



bodhi tree

FOREST MONASTERY AND RETREAT CENTRE

Taking the Practice Home – Ven. Pannyavaro

The image most often associated with Buddhist meditation is that of a sitting Buddha in a crossed-legged posture. While such a representation is undoubtedly inspirational and aesthetically pleasing, it unfortunately suggests to the uninitiated that meditation is a static 'statue-like' pursuit practiced only in meditation halls.

If meditation is to have any relevance to everyday life it has to be done at home. This does not mean just your residence but wherever your attention happens to reside. To meditate at home requires a 'hands-on', dynamic approach that is not restricted to any particular time, place or posture. When applied in this way, it becomes integrated into the ordinary activities of life and becomes the basis for a meditative lifestyle in the home and the routine of everyday life.

Yet it has to be acknowledged that integrating meditation into daily life is not so easy. Therefore, you need to purposefully set yourself up to do it – good intention is not enough. There has to be commitment.

So consider your priorities, what is more important? Many hours spent on the Internet or sitting in front of the TV screen against the benefit to your wellbeing of half an hour or so of sitting meditation?

The regular daily home sit is the anchor for the practice, even if it is only used as a form of mental hygiene for 'un-stressing'. As a meditator, the daily practice sit will greatly contribute towards harmonizing your family and work relationships.

Essentially, meditating at home is about paying attention to the normal routine of the day. The actual meaning of 'attention' indicates its practice: 'to attend upon', 'to be present with'. So by being attentive 'presence of mind' is developed. While there are degrees of attention (down to lack of attention), it can be said that there are two types: 'mundane attention', which tends to be 'automated' attention and the intentionally 'deployed' attention that is developed in 'meditative attention'.

Focused attention is 'bare attention' that is just registering what is happening without reaction from a receptive state of mind. While the deployed mode of attention is applied when any kind of movement or action is done, including reflective thought on things observed.

So what do you pay attention to? Your own body and mind. There are four areas to establish one's attention on: -

The Body - tuning into its elemental qualities and/or sensations as well as monitoring body movements and physical actions.

Feelings - knowing the feeling tone as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral (not to be confused with emotion).

Monitoring one's mind-states - happiness, sadness, calm, elation, depression, etc.

The mental content i.e. the things of the mind e.g. thinking, concepts, and ideas – one's story.

Whatever is the predominant experience in any of these 'four spheres of attention' **it** is used as a frame of reference to help guide the practice of paying meditative attention to whatever is happening in your body and mind from moment-to- moment.

It is important to get your bearings. So it is a matter of literally coming to your senses, by being attentive at one of the Six Sense-Doors: these are the five senses, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching plus the sixth sense or mind-door which is the consciousness or knowing. By being present with 'bare attention' at any of these six sense-doors you can observe what is happening between the senses and their objects during a sense impression.

One thing to notice when watching at a sense-door during a sense impression is the feelings that arise. If the feeling is unpleasant a negative reaction occurs; if it's pleasant grasping arises. Thus the mind is mostly just reacting: liking, disliking. The result is that you are being caught in the conditioned cycle of suffering at the linkage of feelings and grasping. But there is no need to be. By intercepting the primary feeling at a sense-door, without the associated emotion, the feeling will go no further, therefore no attachments, no liking or disliking, end of story, end of suffering.

The ability to 'home in' is really the key to this practice. Get your bearings at a sense-door and keep in mind the 'four areas of attention'. Success in doing so also depends very much on the way you are relating to things: witnessing the experience rather than automatically reacting to it; having an attitude of acceptance of all thoughts, feelings and mind states without discrimination or selection. By developing such a non-reactive awareness it will enable you to be more receptive and intimate with what is observed.

For awareness to deepen, continuity of attention, which gives momentum to the practice, needs to be maintained for at least a few hours in the day. Continuity arises through careful and precise attention to movements, actions, feelings and mind-states - whatever is prominent, for as long as possible in whatever situation you are in during the daily routine.

Nothing can be dismissed as unimportant: domestic chores, eating, cleaning your teeth. Any and every movement and activity is repeatedly noted in order to establish the habit so that it becomes as it were second nature to note during the daily routine. Of course, this is not easy to establish and so it requires patience, perseverance and a sense of humour, especially when you feel frustrated by constant forgetfulness.

Set yourself up to do a daily mindfulness exercise using 'triggers' as reminders. Such a trigger can be every time there is contact with water to remind you to be present with whatever you are doing while you are doing it.

So what are the situations at home when you come into contact with water? Washing your hands, the dishes, hosing the garden, washing the dog, etc. If you succeed only once in paying full attention it can be the start of establishing the habit of being mindful at home.

It is helpful to reinforce your efforts by reviewing or taking stock of your mindfulness at the end of the day. You can record your efforts in a meditation diary, so long as you do not make judgments on the quality of the practice or be discouraged by blank pages.

It is important to maintain the daily meditation sits at home as a way of sustaining and stabilizing your practice. With a busy life it is easy to convince yourself that you really haven't the time anymore to maintain the regular sitting or when you are feeling tired you are inclined to just want to drop it.

Naturally, when you get stressed or overtired there is resistance to facing the stress by meditating. But it is usually only initial resistance you have to face before you go through it. Also, do not evaluate your practice in a negative light, thinking if the meditation isn't of sufficient good quality you are wasting your time. It is all 'grist for the mill'; you must persist, as it is vital to maintain the habit of practice to get the long-term benefits.

It is worth quoting from His Holiness, the Dalai Lama for the more compassionate aspect of the practice.

"I myself feel and also tell other Buddhists that the question of Nirvana will come later. There is not much hurry. But if in day-to-day life you lead a good life, honestly with love, with compassion, with less selfishness then automatically it will lead to Nirvana.

Opposite to this, if we talk about Nirvana, talk about philosophy but do not much bother about day-to-day practice, then you may reach a false Nirvana but will not reach the correct Nirvana because your daily practice is nothing. We must implement the teaching in daily life."

There is a saying that the beginning and the end of a journey are essentially the same. This is especially true of meditation. For there is nowhere you need to go to discover your true nature other than where you are right now - at your home-base, meditating.

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