think about meditation. But there isn't one set way to meditate - it's different across the Buddhist schools.

Ben: Yes, that's what I think of when I hear the word meditation. But you're saying that isn't the only way to do it?

Gabrielle: No Ben, there are lots of different meditation practices. I want to tell you about two categories of meditation practice.

Gabrielle: Samatha and vipassana.

Ben: Can you tell me about Samatha meditation first?

Gabrielle: Samatha means calm, tranquility, or serenity. It's about developing calm and focus, often through being mindful of your breathing. So, a common practice of this type of meditation is to focus on breathing in and breathing out.

Ben: I like that!

Gabrielle: This kind of meditation helps people to develop Samatha - a calm mind - which will help them develop insight into the Buddha's teachings and gain enlightenment.

Ben: Vipassana is the other aspect of meditation we mentioned, how is it different?

Gabrielle: Vipassana means insight. With a calm mind we can also use meditation to help us observe and understand things as they really are.

Ben: How do people practise Vipassana?

Gabrielle: It can be done in lots of different ways, but as an example, Buddhists who practise this type of meditation might sit in a quiet space and take note of whatever thought comes to them. They don't try to empty their mind of thoughts but rather acknowledge them as they come.

Ben: Thanks for explaining Vipassana meditation. Are there any other forms of meditation?

Gabrielle: Metta Bhavana is a meditation practice which means loving kindness. Buddhists who practise this form of meditation focus on developing loving kindness towards themselves whilst they meditate.

Ben: Focusing on loving themselves?

Gabrielle: Yes, the aim is to love yourself despite your faults, and to then direct that loving kindness towards others - including people you hardly know and even people you may not really like.

Ben: So why is meditating significant for Buddhists?

Gabrielle: There's a quote from the Buddhist text Dhammapada, from the teachings of the Buddha. It's verse 1 and says:

"Mind precedes all mental states."

It means that our mind, or our thoughts, shape our experiences in life.

Ben: Okay so if you have a negative mindset, you'll have negative experiences?

Gabrielle: Well, the Buddha didn't talk about positive or negative, he used the terms skillful and unskillful.

Ben: I see. So, the belief is that unskillful states of mind lead to unpleasant experiences?

Gabrielle: That's it.

Ben: How often do you meditate then Gabrielle?

Gabrielle: In my tradition, instead of meditating in silence, we meditate by chanting 'nam-myoho-renge-kyo'.

Ben: I like that! Just like you tune the strings on a guitar, you're learning the inner workings of your mind.

Gabrielle: That's how I think of it.

Ben: How do you use that visual object during your meditation?

Gabrielle: I actually keep my eyes open whilst I meditate. I look at the mandala and I observe my thoughts. I visualise my life - what I want to achieve, my goals - that kind of thing.

Ben: Thanks for sharing that. So, meditation can include visualisation?

Gabrielle: Exactly.

Ben: At the start of this episode, we heard you chanting. Is chanting also part of meditation?

Gabrielle: It's definitely linked! It's another way we can focus our mind. When Buddhists chant, we say things over and over again. These are called mantras.

Ben: Why are mantras significant?

Gabrielle: Mantra is an ancient Sanskrit word. Different traditions use different mantras but Buddhists think of them as sacred sounds they can chant to focus the mind, remove distraction and cultivate compassion, leading to positive karmic consequences.

Ben: What do the mantras say?

Gabrielle: The mantras can't really be translated but they summarise the Buddha's teachings. By saying them over and over again, we can calm the mind to make it more receptive to the Buddha's teachings and get closer to enlightenment.

Ben: I'd love to hear an example of a mantra?

Gabrielle: We chant a mantra called Nam Myoho Renge Kyo.

Ben: Thank you for showing me! How does chanting impact your life?

Gabrielle: What I love about chanting is that I can be myself. Happy, sad, excited, tired – I usually feel much better or even happier afterwards.

Ben: Amazing. And how does meditation link to some of the concepts we've spoken about in other episodes?

Gabrielle: In Buddhism, meditation forms part of the Threefold Way.

Ben: Yes, they were ethics, meditation and wisdom.

Gabrielle: Exactly.

Ben: For more on the concepts we've just spoken about, head to the Bitesize Website and the GCSE Buddhism pages.

Gabrielle: We're going to put your knowledge to the test now Ben. It's time for a quick quiz.

Ben: Let's do it. I'm going to grab a pen and paper to write down my answers.

Gabrielle: First question. What is the aim of Samatha meditation?

Ben: Samatha meditation helps Buddhists to become calm - for example through mindfulness of breathing.

Gabrielle: Correct! Next question. What is the goal of meditation?

Ben: Buddhists use meditation to cultivate mental clarity, calm and loving kindness.

Gabrielle: Exactly.

Ben: And finally - sometimes Buddhists will say something over and over as another form of meditation. What do we call this?

Ben: Sometimes Buddhists will repeat mantras over and over again.

Gabrielle: That's great, well done.

Ben: Thanks for listening to this episode of the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast.

Gabrielle: Next time, we'll be looking at how rebirth and karma are understood in Buddhist traditions.

Ben: And if you're studying other religions for GCSE, there are podcasts on more faiths, as well as series on different GCSE subjects like English and science. Just search for Bitesize GCSE on BBC Sounds.

Gabrielle: We'll see you next time.

Ben: Bye!