



Tricycle Teachings
MEDITATION

A TRICYCLE E-BOOK

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INTRODUCTION

At the start of a new year many of us commit to reinvigorating our meditation practice. But we all know how resolutions often end up—we've forgotten them before winter's end. That's why establishing and maintaining a meditation practice is the theme of this quarter's e-book. With *Tricycle Teachings: Meditation*, we offer you heart advice and practical tips that will help you to stick with your practice. It's not meant for hermits and yogis, but for lay people like us who aspire to apply Buddhist wisdom to our busy everyday lives. For the beginner, this e-book will help explain what meditation is about and why you should bother to try it at all (there are more benefits than you might guess!). Experienced meditators will appreciate the depth and nuance of the various techniques and traditions presented here. Contributors include Sylvia Boorstein, Martine Batchelor, Jon Kabat-Zinn, S. N. Goenka, Gil Fronsdal, Lama Surya Das, Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, Sharon Salzberg, Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Joseph Goldstein, and many others.

In total, this special e-book features 25 articles carefully selected by Tricycle's editors for their clear instruction and useful advice. And for tips along the way, reach into "The Meditator's Tool Box" (Chapter 17).

With all of the distractions in our lives, it's not easy to stay steady and focused. We're here to help. Whatever your meditation resolution is this year, it is Tricycle's resolution—in print and online—to support you in your practice!

—The Tricycle editors

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SOUND MEDITATION

Just by listening, you can experience the insight of impermanence.

BY SYLVIA BOORSTEIN

Deep hearing, then, is not just an auditory sensation, involving the ear, but a matter of the whole. “Deep hearing of the dharma” means embodying the buddhadharma, an experiential awakening of the total self, conscious and unconscious, mind and body. —Rev. Taitetsu Unno

One specific method for practicing mindfulness of body sensations is to focus your attention on sounds. Sounds, like everything else, arise and pass away. Just by listening, you can experience the insight of impermanence, an understanding the Buddha taught as crucial for the development of wisdom.

Early morning is great for listening. Sounds start to slip into the stillness. In a rural setting, the sounds are likely to be those of birds and animals waking up. In a city, sounds of outside action begin—garbage collection, building construction, traffic. Even in the rarefied air of a high-rise hotel room, plumbing sounds and elevator sounds and footsteps in the hall pick up in pace.

Sit in a position in which you can be relaxed and alert. Close your eyes.

The stillness of your posture and the absence of visual stimuli both enhance hearing consciousness. People are sometimes surprised to

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discover how much sensory consciousness gets lost in the shuffle of distracted attention.

After your body is settled comfortably, just listen. Don't scan for sounds; wait for them. You might think of the difference between radar that goes out looking for something and a satellite dish with a wide range of pickup capacity that just sits in the backyard, waiting. Be a satellite dish. Stay turned on, but just wait.

At the beginning, you'll likely find that you are naming sounds: "door slam ... elevator ... footsteps ... bird ... airplane ... " Sometimes you'll name the feeling tone that accompanies the experience: "bird ... pleasant ... pneumatic drill ... unpleasant ... laughter ... pleasant ... " After a while, you may discover that the naming impulse relaxes. What remains is awareness of the presence or absence of sounds: "hearing ... not hearing ... sound arising ... sound passing away ... pleasant ... not pleasant."

Think of your listening meditation now as a wake-up exercise for your attention. However it happens—with names, without names, with feeling tone awareness or without—just let it happen. Don't try to accomplish anything. Just listen.

Sylvia Boorstein is a Buddhist teacher, psychotherapist, and author of *Happiness Is an Inside Job*. "Sound Meditation" is excerpted from *Don't Just Do Something, Sit There* by Sylvia Boorstein. Copyright © 1996 by Sylvia Boorstein. Used with permission from HarperCollins.

—*from Fall 1999*

AT HOME IN OUR BODIES

Q&A with Jon Kabat-Zinn

Can Buddhist practice liberate us from the prison of physical pain? How can meditation help when medicine falls short? Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., professor emeritus of medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, speaks to these questions as a longtime practitioner of Buddhist meditation and hatha yoga, and as a pioneer in the use of mindfulness to treat chronic pain and illness. More than 13,000 people have visited the world-renowned Stress Reduction Clinic that Kabat-Zinn established in 1979 at the UMass Medical Center, and the eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program—described in Kabat-Zinn’s bestseller *Full Catastrophe Living*—is now also offered at some 200 other medical facilities worldwide.

Tricycle editor-at-large Joan Duncan Oliver spoke with Kabat-Zinn about dealing with pain and the MBSR program.

Let’s start with a basic question: What is pain? Physical pain is the response of the body and the nervous system to a huge range of stimuli that are perceived as noxious, damaging, or dangerous. There are really three dimensions to pain: the physical, or sensory component; the emotional, or affective component: how we feel about the sensation; and the cognitive component: the meaning we attribute to our pain.

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Let's say you've got a pain in your back. You can't lift your children; getting in and out of the car is difficult; you can't sit in meditation. Maybe you can't even work. That's the physical component. But you're having to give up a lot, and you're going to have feelings about that—anger, probably—and you're susceptible to depression. That's the emotional response. And then you have thoughts about the pain—questions about what caused it, negative stories about what's going to happen. Those expectations, projections, and fears compound the stress of the pain, eroding the quality of your life.

There is a way to work with all this, based on Buddhist meditative practices, that can liberate you, to a very large extent, from the experience of pain. Whether or not you can reduce the level of sensory pain, the affective and cognitive contributions to the pain—which make it much worse—usually can be lessened. And then, very often, the sensory component of the pain changes as well.

You mean that once you've changed your relationship to the pain, the physical discomfort may decrease? That's the key point: You change your relationship to the pain by opening up to it and paying attention to it. You “put out the welcome mat.” Not because you're masochistic, but because the pain is there. So you need to understand the nature of the experience and the possibilities for, as the doctors might put it, “learning to live with it,” or, as the Buddhists might put it, “liberation from the suffering.” If you distinguish between pain and suffering, change is possible. As the saying goes, “Pain is inevitable; suffering is optional.”

There have been studies looking at how the mind processes acute pain at the sensory level. Subjects are randomized between two groups, then given the cold pressor test, where a tourniquet is placed around your bicep, then you stick your arm into ice water. There's no more

blood flow, so your arm gets very painful very fast. They measure how long you can keep your arm in the water as a function of whether you are given an attentional strategy, such as paying attention to the sensations and really moving into them and being with them as nonjudgmentally as you can—a mindfulness strategy, in other words—or a distraction strategy, where you just try to think about other things and tune out the pain. What they found was that in the early minutes of having your arm in the ice water, distraction works better than mindfulness: You're less aware of the discomfort because you're telling yourself a story, or remembering something, or having a fantasy. But after the arm is in the cold water for a while, mindfulness becomes much more powerful than distraction for tolerating the pain. With distraction alone, once it breaks down and doesn't work, you've got nothing.

The Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program uses the body scan as well as sitting meditation to manage pain. Can you explain how the body scan works? The body scan is a variation on a traditional Burmese practice called sweeping, from the school of U Ba Khin, that S. N. Goenka teaches in his ten-day Vipassana retreats. The traditional method involves tuning in to sensation in a narrow horizontal band that is slowly brought down through the entire body, as if you were giving yourself a CAT scan. This is analogous to the way certain metals, such as zinc, are purified in a circular zone furnace. I thought it would be hard for people in chronic pain to sit for 45 minutes, so I modified the practice. It is done lying down, starting at the toes and moving up through different regions of the body.

This practice is a way of getting out of the head and developing intimacy with the body. The challenge is, can you feel the toes of your left foot without wiggling them? You tune in to the toes, then gradually

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move your attention to the bottom of the foot and the heel, and feel the contact with the floor. Then you move to the ankle and slowly up the leg to the pelvis. Then you go to the toes of the right foot and move up the right leg. Very slowly you move up the torso, through the lower back and abdomen, then the upper back and chest, and the shoulders. Then you go to the fingers on both hands and move up the arms to the shoulders. Then you move through the neck and throat, the face and the back of the head, and then right on up through the top of the head.

And all the while, you're in contact with the breath. I tend to have people feel the breath moving in and out of the body region they're attending to, so that there's a sort of dual awareness. As you move up the body, you're learning how to focus on a particular region, then let go of it and move on. It's like cultivating concentration and mindfulness simultaneously, because there is a continual flow. You're not staying with one object of attention.

Does the body scan work like a relaxation practice? The body scan is a meditation practice, not a relaxation exercise. Relaxation is done with a goal in mind. Meditation is about nonstriving and emptiness. If you get into thinking, "I'm doing this meditation to take away my pain," you're coming at it with the wrong motivation. Meditation doesn't "work" or not "work"; it's about being with things as they are.

What if your pain is so bad that it's hard for you to concentrate on anything else? You have a number of choices. Let's say you have lower back pain. You can say, "I'm going to try to focus on my toes, even in the presence of back pain. The back's always there; I'll get to it sooner or later. Why don't I see if I can really learn to focus my attention where it's being asked to focus?" Often, when you do that, the felt sense of the pain in the back lessens.

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But if the pain is too great, you can go to the region where the pain is and let the breath merge with it. Breathe in and feel the breath, or in your mind's eye see the breath moving down into the lower back. Then on the out-breath, as the breath lets go, see if you can allow the mind to let go. You're not trying to shut off the sensations from the lower back—just to experience the fullness of whatever happens as you let go.

Then in the next moment, the sensations and the feelings and the thoughts might all come flooding back, and you've got the next in-breath to work with. So it's a practice.

You develop an observer's attitude toward the pain? Basically, you're intentionally bearing witness to the pain rather than distancing yourself from it; we're not teaching mindfulness as a dualistic practice. Nevertheless, there's a sense that there's the pain, and there's the observing of the pain. It's important to understand that as an intermediate step toward ultimate liberation. It means that I can rest in awareness, then ask myself, "Is the awareness in pain in this moment?" And the answer invariably is, "As I look at it right now, the awareness of the pain is not in pain." When you realize you can rest in this awareness, the pain may be just as intense, but you're now cultivating equanimity and clear comprehension. You're seeing the pain as it is, as sensation. There is a knowing that it is not pleasant. But the interpretation that the pain is killing me, or ruining my life, and all the emotions and stories that go with that, are seen for what they are. In that seeing, they often go into abeyance.

What do you tell people who say, "My practice isn't working: I'm still in pain"? When you think that your practice *should* be working, then you've already fallen out of your practice and into expectations that the practice is going to achieve some kind of prefigured, desirable result. This need to

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get rid of is its own form of ignorance, and we need to look at our “I” statements. A worthy object of attention and inquiry is: Who is suffering? Who is in pain? We can ask that, but rather than coming up with an answer guaranteed by thought, we can drop into not-knowing and experience simply being aware.

Not that “simply being aware” is easy. When pain arises, the same challenge occurs as when the breath arises. That’s one reason to practice when we’re not in a lot of pain—to cultivate strong practice so we can rely on it when it becomes extremely difficult to practice.

You seem to be saying that pain is just like the rest of life, only more so. If you pay attention to the little episodes of pain in your life, you can learn how to work with the bigger episodes because you learn about anicca, impermanence; anatta, no-self; and dukkha, suffering. The meditation orientation is not about fixing pain or making it better. It’s about looking deeply into the nature of pain—making use of it in certain ways that might allow us to grow. In that growing, things will change, and we have the potential to make choices that will move us toward greater wisdom and compassion, including self-compassion, and thus toward freedom from suffering.

Some forms of pain are harder to deal with than others, aren’t they?

Lower back pain, for example. Lower back pain tends to be more complex because every time you stand up or move in any way, you may be exacerbating the inflammation or instability. But over time, you can actually dramatically transform your relationship to your back. What we’re talking about is the deep structure of rehabilitation.

The deep meaning of “rehabilitation,” which is related to the word “habitation,” is “learning to live inside again.” And the deeper Indo-European root is ghabh-e, which means “giving and receiving,” like ton-

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glen, the Tibetan Buddhist practice. So rehabilitation is an exchange, in which you're willing to move into the interiority of your being and work at the boundary with what is, with full awareness and compassion. If you work that edge patiently, with perseverance, motivation, and kindness, if you give yourself over to it with mindfulness, there is the very real possibility of returning home to your body and learning to live inside again.

In my view, we all need to learn to live inside again. We don't have to have pain to wake up to the fact that we might be happier if we inhabited the totality of our lives.

—*from Winter 2002*

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A REFUGE INTO BEING

When meditating, is it necessary to focus on one specific object?

MARTINE BATCHELOR

This is not always necessary, but at times it can be very helpful. When you do meditate on a specific object, such as the breath, that object will help you to develop concentration, and concentration will enable you to cultivate a quiet and spacious mind. But you must be careful not to focus your attention too narrowly on the object, as that can constrain your practice. You should keep your primary focus on the object of meditation, but try to do so with a wide-open awareness. As you follow the breath, for instance, allow yourself to also be aware of what is happening in and around you. Be conscious of sounds, thoughts, sensations, feelings—but without fixating on, grasping, or rejecting any of these things.

When you meditate without a specific object, you are trying to be aware of everything in that moment, without fixation. You simply notice whatever arises—in the world or in the mind—with a nondiscriminatory awareness. This practice of open awareness can help you become restful and spacious; however, you must be careful not to become dreamy. You have to remain alert, still, and present. This requires energy, dedication, and faith in the practice and in your buddhanature in that moment.

You must also be careful not to equate meditation solely with con-

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centration. It is essential to cultivate inquiry as well. This is the quality of the mind that sees clearly into the impermanent and conditioned nature of reality. Whether you are focusing on a specific object or not, the cultivation of inquiry requires you to look deeply into and investigate the nature of each phenomenon in your field of awareness. Whether it is the breath or a sound or a thought, each and every thing can be seen as conditioned and constantly changing. It is essential that you cultivate together and in harmony these twin elements of concentration and inquiry. Concentration will bring stability, stillness, and spaciousness; inquiry will bring alertness, vividness, brightness, and clarity. Combined, they will help you to develop creative awareness, an ability to bring a meditative mind to all aspects of your daily life. In this way, meditation becomes both a refuge and a training: a refuge into being, and a training into doing.

In the Korean Zen tradition, there is a method of meditation that uses the question “What is this?” to cultivate concentration and inquiry together. As you sit or walk in meditation, you ask constantly, “What is this?” Repeating this question develops concentration because it returns you to the full awareness of the moment. As soon as you become aware of being distracted by past events, anxieties about the present, or future dreams, you ask “What is this?” This way, the power of questioning dissolves distraction.

You don’t repeat this question like a mantra, but with a deep sense of questioning. This is not an analytical or intellectual endeavor. (You have to be careful to ask the question not with the head but with the whole body; sometimes it is recommended to ask with the lower belly.) You are not asking about anything specific, and you are not looking for a specific answer. You are just asking meditatively, experientially, opening yourself to the whole moment, to the questionable and mysterious aspect of life itself and your place within it. You are asking because you

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truly do not know.

As with breath meditation, the question is the primary object of concentration, but it is asked within a wide-open awareness. This kind of meditation helps you to become centered and grounded, but open and spacious at the same time. It will enable you to be more flexible and creative by loosening your grasping and fixations. Your heart will open in a wise and compassionate manner to yourself and life in all of its extraordinarily various aspects.

Martine Batchelor, author of *The Spirit of the Buddha*, was a Zen nun in Korea for ten years. She teaches meditation worldwide.

—*from Winter 2002*

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INVITING FEAR

That which is threatening to the ego is liberating for the heart.

AMARO BHIKKHU

Above all, a materialistic society desires certainty—it seeks to guarantee it; passes laws to enforce it; wipes the pathogens that threaten it; and lets everyone have guns to protect it. Even the seemingly innocuous habits of inking in plans and clinging to beliefs and opinions are the reverse image of the uncertainties that the heart yearns to be certain about.

Yet if we seek security in that which is inherently uncertain, *dukkha*, or discontent, is the inevitable result.

Fear is a discomfiting friend. The impulse is to get to a place of safety, but where in the phenomenal world—either mental or physical—could that be? The insight of the Buddha, informed by his own experiences of exploring fear and dread, encourages us to make a 180-degree turn. Whereas the instinct is to shrink away from the threatening aspects of life, his injunction for those who wish to free the heart is to contemplate frequently the following:

*I am of the nature to age, I have not gone beyond aging;
I am of the nature to sicken, I have not gone beyond sickness;
I am of the nature to die, I have not gone beyond dying;
All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become
otherwise, will become separated from me.*

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For that which is threatening to the ego is liberating for the heart.

By turning to face the inarguable facts of nature, the habit of investing in unstable realms is interrupted. It shines the light of wisdom on the issue, reveals that we've been looking for certainty in the wrong place, and thus frees up the attention to realize where security can be found.

This needs to be examined in the light of personal experience, but in traditional Buddhist terminology, such security is said to be found in the Triple Gem: the Buddha—the awakened, knowing faculty of the heart; the Dharma—the truth of the way things are; and the Sangha—the noble, unselfish response. For when the awakened heart knows the way things truly are, what springs forth is harmonious and virtuous action. Undiscriminating awareness is dependable. The reality of Nature is dependable. Harmony is possible.

How can we arrive at such security?

There are many ways to meditate on fear. One is to wait until it appears adventitiously. Another is to invite it in—when we send out invitations we can be a little better prepared for who shows up at the party.

Perhaps for both methods of approach the first thing to bear in mind is that fear is not the enemy—it is nature's protector; it only becomes troublesome when it oversteps its bounds. In order to deal with fear we must take a fundamentally noncontentious attitude toward it, so it's not held as "My big fear problem" but rather "Here is fear that has come to visit." Once we take this attitude, we can begin to work with fear.

Begin by sitting quietly and focusing the attention as clearly as possible on the present moment, using a simple tranquil object to establish equilibrium—the natural rhythm of the breath is good for this purpose for most people, moving in the empty space of the heart .

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Once such centeredness has been established, deliberately bring to mind something that will arouse a fear reaction. For example,

“Anthrax in the mail”

“Nuclear war”

“Suicide bombers”

—or any other memory, imagined possibility, or Image that triggers the compulsive effect.

Once the seed crystal has been dropped into the mental pool and the consequent flow of thoughts and images has begun, make a definite and concerted effort to withdraw the attention from the stories the thoughts are telling. Bring it instead into the sensations of the physical body.

Where do I feel the fear? What is its texture?

Is it hot or cold?

Is it painful? Rigid? Elastic?

We are not necessarily looking for verbal answers to all these questions; rather, we are just trying to find the feeling, accept it completely, and not add anything to it.

“Fear feels like this.”

Many find that fear locates itself primarily in the solar plexus, sitting like a tightened knot in the belly. Just feel it, know it, open the heart to it as much as possible. We’re not trying to pretend or force ourselves to like it, but it is here—right now it’s the way things are.

Let this process run for at least ten minutes, then consciously let it wind down—not suppressing it, but, as when it’s time for guests to leave, make the hints, and let the event wind down naturally. It might take a while, but that’s fine; just let it run out at its own pace. During this time, reestablish the breath as a focal point, and use the exhalation to support the fading of the fear-wave.

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Once it has come to an end, focus the attention on the feeling of the breath, moving as before in the empty space of the heart. Let the heart be clearly conscious that the fear cycle has come to cessation: it arose out of emptiness, returned to emptiness. It was florid and impactful in its appearance, but the overarching quality, now having been seen directly, is its transiency.

Now we know.

The effect of this practice is to train the heart, so that when the next wave of fear arises, from whatever quarter, something in us knows. The intuitive wisdom faculty is awakened and recognizes: “I know this scenario—don’t panic—it looks impressive, but it’s just the fear reaction.” It becomes vastly easier to avoid being sucked into the vortex of anxiety.

The feeling is not pleasant, but the heart knows, with absolute certainty: “It’s only a feeling.” And if action needs to be taken, then that action will be motivated by wisdom, kindness, and sensitivity to time and place rather than by neurotic reactivity and habit.

Amaro Bhikkhu served as co-abbot of Abhayagiri Monastery in northern California for 14 years, in the lineage of Ajahn Chah and the Thai forest tradition. He is now the abbot of Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in England. He has been a monk for 33 years.

—from Spring 2002

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FINDING SENSE
IN SENSATION

By observing physical sensations on the body, we can eradicate the roots of the defilements of mind.

S. N. GOENKA

The Buddha was the foremost scientist of mind and matter (nama and rupa). What makes him a peerless scientist is his discovery that *tanha*, or craving, and by extension, aversion—arises from vedana, or sensation on the body.

Before the time of the Buddha, little if any importance was given to bodily sensation. In fact, it was the centrality of bodily sensation that was the Buddha's great discovery in his quest to determine the root cause of suffering and the means to its cessation. Before the Buddha, India's spiritual masters emphasized teachings that encouraged people to turn away from sensory objects and ignore the sensations that contact with them engenders.

But the Buddha, a real scientist, examined sensation more closely. He discovered that when we come into contact with a sense object through one of the six sense doors (ears, eyes, nose, tongue, body, mind), we cling to the sensation it creates, giving rise to *tanha* (wanting it to stay and to increase) and aversion (wanting it to cease). The mind then reacts with thoughts of either "I want" or "I do not want." Buddha discovered that everything that arises in the mind arises with the sensations on the

body and that these sensations are the material we have to work with.

The first step, then, is to train the mind to become so sharp and sensitive that it will learn to detect even the subtlest sensations. That job is done by anapana—the practice of awareness of the breath—on the small area under the nostrils, above the upper lip. If we concentrate on this area, the mind becomes sharper and sharper, subtler and subtler. This is the way we begin to become aware of every sort of sensation on the body.

Next, we feel the sensations but don't react to them. We can learn to maintain this equanimity toward sensations by understanding their transitory nature.

Whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, gross or subtle, every sensation shares the same characteristic: it arises and passes away, arises and passes away. It is this arising and passing that we have to experience through practice, not just accept as truth because Buddha said so, not just accept because intellectually it seems logical enough to us. We must experience sensation's nature, understand its flux, and learn not to react to it.

As we reach deeper states of awareness, we will be able to detect subtler and subtler sensations, or vibrations of greater rapidity, arising and passing with greater speed. In these deep states, our mind will become so calm, so tranquil, so pure, that we will immediately recognize any impurity accompanying the agitated state and make the choice to refrain from reacting adversely. It becomes clear to us that we can't harm anybody without first defiling ourselves with emotions like hate or anger or lust. If we do this, we will come to an experiential understanding of the deep truth of *anicca*, or impermanence. As we observe sensations without reacting to them, the impurities in our minds lose their strength and cannot overpower us.

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The Buddha was not merely giving sermons; he was offering a technique to help people reach a state in which they could feel the harm they do to themselves. Once we see this, sila, or ethics, follows naturally. Just as we pull our hand from a flame, we step back from harming ourselves and others.

It is a wonderful discovery that by observing physical sensations on the body, we can eradicate the roots of the defilements of mind. As we practice more, negative emotions will become far more conspicuous to us much earlier; as soon as they arise, we will become aware of sensations and have the opportunity to make ethical choices. But first we need to begin with what is present to us deeply in our minds at the level of sensation. Otherwise, we will keep ourselves and others miserable for a very long time.

S. N. Goenka first began teaching ten-day vipassana meditation courses in India in 1969. His courses in vipassana instruction are now widely given to prison inmates, government officials, corporations, schoolchildren, and the homeless.

—from Fall 2002

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THE REFUGE OF SITTING

Developing your meditation practice

NARAYAN LIEBENSON GRADY

Developing a disciplined sitting practice is a matter of commitment and patience. For many practitioners, it is not easy, even for those who have been sitting for a while. Sitting every day must become a priority in our daily lives rather than just one more thing we have to do. This requires a great deal of dedication, because meditation is not supported by our culture at large. Watching television is rarely criticized as being selfish, whereas a common question that practitioners bring up is whether one “deserves” to sit, implying that it is selfish to do so. Here are a few tips:

Plan to sit at the same time each day. One of the benefits of doing this is that one gets to know the mind that doesn’t want to sit. Personally, I like to sit immediately upon waking up in the morning. For many people, this seems to be a good time, before we become engaged in the activities of the day. But if you have small children or a demanding job, this may not be possible. And some of us have rebellious natures, so any routine presents a problem. Then we need to be flexible.

Another common question is how long to sit. Generally it is better to sit for a shorter amount of time than to sit way beyond our capacity. If we are constantly struggling to stay still, we may find ourselves wanting to throw our cushion against the wall instead of sit-

ting on it. This should be avoided; after all, our frustration is not the cushion's fault. We should determine for ourselves the amount of time we sit—there are no set formulas. Too long, and we may never want to sit again; too short, and our practice won't develop.

It can be helpful to set an electronic timer rather than having to watch a clock. Because the practice is to let go of thoughts about the past and the future, this will free you from having to think or worry about time. You can simply set yourself a specific amount of time to sit and rely on an external sound to signal when the sitting is over.

It is important to sit with the clear intention to be present. At the same time, we need to let go of expectations. In a very real sense, what happens when we sit is none of our business. The practice is to accept whatever arises instead of trying to control our experience. What we can control is our wise effort to be present with what is. We can spend a lot of our sitting time dwelling on memories of past sittings or fantasizing about those to come. When we read or hear about the benefits of meditation, it is tempting to dwell on the stories of wonderful outcomes instead of doing the work of actualizing these possibilities ourselves. There can be a big gap between what we have read about and what is actually happening. Sitting is a way of putting our bodies behind our aspirations.

Some of us sit only when our lives are going well. When difficulties arise, we stop our practice rather than sit with disturbing emotions such as anxiety and anger. Others sit only when facing a big challenge, hoping that sitting will help us get through it. Being aware of these tendencies is part of what we face in sustaining a regular practice.

What hinders and intimidates beginners especially are experiences such as restlessness, sleepiness, and boredom. If we view these energies as part of the practice itself instead of what we need to get rid of in order to meditate, our sittings will be smoother and we will develop the inner

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strength to be able to be with all experiences with greater equanimity.

Even so, only rarely is sitting practice sustained without help from others. This cannot be overemphasized. To sit with others is a way to feel newly inspired and able to continue. Usually it is easier to sit for a longer amount of time in the company of others than to sit alone. Peer pressure can be a good thing. By sitting with others, even once a week, we reinspire our practice, while in sitting alone we learn self-reliance.

Whatever technique one is using, remember that the spirit of practice is more important than the technique. Finding a way to enjoy just sitting is key. Sitting meditation is a refuge, not a test.

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—*from Winter 2003*

MAY ALL BE HAPPY...

Practicing lovingkindness

GIL FRONSDAL

May all beings be happy.
May they live in safety and joy.
All living beings,
Whether weak or strong,
Tall, stout, average, or short,
Seen or unseen, near or distant,
Born or to be born,
May they all be happy.

—*From the Metta Sutta, Sutta Nipata I.8*

M*etta*, or lovingkindness, is one of the most important Buddhist practices. Simply stated, metta is the heartfelt wish for the well-being of oneself and others. When describing metta, the Buddha used the analogy of the care a mother gives her only child. Lovingkindness is also understood as the innate friendliness of an open heart. Its close connection to friendship is reflected in its similarity to the Pali word for friend, *mitta*. However, metta is more than conventional friendship, for it includes being openhearted even toward one's enemies, developed from insight into our shared humanity.

Metta practice is the cultivation of our capacity for lovingkind-

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ness. It does not involve either positive thinking or the imposition of an artificial positive attitude. There is no need to feel loving or kind during metta practice. Rather, we meditate on our good intentions, however weak or strong they may be, and water the seeds of these intentions. When we water wholesome intentions instead of expressing unwholesome ones, we develop those wholesome tendencies within us. If these seeds are never watered, they won't grow. When watered by regular practice, they grow, sometimes in unexpected fashions. We may find that lovingkindness becomes the operating motivation in a situation that previously triggered anger or fear.

To practice lovingkindness meditation, sit in a comfortable and relaxed manner. Take two or three deep breaths with slow, long, and complete exhalations. Let go of any concerns or preoccupations. For a few minutes, feel or imagine the breath moving through the center of your chest in the area of your heart.

Metta is first practiced toward oneself, since we often have difficulty loving others without first loving ourselves. Sitting quietly, mentally repeat, slowly and steadily, the following or similar phrases: *May I be happy. May I be well. May I be safe. May I be peaceful and at ease.*

While you say these phrases, allow yourself to sink into the intentions they express. Lovingkindness meditation consists primarily of connecting to the intention of wishing ourselves or others happiness. However, if feelings of warmth, friendliness, or love arise in the body or mind, connect to them, allowing them to grow as you repeat the phrases. As an aid to the meditation, you might hold an image of yourself in your mind's eye. This helps reinforce the intentions expressed in the phrases.

After a period of directing lovingkindness toward yourself, bring to mind a friend or someone in your life who has deeply cared for you.

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Then slowly repeat phrases of lovingkindness toward them: *May you be happy. May you be well. May you be safe. May you be peaceful and at ease.*

As you say these phrases, again sink into their intention or heartfelt meaning. And again, if any feelings of lovingkindness arise, connect the feelings with the phrases so that the feelings may become stronger as you repeat the words.

As you continue the meditation, you can bring to mind other friends, neighbors, acquaintances, strangers, animals, and finally people with whom you have difficulty. You can either use the same phrases, repeating them again and again, or make up phrases that better represent the lovingkindness you feel toward these beings.

Sometimes during lovingkindness meditation, seemingly opposite feelings such as anger, grief, or sadness may arise. Take these to be signs that your heart is softening, revealing what is held there. You can either shift to mindfulness practice or you can—with whatever patience, acceptance, and kindness you can muster for such feelings—direct lovingkindness toward them. Above all, remember that there is no need to judge yourself for having these feelings.

As you become familiar with lovingkindness practice during meditation, you can also begin to use it in your daily life. While in your car, or at work, or in public, privately practice metta toward those around you. There can be a great delight in establishing a heartfelt connection to everyone we encounter, friends and strangers alike.

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—*from Summer 2005*

AWAKENING,
STEP BY STEP

A guide to walking meditation

PETER DOOBININ

Walking meditation is a practice through which we develop concentration and mindfulness. We learn to cultivate mindfulness of the body while the body is moving. We learn to be awake. Walking meditation is a particularly important practice in that it enables us to make the transition from sitting meditation to being awake in our daily lives, in our work, and in our relationships. In the end, that's what it's all about.

Walking meditation is a simple practice. You choose a straight path—indoors or outdoors—roughly 15 or 20 steps long. You walk from one end of the path to the other, turn around, and walk back. You continue in this fashion, walking back and forth, focusing your attention on your feet. Your posture is upright, alert, and relaxed. You can hold your hands at your sides, or clasped in front or behind. Keep your eyes open, cast down, and aimed slightly ahead. You can experiment with your pace, perhaps walking quite slowly or at a more regular speed, in an effort to find the pace at which you're most present. As you walk, direct your attention to the sensations in the feet, to the bare experience of

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walking. Try to feel one step at time. Be fully, wholeheartedly aware of the physical sensations involved in taking each step. Feel your foot as it lifts, moves through the air, is placed down against the ground. In particular, pay attention to the touching down of the foot, the sensations of contact and pressure. Remember that you're feeling each step, you're not thinking about the foot, or visualizing it.

You'll find, of course, that it isn't always easy to stay focused on the meditation object, the sensations in the feet. The mind wanders, drifts. Your job is to notice when you've strayed, when you're lost in thought. Be aware that you've wandered. And return gently to the physical sensations, the lifting, moving, placing of the foot. Just keep bringing your attention back.

As you walk, cultivate a sense of ease. There's no hurry to get anywhere, no destination to reach. You're just walking. This is a good instruction: just walk.

As you walk, as you let go of the desire to get somewhere, you begin to sense the joy in simply walking, in being in the present moment. You begin to comprehend the preciousness of each step. It's an extraordinarily precious experience to walk on this earth.

You can start by practicing walking meditation for 10 minutes a day. Gradually, you can expand the amount of time you spend on this formal walking meditation.

In addition to this kind of formal practice, you'll want to practice walking meditation in real-life situations. You can practice informally just about anywhere, walking along a city sidewalk, down the aisle in the supermarket, or across the backyard. As always, the objective is to pay attention. Pay attention to your feet. Or pay attention to your whole body—the felt experience of your body as it's moving. In this informal context, you're aware, to some extent, of what's going on around you, but

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your focus is on your walking. Practicing in this way, you begin to live more mindfully. This is when meditation practice takes hold and assumes a new relevancy. Being awake is no longer reserved for the times you spend in formal sitting meditation; it is the way you live.

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—from Summer 2005

A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

Nature can teach us simplicity and contentment

MARK COLEMAN

In the wilderness of the Rainbow Trail at twilight, silence reigns. On this silent backpacking and meditation retreat I am leading deep in the red rocks of Arizona, a small group of men and women have been walking and camping under the steady presence of Navaho Mountain for seven days and seven nights. Immersed in winding sandstone canyons 650 million years old, we have been alone except for occasional visits by curious ravens.

Now the retreat participants are returning from spending 24 hours alone. As we sit around the campfire, the moon rises slowly above the sheer canyon walls, casting shadows and animating wizened faces in the rock.

Since I began leading meditation retreats in nature, I've observed again and again what a profound sense of peace people feel when they spend some meditative time outside in the forest or in open meadows. The power of the natural world encourages us to let go of our habitual mode of being, which is usually self-centered, acquisitive, and endlessly seeking something outside of ourselves. The everyday thinking mind, with its restless concerns and perennial planning, begins to calm down. The body feels more at ease, and the heart slowly opens and resonates

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with the peace of the natural world. On wilderness meditation retreats, people taste the depth of intimacy it is possible to experience with nature, themselves, and their community.

Nature teaches us simplicity and contentment, because in its presence we realize we need very little to be happy. Since we are part of the animal kingdom, our senses are naturally more alive in the outdoors. The rustle of leaves or the rapid flight of birds could indicate the presence of a mountain lion or bear. Hiking in places where we are not the only predator helps us understand that all of life is intimately interwoven and that we are a part of that web. Meditation training, on the other hand, provides the tools to steady the mind so we can be open to receive the jewels of nature. Through meditation we learn how to work skillfully with thoughts and emotional patterns that interfere with simply being able to rest wherever we are, with full presence.

The following exercises are offered to help you connect with the natural world in a meditative way:

Beginner's Mind

Take a walk and let yourself be called to a particular tree. Stay with the tree for a while to study, look, feel, smell, and sense it. Listen to it as wind rustles its branches. Bask in its shade in the midday sun. Get to know it at different times of the day and in different seasons. How is it connected with life around it? How do you get to know it, and which senses do you use?

Feel the difference between your idea of the tree and the rich textural experience of it. Notice the impulse to move on because of impatience, resistance, or boredom. When you feel you “know it,” what does that do to the sense of curiosity and mystery? Can you maintain interest even when you think you have reached the end of your exploration? Is

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it possible to fully know what a tree really is? Start to bring this curious attention to all that you meet.

Silence

Spend a period of time in a quiet place in nature to experience silence. Can you connect with the silence that is there even when there are sounds? What interrupts the experience of silence? Does being in silence create any sense of discomfort? Do you want to distract yourself from it? Does the silence allow your mind and body to rest more in stillness and quiet?

Working with Thoughts

Take some time to sit or walk in nature. Simply be as present as you can, Notice when your attention is lost in thought, and how thinking makes you less present to your environment. For a period of time, practice letting go of your thoughts as soon as they arise and returning your attention to what is happening in the physical environment. How does that affect your experience?

Letting Go of Our Stories

When you are lost or caught up in an emotional storm or contracted in self-centeredness or plagued by obsessive thoughts, notice what happens when you step outside or go for a walk and pay attention to the sky, the air, the light, the movement of wind, the feel of grass under your feet. Be aware of how the spaciousness that can arise allows a natural dis-identification with inner turmoil and a regaining of perspective.

Knowing Your Backyard

Take some time to investigate the source of your water, food, lumber,

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firewood. Where do your waste products go? Is the food that you eat grown locally? What are the indigenous animals, birds, plants, and trees in your local area? What are their habitats, where do they nest, eat? What species, what land is currently under threat in your region? Since you are part of this chain of interrelated life, what are you doing that supports or threatens the health of that which may be in danger?

Love

Take time to be with something you love in nature that brings out your natural curiosity and delight, It may be a wild iris, the shimmering luminescence of water in a stream, the patterns and colors of a butterfly's wing. Let yourself be drawn to it. Engage your senses. Are you touched by the sense of wonder? Practice daily or weekly, spending time in nature with what most allows your heart to open. How does such love feel in the mind, body, and heart? What effect does it have on your sense of connection with the web of life?

A Day in Nature

Take a day to be alone in nature. Select a location where you are not likely to be interrupted by many people, You can divide the time between periods of contemplative sitting and gentle walks. In sitting meditation, cultivate an open attentiveness toward the present moment. You can focus on the inner experience of breathing and the sensations of the body. Or you can pay attention to the experience that arises from sitting outside—the touch of the breeze on your skin, the physical connection with the earth, the sounds of birds, animals, and the wind, and the fragrances in the air. Try meditating with the eyes open, allowing the eyes to be soft and receptive with a wide field of vision while maintaining awareness of the other senses, especially hearing.

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While walking, let go of any goal-orientation. Simply let yourself walk slowly, carefully, with full awareness of the space you are walking in. Let go of any intention to get anywhere. Listen to whatever draws you in the landscape—a particular tree, rock, or stream, or a vast open vista. Or perhaps a lizard or beetle draws you into a conversation. Let your senses be wide open and receptive. Give little attention to your thoughts; instead, keep turning to your inner and outer environment. If you begin to feel spacey or unfocused, resume sitting meditation, centering attention upon the breath. The less you do outwardly, the more will open to you.

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—*from Summer 2005*

WISDOM ARISING

Finding a balance

BHANTE HENEPOLA GUNARATANA

V*ipassana*, or insight meditation, is a way of training the mind to see things in a very special way as they happen. Seeing without using eyes is a special way of seeing. We train the mind to use our innate wisdom without using words, concepts, logic, or interpretation. In this training, concentration and mindfulness are united. Then wisdom arises and disintegrates what appears to be integrated. Our wisdom eye registers the constant flux of events that is taking place in every moment in our lives. Although this unbroken flux of events is what life is, one cannot be fully aware of this truth without paying attention to what is happening to one's mind and body every waking moment. With developed insight, our mind can be fully aware of the evolving, processing, and dissolving of everything that happens to us.

So we train the mind to see things as they happen, neither before nor after. And we don't cling to the past, the future, or even to the present. We participate in what is happening and at the same time observe it without clinging to the events of the past, the future, or the present. We experience our ego or self arising, dissolving, and evaporating without leaving a trace of it. We see how our greed, anger, and ignorance vanish as we see the reality in life. Mindfully we watch the body, feelings, sensations,

perceptions, and consciousness and experience their dynamic nature.

Watching impartially opens the mind to realize that there is no way that we can stop this flux even for a fraction of a second. We experience the freshness of life. Every moment is a new moment. Every breath is a fresh breath. Every tiny little thing is living and dying every fraction of a second. There is no way that we can see these momentary existences with our eyes. Only when the mind is sharp and clear, without the clouds of craving, hatred, and confusion can our mind be fully aware of this phenomenon. When we don't try to cling to these experiences, we experience great joy, happiness, and peace. The moment we try to cling to any part of our experience—however pleasant or peaceful—joy, peace, and happiness disappear. The very purpose of vipassana meditation is to liberate the mind from psychic irritation and enjoy the peace and happiness of liberation. Nevertheless, if we cling to peace or happiness, that instant that very peace and happiness vanish. This is a very delicate balance that we should maintain through the wisdom that arises from vipassana meditation.

Bhante Henepola Gunaratana is the co-founder and abbot of the Bhavana Society in West Virginia. A monk since age 12 in the Theravada forest tradition, he is the author of the now-classic book *Mindfulness In Plain English*.

—*from Summer 2005*

HOT AND HEAVY,
COOL AND LIGHT

The Tibetan Buddhist practice of tonglen

JUDITH SIMMER-BROWN

T*onglen*, literally “giving and taking,” is a Tibetan practice for cultivating compassion, the Mahayana path of the bodhisattva. The great master Atisha brought Tibetans this practice from India in the eleventh century. Tonglen reverses the pattern of self-cherishing that is the knot of our personal suffering. Using breathing as the basis, tonglen opens our hearts to those things we would rather avoid and encourages us to share what we would rather keep for ourselves. The practice shows that there are no real boundaries between living beings—we are all interdependent.

We begin tonglen by taking our seats in meditation with good posture, very simply and naturally. We ask, why would we want to do this practice? Fundamentally it is vast and choiceless. We recognize that the purpose of our human life is huge, to grow larger hearts and open minds, and we celebrate that we can do this in this moment. We are ready for transformation. Glimpsing this motivation begins the practice.

Then we become aware of our breathing, in and out, and establish the flow of the practice. On the in-breath, we breathe in thinking,

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“heavy, thick, hot,” and on the out-breath, we breathe out thinking, “light, bright, cool.” At first it seems only like words, but it is good to develop a literal sense of this. My teacher, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, suggested that we think of ourselves as air conditioners. We breathe in the stale, smoky, fetid air of the room around us, and we breathe out fresh, clean, cool air. We gradually purify the room. When we breathe, we are breathing with every pore of our bodies, in with “heavy, thick, hot,” and out with “light, bright, cool.” Do this for roughly one-third of the twenty-minute session, or until the texture is established.

Next, we breathe with a continuing sense of the texture we have established. But now we open our thoughts and emotions to all of our personal material. It is good to start with those who spontaneously arouse our compassion. Is there someone we know who is sick or in emotional turmoil? We begin with that person’s face before us and breathe in their heavy, thick, and hot suffering, sharing with them our own light, bright, and cool energy. Be quite tangible with the texture. Whatever suffering we see in them, we breathe it in; whatever sanity and kindness we see in ourselves, we breathe it out to them. When we are ready, extend beyond our loved ones to more difficult people. Are there people we see as threatening or as problematic in our lives? We allow their faces to come to us and then breathe in their suffering and extend to them our sanity and kindness. We are practicing embracing what we would normally avoid, and sharing what we would normally hoard. Do this part of the practice for 7 to 10 minutes.

We conclude the practice by extending it out beyond our familiar world. One way to do this is to move geographically. We begin in our immediate neighborhood, with the family next door with the two babies, to the college student on the other side who takes terrible care of her lawn, to the elderly woman across the street who recently lost her husband. We move to those people we encounter on our daily routines—our cowork-

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ers and our boss; the grocery checker and stock boy; the employees at the cleaners, the gas station, and the video store. Then we extend through our community, to the hospital, the shelter, the jail, the nursing home, including everyone suffering there. And we extend to our state, region, country, and world, our minds going to the painful situations there that are described in the newspaper—the wars, famines, epidemics. We also include the CEOs, the political leaders, and the people of privilege. We extend this practice until the twenty-minute session is over. Then we conclude with a simple session of meditation again.

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—*from Summer 2005*

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LEAVE YOURSELF ALONE!

Just sitting

BARRY MAGID

Imagine sitting down in front of a mirror. Your face automatically appears. There is no effort required; the mirror is doing all the work. You can't do it right or wrong. The Zen Buddhist practice of "just sitting" is like that. When we sit, our mind automatically begins to display itself to us. Our practice is to observe and experience what appears moment after moment. Of course, just as when we look in a real mirror, things don't stay that simple for long.

We notice how our faces or our bodies look in the mirror, and we immediately have an emotional reaction and form judgments about what we see. Rainer Maria Rilke wrote that Paul Cezanne was capable of painting a self-portrait with utter objectivity, of looking at his own face with no more reaction than "a dog which sees itself in a mirror and thinks, 'Here is another dog.'" For the rest of us, it's not so easy to simply observe who we are. Looking in the mirror, we are tempted to use it as a makeup mirror to touch up the parts of our self-image we don't like.

Our minds are never what we want them to be. That's part of why we sit in the first place. We are uncomfortable with ourselves as we are. The greatest dualism we face is the split between who we are and who we think we ought to be. Sometimes that gap fuels our aspiration to follow

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Buddhist teachings, sometimes it simply fuels our self-hatred, and all too often we confuse these two notions of self entirely.

Just sitting means sitting still with all of the aspects of ourselves that we came to Buddhist practice in order to avoid or change—our restlessness, our anxiety, our fear, our anger, our wandering minds. Our practice is to just watch, to just feel. We watch our minds. Minds think. There's no problem with that; minds just do what they do. Ordinarily we get caught up in the content of our thoughts, but when we just sit, we observe ourselves just thinking. Our body's most basic activity is breathing: No matter what else is going on, we are breathing. We sit and breathe, and we feel the sensation of our breath in our bodies. Often there is tension or even pain somewhere in our bodies as well. We sit and feel that too and keep breathing. Whatever thoughts come, come. Whatever feelings come, come. We are not sitting there to fight off our thoughts or try to make ourselves stop thinking.

When we sit, we realize how unwilling we are to leave anything about ourselves alone. We turn our lives into one endless self-improvement project. All too often, what we call meditation or spirituality is simply incorporated into our obsession with self-criticism and self-improvement. I've encountered many students who have attempted to use meditation to perform a spiritual lobotomy on themselves—trying to excise, once and for all, their anger, their fear, their sexuality. We have to sit with our resistance to feeling whole, to feeling all those painful and messy parts of ourselves.

Just sitting means just that. That “just” endlessly goes against the grain of our need to fix, transform, and improve ourselves. The paradox of our practice is that the most effective way of transformation is to leave ourselves alone. The more we let everything be just what it is, the more we relax into an open, attentive awareness of one moment after another.

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Just sitting leaves everything just as it is.

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—*from Summer 2005*

WORRY BEADS

Buddhist mala practice

CLARK STRAND

Take up a Buddhist *mala*, and right away you notice how good it feels in your hands. The same is true of the prayer beads of any religious tradition. First, there is the soothing feel of the beads themselves, which only increases as they become smoother or darken with use. Then there is what they symbolize—the tangible link to an age-old tradition. Run a string of prayer beads through your hands, and you are touching an ancient practice. Yours are only the most recent set of fingers to caress such beads, and others will take them up later, after you are gone.

On a more literal note, the mala is also a kind of Buddhist robe. Worn about the neck or wrist, it is, after a monk's shaved head, the most recognizable sign of Buddhist affiliation—especially for laypeople who might not otherwise be identified as such. In the beginning, in fact, prayer beads were mostly designed for the layperson's use. Monks now carry them, but if we follow the various bead traditions back far enough, we usually find that they were a way of adapting monastic discipline to the limits and demands of nonmonastic life. The Catholic “rosary,” so named when travelers to India mistranslated the Sanskrit word *japa-mala* as “rose beads,” is a perfect example. Its 150 Hail Marys (completed

by going through the beads three times) were a substitute for observing the monastic hours, in which all 150 psalms were chanted. Likewise, the 15 “mysteries,” episodes from the lives of Jesus and Mary, were intended to function as a summary of the Gospel for ordinary illiterate people who were unable to read the Bible on their own. Even in the Buddhist tradition, the first prayer beads were not intended for monks’ use.

According to a popular legend on the origins of Buddhist mala practice, King Vaidunya once said to the Buddha: “In recent years, disease and famine have swept my country. The people are distressed, and I worry about this night and day without interruption. Ours is a pitiful condition. The totality of the dharma is too profound and extensive for us to practice, given these circumstances. Please teach me just the main point of the dharma so that I may practice it and teach it to others.”

The Buddha replied: “King, if you want to eliminate earthly desires, make a circular string of 108 bodhi seeds and, holding them always to yourself, recite, ‘I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the Dharma. I take refuge in the Sangha.’ Count one bead with each recitation of these three.”

This is the earliest tale of Buddhist mala practice, and it was clearly intended for those who, unlike members of the Buddha’s monastic assembly, could not abandon the worries of secular life. That mala beads later came to be used by the monks themselves probably testifies to their effectiveness in calming the kinds of worries that afflict us all, monk and layperson alike. When questioned in an interview, even the Dalai Lama has admitted to being attached to his beads.

After nearly 30 years of using and making the prayer beads of various religious traditions, I have come to a simple conclusion: All beads are worry beads—from the Pope’s rosary all the way down to those little wrist malas, sometimes popularly referred to as “power bracelets,” worn

by Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. People of every religious tradition will claim that their beads are for praying—for appealing to a higher power, for collecting the spirit or concentrating mind—and while this is indisputably true, that is not their primary purpose. Beads are for worry. They answer a human need so basic it actually precedes a religious consciousness—and that is to fret over things. The Buddhist mala acknowledges this. It is a way of engaging our worries, a way of combining the universal need for talismanic objects with the kind of repetitive movements that calm the body and mind. The difference between the Buddhist mala and the various Western-style rosaries is simply that it makes this explicit in the symbolism of its beads.

A Buddhist mala typically consists of 108 beads, one for each of the delusions (call them worries) that afflict human life. I am often asked how that number was arrived at, and the answer, although somewhat convoluted mathematically, makes sense from a Buddhist point of view. There are six varieties of delusion that can occur when we experience an object of awareness: delusion via the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, the body, or the mind. Each of these objects can in turn be perceived in the past, the present, or the future, making for eighteen possibilities in all. Multiply these by the two conditions of heart (pure and impure) and again by the three possible sentiments with regard to any of those sense objects (like, dislike, and indifference), and the number of possibilities for delusion is found to be $6 \times 3 \times 2 \times 3$, or 108. There are other ways of calculating that number, but in most cases the gist is the same. For a Buddhist, delusion is the only legitimate source of worry. Worrying about money or health is, by comparison, relatively pointless. There will never be enough money in the world (that seems to be the point of money), and our health is guaranteed to fail in the end, no matter what we do. The wordless message of the Buddhist mala is “Don’t worry about

things; worry about the fact that you are so worried all the time, and address the root of that.” The mala is a teaching in itself.

No matter which particular recitation it is being used for, the mala contains a full course of spiritual lessons. To begin with, every Buddhist tradition stresses that the beads must be cared for as if they were a precious sutra or a Buddhist robe. This makes a literal kind of sense if we consider the fact that we use them to recite mantras, often considered the essence of the sutras in which they appear. Then there is the fact that, unlike the Catholic rosary, the mala is meant to be worn when not in use. Thus, to use a mala is both to take up a spiritual text and to clothe oneself in the truth of the Buddha Way. And then there is the curious matter of the “guru” bead. The larger, three-holed bead at the end of a mala is the Buddhist equivalent of the crucifix on a Catholic rosary. It is the teacher—and the teaching—that we keep coming back to with every cycle we pray.

At some point in their religious observances, most Mahayana Buddhists recite some variation on the bodhisattva vows, the second of which is “No matter how inexhaustible delusions are, I vow to vanquish them all”—a paradox at best, at worst an impossible task. But the mala offers a valuable clarification on this point, for it is basically a circle. In the course of reciting a round of mantras, one begins and ends with the guru bead. As a rule we never cross that bead in our counting. Rather, if we want to continue beyond a single cycle, we stop at the guru bead and count the beads back in the opposite direction, repeating this same cycle for as long as we wish to practice. In this way, we find that delusions truly *are* inexhaustible. Delusion is the realm we live in; delusion is fundamentally what we are. To overcome this, once and for all, is to pass beyond this life. When we have done that, finally, we enter the timeless realm of the Buddha.

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What is most peculiar about mala practice is that the beads never take us there. Always we stop short of the Buddha realm and turn back the other way. This may seem fatalistic on its surface, but there is a deep wisdom in this simple ritual, for even though he eventually passed into the extinguished, blown-out-candle state of nirvana, the Buddha realized his enlightenment as a human being and lived in peace with all other beings in this world. He is the Tathagata, or the “Thus Come One,” not the Thus Gone.

We are not called upon as Buddhists to deny the world, and certainly not to escape from it. We are called to live with it, and to make our peace with all that is. In Buddhist terms, that peace is called Tathagata. The Thus Come One is enlightened as he is, not as he would wish himself to be. There is no escaping this. The world of worries we wish to escape from in the beginning of Buddhist practice is found to be enlightenment itself in the end. We don’t understand this, of course, and so we keep striving for a distant, idealized kind of Buddhahood, only to reach its threshold and be turned back the way we came. In this way, we receive the teaching of the Buddha with every mala we say.

That is what the beads have taught me. Now after many years of handling them, taking in their teachings through the palm of my hand, I am occasionally able to recognize a little of that teaching when I see it manifested in others. There is the Tibetan mother of a friend of mine, dispossessed of her homeland, happily walking through the town where I live, an enormous goiter swelling above the neckline of her traditional dress. She fingers her beads continuously, smiling all the while. She speaks little English, but as I witness her reach the end of her mala and happily twist it about in her hand to finger its beads back the other way, I see that she is at peace in the world, as though she had actually spoken the words aloud. Buddha. Dharma. Sangha. The teachings are all there.

She carries them. And when she isn't carrying them, she wears them on her sleeve.

Saying the Nembutsu:

Nembutsu literally means, “to think of Buddha,” and is based on the teaching that “when you are mindful of the Buddha, the Buddha is mindful of you.” The principal practice of Pure Land Buddhism, *nembutsu* originally referred to a complex series of practices leading up to a vision of Amida Buddha in his Western Paradise. But many centuries ago it came to mean just what it does today: simple recitation of the words *Namu Amida Butsu*, “I take refuge in Amida, the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life.”

Reciting the nembutsu sets the minds of those who practice it directly in the presence of Amida Buddha, with no intermediary whatsoever. Therefore, it can be taken up by anyone, anywhere, at any time—whether they have received instruction in that practice from a Pure Land teacher or not.

Honen, the founder of the Pure Land school, taught: “The way to say the nembutsu lies in having no way.” In other words, any way of saying the nembutsu is fine. You may say it very fast or very slowly, use its traditional six-syllable form, *Na-Mu-A-Mi-Da-Bu*, or abbreviate it down to *Na-Man-Da-Bu*, as many Japanese people do; it makes no difference at all. In saying the nembutsu, we rely on Amida's vow to save all beings who simply call upon his name. To be too concerned with such matters as rhythm or pronunciation takes our minds off of the Buddha. And so it is best not to worry. Amida will hear us wherever we are, in whatever condition we find ourselves, and however we say his name.

In reciting the nembutsu, some traditions stress the use of malas, also called *juzu* (“counting beads”), to keep track of their recitations,

while others do not. For those who wish to use a juzu, one simply recites the nembutsu once for every bead, turning about at the guru bead to go back in the other direction, repeating this cycle as often as possible. Pure Land practitioners who favor a simple, heartfelt recitation still use malas, only they refer to them as *nenju* (“thought beads”), to indicate that they are not to be used for counting. In such cases, they simply place their hands together in *gassho*, with the beads encircling both palms, and chant. Placing our hands together in *gassho* is the basic attitude of devotion in the Pure Land school. The left hand joins the right, palm to palm, and in this way, symbolically speaking, our deluded selves are joined with Amida. When we place our hands together in this way, we find that they match up perfectly. For each finger of the left hand, there is a finger of the right to embrace it. The match is perfect. Nothing is left out.

This is a beautiful description of the way worried beings are saved by Amida. For every moment of delusion, every act of greed, folly, or confusion, there is Amida right beside us, embracing us as we are. If it were necessary to change first in order to be worthy of birth in the Pure Land, few of us could attain it. Fortunately, all that is required is that we unite with the Tathagata. When we join the palms together in this way in an expression of simple faith and utter the words *Namu Amida Butsu*, whether we count our beads or not, all is taken care of. Amida embraces us on the spot.

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—from *Winter 2006*

FULL BODY, EMPTY MIND

How the body can serve as the doorway to spiritual transformation

WILL JOHNSON

In many Buddhist groups, the body is addressed only in basic instructions on posture for meditation, sometimes lasting no more than a few minutes. Many practitioners are drawn to body-based practices such as yoga, martial arts, or the Alexander technique to complement or even enable their sitting practice, but they are often on their own when it comes to integrating these traditions with their larger spiritual path. What is being lost in this gap? One of the most convincing voices for the importance of the body in meditation belongs to Will Johnson, author of several books on the topic, including *The Posture of Meditation; Aligned, Relaxed, and Resilient*; and *Yoga of the Mahamudra*.

Johnson, the director of the Institute for Embodiment Training in British Columbia, Canada, began his Buddhist practice in 1972 and was certified in the deep bodywork system of Rolfing in 1976. Drawing on his experience in these traditions, Sufism, and others, he now teaches embodiment training, what he calls “a path of awakening that views the body as the doorway, not the obstacle, to personal growth and spiritual transformation.” *Tricycle*’s Andrew Merz exchanged emails with Johnson to discuss how meditators can explore the body and what they

might gain from the practice.

You've said that in order to experience emptiness of mind, one must first experience fullness of body. While this intuitively resonates with many meditators, clear explanations of why that is true and how it can be integrated into a Buddhist meditation practice are hard to find. How do we start to understand this view in a Buddhist context, and how do we address it without feeling as though we are detracting from our usual sitting practice? This focus on awareness of the body is what, for me, the teachings always kept leading to. The part of the Four Noble Truths that attracted me the most, for example, was the explanation about why we suffer. The Buddha's observation that we create upset for ourselves when we're in reaction, and that we manage to do this to ourselves through the twinned actions of desire and aversion, just rang true.

The teachings tell us that actions disturb our peace of mind, but what I'm suggesting is that we can't just look to what we conventionally call our mind to sort this out. Reaction, clinging, and aversion are physical actions that the body performs and that, no matter how subtle, create muscular tension through the repeated motions of either "pulling toward" (desire) or "pushing away" (aversion). Repeat anything often enough, and you create holding patterns in the body that predispose you to continue doing that action. Sitting practices that focus on relaxing the underlying tensions and holdings you feel in your body, as well as restrictions to the breath, help you mitigate the legacy and habit patterns of reacting, clinging, and aversion.

As the 11th-century Mahamudra teacher Tilopa said, "Do nothing with the body but relax." When we start to relax, we start feeling the body. Tensions and contractions in the body serve as a numbing blanket

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that keeps the tiny physical sensations that exist on every part of the body from being felt. Learning how to relax while remaining upright in the sitting posture allows the body's full range of sensations to come out of hiding and make their existence felt. It's always struck me as peculiar: If I know that sensations can be felt to exist everywhere in the body, then why don't I feel them? And what effect does blocking out awareness of feeling have on me? And finally, if the mind that is "lost in thought" is somehow dependent on my not feeling the sensations of the body, what happens to the mind if I let myself feel the entire body, head to toe, as an unbroken field of sensations? The sitting posture itself can be a kind of crucible for burning off the tensions and restrictions to body and breath that all too often keep us lost in thought and unaware of feeling presence.

A good place to start is examining what happens to the body when you're lost in thought. This, of course, is tricky to do, because when the mind is off wandering in involuntary thought, you're not very aware of the body at all. But if you can include an observation of the body while you're off in a thought, you'll find that the condition "lost in thought" is directly accompanied somewhere in the body by muscular contraction and tensing, stillness and rigidity, and a subtle contraction or holding quality to the breath. In other words, when you're lost in thought, you're tense in body. It follows, then, that if you can consciously work with the body during your sitting practice to soften and relax the tensions and allow more resilient and natural movement to accompany the passage of the breath, the chatter of the mind can be reduced, and your practice can start going really deep.

Once we begin to burn off the tensions and restrictions, how is this release manifested in the mind and emotions? Vipassana teachers speak of *sankharas*, the accumulated residues of resistance and reactions that

we store in our bodies and that, through long, focused hours of meditation, gradually come to the surface of awareness in the form of sensations (often not very pleasant ones). If we can simply feel them without reacting to them, they eventually burn themselves up and disappear, leaving a much more pleasurable shimmer in their place (that is, until the next deeper level of sankharas make their way to the surface to be felt, accepted, and released).

Wilhelm Reich, one of the earliest Western psychotherapists who became interested in how the energies of the body affect states of the mind, believed that what we call the unconscious is stored not in some remote repository in the brain but rather in the soft tissues of the body. Think about this for a moment, because it makes a lot of sense. Even though we know that sensations can be felt to exist on every part of the body down to the smallest cell, most people, most of the time, have very little conscious awareness of the felt presence of their bodies. In other words, we are unconscious of the presence of sensations, and so it is in the unfelt sensations of the body that the unconscious is to be found. I would suggest that most people, at any given moment, are probably only aware of 5 to 15 percent of their bodily sensations.

The work of Buddhism is to awaken, to come out of the sleepy dreams and notions of reality that we hold to be true and replace them with a direct experience of what is more accurately occurring. To awaken in this way, we need to become conscious of what's actually going on at the very depths of our experience.

So when we unlock a particular physical tension, are we also releasing potentially difficult emotional aspects of the clinging or aversion that originally caused the tension? Many people report strong emotional reactions to bodywork—memories of a childhood trauma arising during massage therapy, for instance. In Buddhist terms, is this

our karma stored in the tension in our bodies? For Western somatic therapists and Theravada Buddhists alike, much of the work that needs to be done is to rekindle a felt awareness of the whole body as a field of vibratory sensations. I sometimes joke with people that as we start to become aware of bodily sensations, we very quickly realize why we haven't wanted to feel them! We may have visions of relaxing the body and opening to an awareness of shimmering bodily sensations that feel like soft falling rain, but more often than not what we are first going to have to go through is a phase in which we feel highly intensified, sometimes very painful sensations, and through these periods of practice we face our karma directly. When we silently weep in our meditation practice over the discomfort we might be feeling, it is likely that a sankhara of sadness has come to the surface and is being released through that sensation of pain. When we get angry and irritated in our meditation because of what we might be feeling, it's likely that a sankhara of aversion has emerged out of the repository of our unconscious.

So when I speak of relaxing the tensions and holdings in the body and breath through sitting meditation practice, please don't think that I'm implying that everything is going to proceed like a pleasant Sunday outing in the country. More often than not, large emotional and physical storms may occur during practice before the skies clear. But if we can be courageous enough to work with the simple principles of alignment, relaxation, and surrendered resilience during our sitting practice, these storms eventually do seem to abate, and what appears in their place is worth the price of admission. Sometimes the clearing of the storms can take quite a bit of time (this is not fast-food therapy), and it is for this reason that I increasingly prefer to enter into retreats that last several weeks. Meditation practices that instruct students to focus solely on the activities and contents of what we conventionally call the mind may un-

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wittingly contribute to keeping contained the deep unconscious sankharas, which always appear as sensation. Many techniques can bring about a calming effect at the surface level of the mind, but if we're sincere about wanting to truly awaken and become truly conscious, we really need to embrace the experience of the body as a focus of our practice and allow the deeply unconscious and unfelt sensations to start coming out of hiding. And yes, this can be a very intensive undertaking, one definitely not for the faint of heart! But what, really, is our choice? We either face our karma and release the accumulated tensions of the past, or we continue to avoid feeling the reality of the body and enshrine the tensions forever.

As you say, this does indeed sound like an intensive undertaking and one that many practitioners today may feel they simply don't have room for in their busy lives. When we sit down and encounter our deepest unconscious feelings first thing in the morning, how do we then get up and go about our day effectively? How can we approach this work in a manner that doesn't threaten to make us fall apart completely? The kinds of emotional storms that we're talking about generally only erupt during long, intensive retreats. When we return home to our more familiar environment, things will settle after a day or two, and so I don't think you really have to worry about falling apart while driving to work. If we're sincere about truly going deep and purifying out some of the residue of our karma, then I think an intensive retreat at least once a year is very important. When we come back from retreat, it's helpful to keep up our formal practice by sitting daily for an hour or for however long our schedule permits.

As important as formal practices undeniably are, I feel that it is even more important to view the rest of our lives as "informal" practice. What I mean by this is that the awareness of embodied presence need not be

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confined to the time spent sitting on our meditation cushion. Every single moment provides an opportunity to relax the tendency to create tension in the body and unconscious thought patterns in the mind, and this can be a very gentle process. If intensive retreats are like turning up the flame on the stove, informal practice is like simmering at a low and steady heat that is practically unnoticeable and so allows you to go about your daily life without the emotional upheavals that can occur during more intensive periods of practice.

I think of informal practice as “embodied mindfulness.” In truth, every single moment of our lives presents us with a choice: either awaken to the reality of the present moment, or stay sleepy and push aspects of that reality away. Sensations are here every single moment. Why don’t we feel them? The visual field, in all its dazzling play, is here every moment that our eyes are open. Can we remember to look and actually see? Sounds are here constantly. Blocking them from our awareness creates a great deal of tension in the body.

Let alignment, relaxation, and surrendered resilience be your physical guides not only in your sitting practice but also as you go about your day. These three keys allow you to stay in touch with embodied presence. Merging an awareness of body with the awareness of vision and sound allows you to truly become one with this present moment. As you bring alignment, relaxation, and resilience into your daily life, your breath automatically becomes fuller and starts moving through your entire body, just as the Buddha suggested in his description of meditation. Without forcing a thing, let your breath breathe you: breathe into your entire body, and breathe out just as effortlessly. This condition, nothing more, nothing less, is really the reward and benefit of the practice. And in this way you can walk in full awareness through the city or countryside, like a knife cutting through the softest butter. Always be on the lookout

not to bring any tension into this practice. Striving to attain this kind of awareness is simply self-defeating. Relax into presence. It's been there all the time.

Exercise: Dissolving Thought into Sensation

By Will Johnson

Sensation and thought cannot easily coexist. Another way of saying this is that sensation and thought cannot occupy the same space. So locate where your next thought is positioned in space. It's probably going to be somewhere around or inside your head, but it's definitely somewhere in your body. Find out where it is. Plot out its spatial coordinates. Where does it start and stop in your body? What shape is it?

Now shift your awareness. Remember: sensations exist in every part of the body, and thought and sensation cannot occupy the same space. So relax and let yourself start to feel the tactile sensations, the feeling presence, that also occupies that space. Just let the feeling presence in this space start to come forward. Where is your thought now?

Exercise: Expanding Sensation into Presence

Never look upon the involuntary thought process of the mind as an enemy that needs to be subdued or vanquished. Look upon it instead as an infallible guide that is constantly "re-minding" you that you have momentarily lost awareness of sensations. Once you have dissolved thought into sensation in the area of your head, expand your awareness of sensations to include your entire body. Without bringing any tension into this shifting of awareness, staying completely relaxed, feel the entire body from head to foot, all at once, as a unified field of tactile sensations.

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Now expand your awareness to include the entire field of vision. Soften any tension around your eyes so that you can see the entire visual field all at once. Next include the entire field of sound. Be aware of every little bit of the ever-changing field of sound, as though you were listening to a symphony and hearing what every single instrument was playing.

Feel the entire body. See the entire visual field. Listen to everything that is here to be heard. Stay completely relaxed as you do this. In this condition of awakened presence, where have the thoughts gone? Where have YOU gone?

3 Keys: Alignment, Relaxation, and Surrendered Resilience

Alignment: The tallest skyscrapers and trees are only able to attain their remarkable height because of their vertical alignment. Gravity supports structures that are balanced and aligned in this way. If you can consciously, but effortlessly, bring the major segments of your body into a predominantly vertical alignment, gravity will support you as well.

Relaxation: The purpose of alignment is that it allows us to relax. A body that is not aligned relies on constant muscular tension to remain upright, for if it were to relax its tension, it would fall to the ground. Tension blocks out our awareness of sensations, so once we are able to relax, we can start to feel the body and our formerly unfelt sensations start emerging.

Surrendered resilience: To stay relaxed, the entire body must be able to remain in subtle but constant movement, like an amoeba that continually expands and contracts. Breath, for example, can be felt to move through the entire body, causing subtle movement to occur at every joint. If we resist this natural bodily movement by holding ourselves

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still, we will bring tension back into our body, forfeit our relaxation, lose awareness of sensations, and yet again become lost in the involuntary story lines of our mind.

—*from Fall 2007*

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EMOTIONS &
HINDRANCES

SHARON SALZBERG AND JOSPEH GOLDSTEIN

In this practice we'll devote our attention to the emotions and hindrances that arise during meditation. In order to do this, we investigate the nature of these experiences as they happen.

GUIDED MEDITATION: HANDLING HINDRANCES

One of the keys to a skillful relationship with the five hindrances is being able to name them or to make a mental note of them. The five classical hindrances to meditation practice are desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, and doubt. We practice noting very softly, giving about 95 percent of our attention to actually being with the experience, to sensing it completely. Only 5 percent of our energy goes into the soft, gentle naming of it.

We use mental noting with the hindrances to bring us into a direct relationship with them, as opposed to elaborating or judging or creating a story about what's going on. If aversion, or anger, arises, for example, we would note it as "anger, anger." This brings us close to the exploration of anger itself. What is anger? What does it feel like? What is its nature?

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Mental noting takes us in a very different direction from getting lost in a story: “Oh, this anger is so miserable; I am such a terrible person, because I’m always angry; this is just how I will always be,” and so on. Instead, we simply say to ourselves, “anger, anger”—and cut through all of that elaboration, the story, the judgment, the interpretation.

As you note the particular hindrance, you can also be conscious of what happens to it. How does it behave? Does it intensify? Does it fade away? Pay particular attention to whether or not it manifests in the body. If so, how does it feel? What parts of the body are affected by the arising of this force in the mind? The chest, the stomach, the head, the eyes, the breath—where are you feeling it?

What does it feel like in the mind, in the heart, as a mood, as a coloration, as an experience? Do you feel open, or do you feel contracted when this hindrance is present? Do you feel closed off and separate, or do you feel connected? Whatever it is, explore and discover without judgment. Simply pay attention. Watch and see the nature of this hindrance in the moment and observe how it changes. Is it growing stronger? Is it growing weaker? Is it changing into something else?

Listen to the voices that come along with the hindrances. What are they saying to you? What are they saying about you and what you’re capable of? Very often with the hindrances, and especially with the forces of desire or anger, we get so lost in the object that we forget to pay any attention to the feeling itself. We fixate so much on what we want, or what we want to keep, or what we hate and want to push away, that we don’t spend much time feeling the nature of desire or of anger itself. So ask yourself now: what do they feel like? See if you can let go of that fixation on the object of the feeling. Relax. Abide in the feeling. It’s an act of discovery. It’s as though somebody were to say to you, “What is desire? What is anger?” Not “Why are you feeling it?” or “Is it right or is

it wrong?” Just “What is it?”

The hindrances are going to arise. We don't have to be upset or afraid about that. We don't have to feel disappointed because of it. We can come to understand a great deal about our experience—about our own suffering and our release from suffering—just from coming to understand these hindrances better.

Guided Meditation: How Does It Feel?

We've talked about working with the mind states of the hindrances as they arise in meditation and in our lives. We also want to become aware of the entire range of emotional life. The various emotions that arise in sitting practice and in walking—we want to bring this awareness to all of these, and then beyond that to the emotions we experience in the world every day. As you sit, feeling the breath, feeling sensations, noticing the hindrances as they arise, be aware of different emotions as they appear in your experience. There might be the feeling of happiness or sadness; there might be the feeling of joy or depression. You might feel quite light or buoyant. You might feel heavy or despairing.

Each one of these states can be opened to, noticed, and noted. The practice is to be aware of them without identifying with them; not taking them to be “I” or “self” or “mine,” but seeing them as a constellation or experience arising out of conditions. We see them lasting for some time, changing, disappearing, in the form of sensations in the body; particular thoughts or images associated with the emotion; or as a certain texture or coloration of the mind. Each emotion has its own particular flavor. We want to investigate all of these aspects.

The first step in working with an emotion is to recognize what it is. It's very helpful to use mental noting to bring forth clear recognition: “This is happiness, this is sadness, this is loneliness, this is excitement,

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this is interest, this is boredom.” Clear recognition can be very helpful. If other thoughts rush in to associate with the naming, practice returning, again and again, to the simple naming.

When an emotion is arising strongly in your experience, it’s useful to notice the different aspects or constituents of the emotion. Feel the specific sensations in the body. Is there heat? Is the body contracted? Is it open? Is it soft? Notice whether there are particular images or thoughts associated with the emotion, and notice the mind flavor of the particular feeling. Each emotion has its own flavor, the flavor of sadness or happiness or joy or love or anger. Open to the subtleties in the mind and body as each of these feelings arises.

Sometimes you may not be able to recognize exactly what the emotion is. There’s no need to spend a long time trying to analyze it; you can simply open to the feeling with the general note of “feeling” or “emotion” until what it is becomes clearer to you.

So the first step is recognition. The second step is acceptance. There’s often a tendency to resist or deny certain emotions, particularly if they’re unpleasant. There are certain emotions that we don’t like to feel. These can be different for each of us. For some people, there is a resistance to feeling anger or sadness or unworthiness. In our meditation practice, we want to recognize what’s arising and be accepting of whatever it is. Acceptance is the key to the third step, which is nonidentification with the emotion. The understanding is that this constellation of experience is arising out of conditions and then passing away. It is nonpersonal. There’s no one behind them to whom they are happening.

This may take some practice to understand. It’s a very subtle and difficult point, because often what we most personalize, what we most identify with, are the emotions. They’re what we’re most likely to take ourselves to be.

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Monday–Friday: Practice seated meditation for 30 minutes in the morning and in the evening. Include two periods of walking meditation, of any length, in the course of the day. Pay particular attention to emotions and hindrances, working with them according to the instructions above.

Weekend Challenge: Devote four hours this weekend to silent meditation in sessions of at least 30 minutes. Practice being mindful of emotions and hindrances as they arise this weekend, both during and outside of your formal meditation periods.

Working with Hindrances:

- Recognize sleepiness as something we experience in parts of each day. We practice meditation in order to wake up. By bringing awareness to the state of torpor, you can gain glimpses into those parts of your world you may be excluding from the totality of your awareness.
- If you find yourself losing interest in your surroundings, wherever you are, focus on just one thing. “Just this sentence.” “Just this step.” Bring yourself back into the present moment by becoming mindful of those objects and events that are actually arising.
- Surrender. Let your mind be as restless as it wants to, but stay with it. As with any conditioned phenomenon, the restlessness will change shape as you watch it.
- Recognize doubt as a thought process. It takes form as a string of words. Drop below the words to your actual experience, and you’re likely to encounter the subtle fear and resistance from which doubt can arise.

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—*from Spring 2007*

WORKING WITH THOUGHTS

Developing silent awareness

SHARON SALZBERG AND JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN

For the purpose of meditation, nothing is particularly worth thinking about: not our childhood, not our relationships, not the great novel we always wanted to write. This does not mean that thoughts will not come. In fact, they may come with tremendous frequency. We do not need to fight with them or struggle against them or judge them. Rather, we can simply choose not to follow the thoughts once they have arisen. The quicker we notice that we are thinking, the quicker we can see thought's empty nature.

Our thoughts are often seductive, and meditation may pass quickly when we sit and daydream; before we know it, the hour has passed. It may have been an enjoyable sitting, but it was not meditation. We need to be aware of this sidetrack in practice and remember that the kind of wisdom we want to develop comes intuitively and spontaneously from silent awareness.

Although meditation is not thinking, it can be *clear awareness of thinking*. Thought can be a very useful object of meditation. We can turn the great power of observation onto thought in order to learn about its

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inherent nature, becoming aware of its process instead of getting lost in its content.

In dharma teaching we speak frequently about the powerful impact of identifying with phenomena. Identification imprisons us in the content of our conditioning. One of the easiest ways to understand this imprisonment is to observe the difference between being lost *in* thought and being mindful *of* it.

The Buddha said that we are shaped, created, and led by our thoughts. If he was right, then it is important for us to watch our thought process closely to see where we get hooked, where we are seduced through identification into creating something that brings us unhappiness. It is amazing to observe how much power we give unknowingly to uninvited thoughts: “Do this, say that, remember, plan, obsess, judge.” They can drive us quite crazy, and they often do!

The kinds of thoughts we have, and the impact they have on our destiny, depend on our understanding of things. If we are in the clear powerful space of just seeing thoughts arising and passing, then it does not matter what species of thinking appears in the mind; they are all essentially empty of any substance at all, and we can see them for the passing show that they are. These all-powerful movers and shakers of the world that create us and lead us become little energy blips in our mind, with hardly enough power to create even a ripple. They seem like transparent dewdrops evaporating in the sun.

But there are many times when we are not simply watching thoughts come and go, either because we are lost in them or because we choose to think something through, perhaps as a precursor to action. In both cases it is crucial for us to discern wholesome from unwholesome thoughts in order to know which to give our energy to, because these thoughts do have karmic impact: they lead us. From thoughts come actions. From

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actions come all sorts of consequences. Which thoughts will we invest in? Our great task is to see them clearly, so that we can choose which to act on and which simply to let be.

It takes a great deal of alertness to stay aware of thoughts. They are extremely slippery. If you watch them in one place, they sneak in from another. But as practice evolves, two liberating things happen. First, our mind actually becomes quieter. Instead of being a rushing torrent, thoughts come less frequently, and we enjoy an increasing sense of calm and inner peace. Second, our observing power becomes quicker and stronger. We can see thoughts much more clearly and are taken for fewer unconscious rides. Without identifying with thoughts and giving them power, our mind abides in a natural state of ease, simplicity, and peace.

GUIDED MEDITATION: COUNTING THOUGHTS

As you sit, resolve to concentrate on the thought process for five minutes. Let your mind appear as a blank screen, and watch carefully for thoughts to arise. They may come as images, or words in the mind, or both together. Some thoughts may arise with a feeling or physical sense as well. Note experience as it appears.

For five minutes, experiment with counting your thoughts. After noticing and counting the thoughts, simply wait, looking at the blank screen, for the next one to arise. Remember that some thoughts are very subtle, like “It’s so quiet in here.” We count the thoughts not to form a judgment about ourselves and how much (or little) we think, but to observe the thought process with mindfulness, without getting lost in each story. Can you describe your experience?

Carefully note each breath as “breath.” As thoughts arise, note them simply as “not-breath.” This also helps us cut our dualistic fixation with

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the content of our thoughts. Whether lovely or frightening, they are all noted simply as “not-breath.” What kinds of thoughts predominate in your mind—words or pictures, those arising with a kinesthetic sense, or a combination?

If images are arising, can you note them as “seeing” and notice whether they are growing brighter, fading, breaking apart, moving closer, or staying just the same? Can you note the particular kind of thought, such as “planning,” “remembering,” “judging,” “loving”?

Observe the effect of various types of thoughts—for example, that of a future-directed thought like “I’m never going to get any better.” What happens to your mood, to your body, as a consequence of this thought? What is the difference between simply observing it and getting lost in it?

Can you name an insistent thought with a label that reflects some compassion and humor? We call them the Top Ten tapes because they arise in the form of conditioned tapes in the mind. They play like songs on the radio, reflecting the same themes over and over again. Try giving them appropriate labels like “the Martyr tape,” “the I-Blew-It-Again tape,” “the Fear-of-the-Dark tape.” Be lighthearted about these labels. We can see these tapes as conditioned forces and don’t have to take ourselves so seriously. The repeated forces in the mind can be greeted in a friendly and openhearted way: “Oh, it’s you again, Mad Scientist tape. Hello.”

If a particular thought seems to be returning a lot, expand your field of attention to notice whatever emotional state may be feeding it. Unseen feelings are part of what brings thoughts back again and again. For example, anxiety often fuels future planning. At first the emotions may be half-hidden or unconscious, but if you pay careful attention, the feelings will reveal themselves. Use the sensations in the body to help

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guide the attention to whatever emotions may be present. You may find that watching tension in the chest uncovers sadness. Begin to note whatever emotion you see as a way of acknowledging them.

If there is a repeated physical pain or difficult mood, expand your field of attention to the thoughts, stories, or beliefs that may be feeding the difficult situation. When we are mindful, we may find a subtle level of self-judgment or a belief about our unworthiness, such as “I’m not as good as others. I’ll always be this way.” These thoughts actually help perpetuate pain or unhappiness.

Monday–Friday: Commit to 45-minute sessions in the morning and in the evening. Also include two periods of walking meditation, of any length, in the course of the day

Weekend Challenge: Devote one full day (from sunrise to sunset) to contemplation on the body, the feelings, and the mind. Create a schedule of alternating periods of seated and walking meditation with short breaks in the morning and afternoon and one two-hour lunch break. During break periods move carefully, paying special attention to sensations in the body and activity in the mind. This is a good opportunity to learn how to take your mindfulness practice off the cushion and into your everyday life.

Sharon Salzberg is a cofounder of the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, Massachusetts. The ancient Buddhist practices of *vipassana* (mindfulness) and *metta* (lovingkindness) are the foundations of her work.

Joseph Goldstein has been leading insight and lovingkindness medi-

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tation retreats worldwide since 1974. He is a cofounder of the Insight Meditation Society.

—from Spring 2007

MEDITATOR'S TOOLBOX

Helpful tips from teachers and practitioners

Bodhidharma tore off his eyelids. Jack Kornfield's teacher told him to meditate at the edge of a well. The Buddhist tradition is full of stories of practitioners who have found unique techniques for stimulating and maintaining their practice. In fact, anyone who has sat on a zafu more than once probably has come up with a trick or two for staying there. To tap into this resource, we've asked seasoned Buddhist teachers and longtime practitioners to share their favorite meditating tools. Check out what they have to offer.

1. JUST GET IN THE POSTURE

“Try making a commitment to getting into the meditation posture at least once a day. You don't have to sit for any particular length of time; just get on the cushion. A lot of times, the hardest part is getting there. Once you're sitting down, you think, ‘I might as well sit for a few minutes,’ and more often than not, you're getting full sessions in.” —Insight Meditation Society cofounder Joseph Goldstein

2. REFLECT ON THE BIG PICTURE

“The breath is not only a useful object of concentration but also a sign of life. A little reflection can bring a sense of gratitude and delight to each breath, which is further enhanced by sensing what the Indian

mystic and poet Kabir called ‘the breath within the breath,’ the mystery that is riding along on each inhale and exhale.” —Author and meditation teacher Wes Nisker

3. USE A TIMER

“When you sit in meditation, use a timer instead of a clock. If you have to keep opening your eyes to check on the time, restlessness can be exacerbated. By using a timer, one frees oneself from the concept of time and discovers a deepening of relaxation and a sense of the timeless.” —Cambridge Insight Meditation teacher Narayan Liebenson Grady

4. GET YOUR PRIORITIES STRAIGHT

“If meditation is a priority, then it’s helpful to take that word literally and put meditation first. An example would be my rule of not turning on the computer before I’ve meditated. Simple, but effective. Probably the most trenchant advice I ever heard was in eight words from Suzuki Roshi: ‘Organize your life so you can sit well.’” —Senior Shambhala teacher David Schneider

5. BE PATIENT

When you plant seeds in the garden, you don’t dig them up every day to see if they have sprouted yet. You simply water them and clear away the weeds; you know that the seeds will grow in time. Similarly, just do your daily practice and cultivate a kind heart. Abandon impatience and instead be content creating the causes for goodness; the results will come when they’re ready.” —Tibetan Buddhist nun and author Bhikshuni Thubten Choödrön

6. PLAY WITH POSTURES

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“Even though we generally refer to meditation as ‘sitting,’ when you find that hard to do, you can also ‘sit’ lying down. When I wake up at night with insomnia, I pay attention to the breath or do lovingkindness practice. One year, I could only get myself to ‘sit’ by lying on the ground in the backyard, sensing the layers of the earth, and listening to the sounds of a garden in the city.” —Barbara Gates, co-editor of the journal *Inquiring Mind*

7. MAKE A VOW

“Don’t give yourself a choice. Don’t ask yourself: ‘Do I want to get up and do this?’ because you will think of a million other things to do. Just set your alarm and get up and meditate—no questions. It also helps to make a vow. Try promising the Buddhas that you’ll meditate every day for a month and see what happens.” —Tibetan Buddhist nun and author Ani Tenzin Palmo

8. USE INCENSE

“Time a stick of incense. Once you know how long it takes to burn, you can use it to determine the lengths of your sessions.” —*Tricycle* founder Helen Tworokov

9. WIDEN YOUR PRACTICE FIELD

“Don’t put arbitrary limits on the field of practice. Trying to live graciously, reading and reflecting wisely, appreciating virtue in others, not making those around you miserable, being a mensch—practicing in this way, which is pretty traditional, there is never a lack of opportunity. As for sitting meditation itself—that’s something we do for others, so that maybe we can have a more generous spirit and be less of a pain in the neck.” —*Tricycle* features editor Andy Cooper

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10. STILL THE MIND IN UNUSUAL POSITIONS

“I like to interpret what the Buddha said when he talked about the four postures suitable for meditation—seated, standing, walking, and lying down—as an invitation to watch the mind in any position, any place, any time. I begin my practice periods with a breathing practice from my teacher Mingyur Rinpoche; then I get into a yoga posture and stay in it for some time. Working in this way, I can watch my mind play around with discomfort, effort, desire, and aversion. Plus I receive the benefits of the pose by staying in it longer.” —Vajra Yoga founder Jill Satterfield

11. SIT WITH OTHERS

“Find others to sit with. Sometimes showing up for others is easier than showing up for yourself.” —*Tricycle* editor and publisher James Shaheen

12. MAKE THE RIGHT DECISION

“Every practitioner I know who has been able to continue to practice for years has had to deal with their resistance to sitting. It seems that when we hurl ourselves in a particular direction with vigor and intention, we are also creating a shadow of resistance at the same time. This matter is resolved over time by the decisions we make in the immediate situation: Do we watch TV or sit? Do we schedule a date with a friend during our usual sitting time? Do we skip our sangha night when our parents visit, or do we ask them to join us (or excuse us)? Deciding to sit over and over again through every possible seduction establishes the vigor of our intention.” —Russian River Zendo teacher Darlene Cohen

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13. EXPERIMENT WITH THE BREATH

“My teacher Than Geoff has always reminded me that when the mind is fighting the meditation, ask it, ‘What kind of breath would feel really good right now?’ It tricks you into experimenting with the breath, and usually the breath becomes interesting enough and pleasurable enough that concentration can settle in.” —*Tricycle* contributing editor Mary Talbot

14. DRINK COFFEE

“Some people say that it was actually Buddhist monks who discovered coffee. The story goes that they were wandering around in the forest somewhere when they came across the beans. They started chewing them and thought, ‘These are great. we can use this energy for our meditation practice.’ If you are going to get up in the morning and sit, it doesn’t have to be first thing. Get up and have a cup of coffee if it helps. It’s when you start taking out the newspaper and doing other stuff that you lose the freshness of mind you have when you first wake up. But if you can have coffee without turning on your cell phone, go for it.” —Downtown Meditation Community teacher Peter Doobinin

15. SIT BECAUSE YOU NEED TO

“I’d say to meditators pretty much what Rilke said to poets: don’t do it unless you have to! In my little experience, any other motivation than necessity demeans meditation to a conceit, another tool for ego-consolidation of one form or another. Not for nothing is the first point of the Big B: There is SUFFERING. That’s the one and only actual gate.” —*Tricycle* contributing editor Eliot Fintushel

16. DON’T CHEAT

“If you’re counting the breaths, for example, don’t let it be Enron style. An honest accounting works wonders for the spiritual bottom line.” —*Tricycle* contributing editor Mark Magill

17. TUNE UP BY READING SOMETHING YOU
LOVE

“I don’t mean a text that you’re studying—you don’t want to encourage the mind to cogitate. Near the place where you like to sit, keep a little selection of readings that inspire happiness or quiet; they can be from any tradition. Recently I’ve had by my side Thomas Merton’s *Thoughts in Solitude*, the *Avadhuta Gita*, and a folder of short poems and quotations from past issues of *Tricycle* and other sources. For a session when the mind is really stirred up, here’s a wonderful quote to put it in pause mode, from the mind training teachings in *The Great Path of Awakening*:

When I am in this kind of mood
My mat is by far the best place to be.

This present mental state is fine. Moreover, by putting up with this unpleasantness, I won’t be born in the hell realms. How wonderful! I won’t be baked or roasted. How wonderful!”—*Tricycle* copy editor Karen Ready

18. CHECK IN BEFORE YOU START

“Once you sit down, in addition to doing a quick scan of your body for tension, take a moment to look at your heart and mind before you ‘start’ officially. Sure, maybe you just rolled out of bed, but what is your mood like—annoyed? Excited (or anxious) at the prospect of a new day? Is your brain still in slo-mo, or was it jolted into a panic by the alarm

clock? It can be good to notice where you're at before you start counting breaths." —*Tricycle* contributing editor Andrew Merz

19. HAVE FAITH

"Seek the support of a Power Beyond the Self. Dogen says, 'Throw body and mind into the house of Buddha, so that all is done by Buddha.' If we rely only upon our own resources in trying to develop a meditation practice, we will quickly exhaust ourselves. It is important to know that the Buddha himself supports us in all kinds of ways, some easy to recognize (through the teaching passed down from master to disciple, for instance) and some not. Some of those supports become visible to us only when we believe in the Buddha. Belief in buddhahood as a Power Beyond the Self can encourage us when nothing else seems to work. That statue on your altar isn't just a decorating idea." —*Tricycle* contributing editor Clark Strand

20. DON'T PUSH

"There's an old Zen saying, 'When you sit Buddha, you kill Buddha.' Whatever else it might mean about blowing away preconceptions or that kind of thing, it always stuck with me as a very friendly reminder not to try too hard or push too hard; don't try to be a Buddha when you're sitting." —*Tricycle* executive Philip Ryan

21. END CAREFULLY

"When you end your meditation, be very careful with how you open your eyes. Try to maintain your center inside rather than letting it flow outside. Then, maintaining your center, get up from the cushion and keep the center inside as long as you can. As my teacher Ajaan Fuang instructed: 'When you start out sitting in meditation, it takes a long time

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for the mind to settle down, but as soon as the session is over you get right up and throw it away. It's like climbing a ladder slowly, step by step, to the second floor, and then jumping out the window.” —Metta Forest Monastery abbot Thanissaro Bhikkhu

—*from Fall 2007*

THE HEART-ESSENCE OF
BUDDHIST MEDITATION

All we seek can be found within.

LAMA SURYA DAS

Clinging to one's school and condemning others
Is the certain way to waste one's learning.
Since all dharma teachings are good,
Those who cling to sectarianism
Degrade Buddhism and sever
Themselves from liberation.

—Milarepa, *The One Hundred Thousand Songs*

During my initial private meeting with the Venerable Kalu Rinpoche, my first root guru, I asked him about the main points of meditation. He asked what kind of meditation I was doing, and I told him mindfulness of breathing. “What will you concentrate on when you stop breathing?” he asked.

That was a real eye-opener. Suddenly I realized that I might have to broaden the scope of my understanding of Buddhist practice. In time, I came to discover that it included a great deal more than any one meditation technique and also that the many forms of Buddhist meditation shared fundamental elements.

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The philosopher Simone Weil characterized prayer as pure undivided attention. Here is where all contemplative practices have a common root, a vital heart that can be developed in an almost infinite variety of skillful directions, depending on purpose and perspective. Different techniques of meditation can be classified according to their focus. Some focus on the field of perception itself, and we call those methods mindfulness; others focus on a specific object, and we call those concentrative practices. There are also techniques that shift back and forth between the field and the object.

Meditation, simply defined, is a way of being aware. It is the happy marriage of doing and being. It lifts the fog of our ordinary lives to reveal what is hidden; it loosens the knot of self-centeredness and opens the heart; it moves us beyond mere concepts to allow for a direct experience of reality. Meditation embodies the way of awakening: both the path and its fruition. From one point of view, it is the means to awakening; from another, it is awakening itself.

Meditation masters teach us how to be precisely present and focused on this one breath, the only breath; this moment, the only moment. In the Dzogchen tradition we refer to a “fourth time,” the transcendent moment of *nowness*. In Tibetan this is called *shicha*, a transcendent yet immanent dimension of timeless being that vertically intersects each moment of horizontal linear time—past, present, and future. Whether we’re aware of it or not, we are quite naturally present to this moment—where else could we be? Meditation is simply a way of knowing this.

Different Buddhist schools recommend a variety of meditative postures. Some emphasize a still, formal posture, while others are less strict and more focused on internal movements of consciousness. Tibetan traditions, for instance, advise an upright spine, erect but relaxed; hands at rest in the lap, with the belly soft; shoulders relaxed, chin slight-

ly tucked, and the gaze lowered with eyelids half shut; the jaw is slack with the tongue behind the upper teeth; the legs are crossed. A Soto Zen Buddhist saying instructs us to sit with formal body and informal mind. The common essential point is to remain balanced and alert, so as to pierce the veil of samsaric illusion.

Although most Westerners tend to conceive of Eastern forms of meditation as something done cross-legged with eyes closed, in a quiet, unlit place, the Buddha points with equal emphasis to four postures in which to meditate: sitting, standing, walking, and lying down. The *Satipatthana Sutra* says: “When you sit, know that you are sitting; when standing, know you are standing. . . .” This pretty much covers all our activities, allowing us to integrate meditative practice into daily life. Learn to sit like a buddha, stand like a buddha, walk like a buddha. Be a buddha; this is the main point of Buddhist practice.

While many people today practice meditation for physical and mental health, a deeper approach to practice energizes our inner life and opens the door to realization. In Tibetan, the word for meditation is *gom*, which literally means “familiarization” or “getting used to,” and in this sense meditation is a means by which we familiarize ourselves with our mind. The common Pali term for meditation is *bhavana*, meaning “cultivation, development, bringing into being.” So we might then think of meditation as the active cultivation of mind leading to clear awareness, tranquillity, and wisdom. This requires conscious effort.

But from another—and at first glance contradictory—perspective, there is nothing to do in meditation but enjoy the view: the magical, mysterious, and lawful unfolding of all that is, all of which is perfect as it is. In other words, we’re perfect as we are, and yet there’s work to be done. In this we find the union of being and doing: we swoop down with the bigger picture in mind—the view of absolute reality—and at

the same time we climb the spiritual mountain in keeping with our specific aspirations and inclinations, living out relative truth. “While my view is as high as the sky, my actions regarding cause and effect [karma] are as meticulous as finely ground barley flour,” sang the Lotus Master Padmasambhava, who first brought Buddhism to Tibet in the eighth century. By alternating between active cultivation and effortless awareness, we engage in a delicate dance that balances disciplined intention with simply being. By being both directive and allowing, we gradually learn to fearlessly explore the frontiers and depths of doing and being, and come to realize that whatever is taking place, whatever we may feel and experience, is intimately connected with and inseparable from intrinsic awareness.

“Not doing, not constructing, not fabricating, not altering or manipulating your mind, while remaining undistracted: this is my vital pithy instruction, the heart-essence of meditation.” So taught my own Dzogchen master Nyoshul Khenpo Rinpoche. “Beyond action and inaction, the sublime dharma is accomplished.”

Meditation is not about getting away from it all, numbing out, or stopping thoughts. Without trying to be rid of pesky thoughts and feelings, we learn how to practice being aware of them in the fleeting immediacy of the very moment in which they present themselves. We can cultivate awareness of any object: sounds, smells, physical sensations, perceptions, and so forth. Everything is grist for the mill—even those things we find terribly unpleasant. As the Tibetan Dragon Master Gyalwang Drukpa says, “Everything must be meditated!”

Like the archer straightening his arrow and perfecting his aim, the practitioner of meditation straightens out the mind while aiming his or her attentional energy at its object. Learning to drop what we’re doing, however momentarily, and to genuinely pay attention in the pres-

ent moment, without attachment or bias, helps us become clear, just as a snow globe becomes clear when we stop shaking it and its flakes settle.

This settling process of concentrated attention has four stages: first, the letting go of distracting inner objects—such as feelings, thoughts, attractions, and aversions—and all outer objects; second, the attainment of serene one-pointedness of focus; third, the refinement of this state of concentration into a subtler and purer awareness. The fourth and final stage is the attainment of a state of simple wakefulness and equanimity conducive to clear vision and profound comprehension, an awareness beyond subject and object.

Let's take an example: In breath-awareness meditation—the technique known as mindfulness of breathing (*anapanasati* in Pali)—we first observe the breath by intently following the tiny movements and physical sensations associated with each in- and out-breath. When we are distracted, we simply bring the wandering mind back to the object of attention. (In this case it is the breath, but whatever the particular practice—mantra, visualization, and so forth—the principle is the same.) Then, gradually relaxing into the object, we notice the gentle tide of thoughts and feelings subside as we fine-tune our focus. Later, as our awareness deepens, we abandon any dualistic notion of inner and outer as we become the breath itself. This calls to mind the haiku master Basho's saying that in order to write about a tree, he would watch the tree until he became the tree. We watch the breath until we become the breath. In this way, as it is said in Zen, we come to know the breath, ourselves, and all things intimately. In the beginning, concentration is key. Concentrative meditations (Sanskrit *shamatha*) are said to be the useful means but not the end. The stability of mind established by shamatha becomes the foundation for insight meditation, or *vipassana*, in which the critical faculties of mind discern the nature of samsara: imperma-

ment, without self, and ultimately unsatisfactory.

There are many techniques for developing concentration and insight, but the point is to not be caught up in and overly influenced by the ever-running narratives and desires of the mind. All center on the vital principles of nonjudgmental openness and relaxation with applied and discerning awareness. As practice matures, effortless, innate wakefulness is balanced by the discipline of mindfulness. What we call “mindfulness meditation” can be broadly defined as any conscious activity that keeps the cling-free attention anchored in the present moment, allowing us to see clearly what is happening, to distinguish what is wholesome from what is unwholesome, and to perceive the interdependent working of things. In the *Satipatthana Sutra*, the Buddha identified four basic foundations of mindfulness: the body, feelings (in the sense that all sense impressions *feel* pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral), mind states and mental objects, and universal laws (dharma). Paying careful attention to these aspects of ourselves brings self-knowledge and wisdom.

Mindfulness is the tool we use to bring the mind back home, to the present moment, to what is, just as it is, and to who and what we actually are. Through mindfulness we learn how not to be so distracted by thoughts, feelings, memories—our running inner narrative. That’s why buddhas are called *jinās*, “conquerors”: they have conquered their afflictive states of hatred, greed, and delusion, all of which obscure and diminish our innate buddhanature.

Mindful awareness frees us from habitual patterns, opening up a space between stimulus and response, allowing us to consciously choose how to respond to things rather than blindly react. With the discernment of mindfulness we no longer fall prey to karmic habits and unwholesome conditioning. As the pioneering Zen master Shunryu Suzuki said, “We pay attention with respect and interest, not in order to

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manipulate but to understand what is true. And seeing what is true, the heart becomes free.”

This is not just Buddhist double-talk. In the *Diamond Sutra*, the Buddha says of his enlightenment that he has obtained nothing that wasn't in him all along, there for the finding. And the *Hevajra Tantra* teaches, “We are all buddhas by nature; it is only adventitious obscurations which temporarily veil it from us.”

There are various Buddhist schools with different approaches and practices, but committed meditation practice is, in short, the way we apply the Buddha's final words: “Work out your own salvation with diligence.”

In Tibetan Buddhism it is said that detachment is the root of meditation and devotion is its head. Bodhicitta (the aspiration to attain enlightenment for the welfare of others) is its soul. Mindfulness is its breath, vigilance its skin, and nondistractedness its essence. Balance and harmony are the seat of meditation, and penetrating wisdom is its eye. Nowness is the time, and this place is *the* place. Self-discipline is the very bones of Buddha, and present-moment awareness is the heart of it all.

Milarepa said, “The ultimate view is to observe one's mind, steadfastly and with determination.” When the Buddha stated, over twenty-five hundred years ago, that anyone could become enlightened through applying his teachings, he meant it. And many have reaped those blessed results. This is the promise of buddhadharma, of the wisdom of meditation.

GUIDED MEDITATION: SIMPLY BEING

Sit comfortably, perhaps close your eyes, or lower your gaze. Take a deep breath or two and relax. Breathe slowly and let it all go. Release the tension and relax a little more.

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Stop doing and settle back into just being. Let things settle without your direction or intercession. Let go. Wherever things fall is okay for now. Open to the wisdom of allowing, of inclusive acceptance. This is the inner secret to natural meditation.

Don't get lost. Stay right here, at home and at ease. Befriend yourself; familiarize yourself with your own fundamental presence. Let awareness be uninterrupted by techniques or concepts.

If and when you feel lost, distracted, spaced out, or sleepy, get in touch with your breath. Watch the breath, observe the inhalation and exhalation as they effortlessly occur. Feel the breath moving in and out, anchoring you in the present moment while you again let everything go, without judgment, evaluation, or interference.

Opening gradually to the effortlessness of pure presence, turn your attention inward. All we seek can be found within. This is the process and practice of inner freedom.

Being Buddha, enjoy the buoyant peace, harmony, and delight of natural meditation.

Lama Surya Das is a teacher in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and founder of the Dzogchen Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His latest books are *Buddha Standard Time* and *Awakening the Buddha Within*.

—*from Winter 2007*

THE JOY OF EFFORT

Meditation is a skill, and mastering it should be enjoyable

THANISSARO BHIKKHU

When explaining meditation, the Buddha often drew analogies with the skills of artists, carpenters, musicians, archers, and cooks. Finding the right level of effort, he said, is like a musician's tuning of a lute. Reading the mind's needs in the moment—to be gladdened, steadied, or inspired—is like a palace cook's ability to read and please the tastes of a prince.

Collectively, these analogies make an important point: Meditation is a skill, and mastering it should be enjoyable in the same way mastering any other rewarding skill can be. The Buddha said as much to his son, Rahula: “When you see that you've acted, spoken, or thought in a skillful way—conducive to happiness while causing no harm to yourself or others—take joy in that fact and keep on training.”

Of course, saying that meditation should be enjoyable doesn't mean that it will always be easy or pleasant. Every meditator knows that it requires serious discipline to sit with long, unpleasant stretches and untangle all the mind's difficult issues. But if you can approach difficulties with the enthusiasm with which an artist approaches challenges in her work, the discipline becomes enjoyable. Problems are solved through your own ingenuity, and the mind is energized for even greater chal-

lenges.

This joyful attitude is a useful antidote to the more pessimistic attitudes that people often bring to meditation, which tend to fall into two extremes. On the one hand, there's the belief that meditation is a series of dull and dreary exercises, allowing no room for imagination and inquiry: simply grit your teeth, and at the end of the long haul your mind will be processed into an awakened state. On the other hand, there's the belief that effort is counterproductive to happiness, so meditation should involve no exertion at all: simply accept things as they are—it's foolish to demand that they get any better—and relax into the moment.

While it's true that both repetition and relaxation can bring results in meditation, when either is pursued to the exclusion of the other, it leads to a dead end. If, however, you can integrate them both into the greater skill of learning how to apply whatever level of effort the practice requires at any given moment, they can take you far. This greater skill requires strong powers of mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, and if you stick with it, it can lead you all the way to the Buddha's ultimate aim in teaching meditation: nirvana, a totally unconditioned happiness, free from the constraints of space and time.

That's an inspiring aim, but it requires work. And the key to maintaining your inspiration in the day-to-day work of meditation practice is to approach it as play—a happy opportunity to master practical skills, to raise questions, experiment, and explore. This is precisely how the Buddha himself taught meditation. Instead of formulating a cut-and-dried method, he first trained his students in the personal qualities—such as honesty and patience—needed to make trustworthy observations. Only after this training did he teach meditation techniques, and even then he didn't spell everything out. He raised questions and

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suggested areas for exploration in the hope that his questions would capture his students' imagination, so they'd develop discernment and gain insights on their own.

We can see this in the way the Buddha taught Rahula how to meditate. He started with the issue of patience. Meditate, he said, so that your mind is like the earth. Disgusting things get thrown on the earth, but the earth isn't horrified by them. When you make your mind like the earth, neither agreeable nor disagreeable sensory impressions will take charge of it.

Now, the Buddha wasn't telling Rahula to become a passive clod of dirt. He was teaching Rahula to be grounded, to develop his powers of endurance, so that he'd be able to observe both pleasant and painful events in his body and mind without becoming engrossed in the pleasure or blown away by the pain. This is what patience does. It helps you sit with things until you understand them well enough to respond to them skillfully.

To develop honesty in meditation, the Buddha taught Rahula a further exercise. Look at the inconstancy of events in body and mind, he said, so that you don't develop a sense of "I am" around them. Here the Buddha was building on a lesson he had taught Rahula when the boy was seven years old. Learn to look at your actions, he had said, before you do them, while you're doing them, and after they're done. If you see that you've acted unskillfully and caused harm, resolve not to repeat the mistake. Then talk it over with someone you respect.

In these lessons, the Buddha was training Rahula to be honest with himself and with others. And the key to this honesty is to treat your actions as experiments. Then, if you see the results aren't good, you're free to change your ways.

This attitude is essential for developing honesty in your medita-

tion as well. If you regard everything—good or bad—that arises in the meditation as a sign of the sort of person you are, it will be hard to observe anything honestly at all. If an unskillful intention arises, you're likely either to come down on yourself as a miserable meditator or to smother the intention under a cloak of denial. If a skillful intention arises, you're likely to become proud and complacent, reading it as a sign of your innate good nature. As a result, you never get to see whether these intentions are actually as skillful as they seemed at first glance.

To avoid these pitfalls, you can learn to see events simply as events and not as signs of your innate buddha-ness or badness. Then you can observe these events honestly, to see where they come from and where they lead. Honesty, together with patience, puts you in a better position to use the techniques of meditation to explore your own mind.

The primary technique the Buddha taught his son was breath meditation. The Buddha recommended 16 steps in dealing with the breath [*see bottom of page*]. The first two involve straightforward instructions; the rest raise questions to be explored. In this way, the breath becomes a vehicle for exercising your ingenuity in solving the problems of the mind, and exercising your sensitivity in gauging the results.

To begin, simply notice when the breath is long and when it's short. In the remaining steps, though, you train yourself. In other words, you have to figure out for yourself how to do what the Buddha recommends. The first two trainings are to breathe in and out sensitive to the entire body, then to calm the effect that the breath has on the body. How do you do that? You experiment. What rhythm of breathing, what way of conceiving the breath calms its effect on the body? Try thinking of the breath not as the air coming in and out of the lungs but as the energy flow throughout the body that draws the air in and out. Where do you feel that energy flow? Think of it as flowing in and out the back of your

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neck, in your feet and hands, along the nerves and blood vessels, in your bones. Think of it coming in and out every pore of your skin. Where is it blocked? How do you dissolve the blockages? By breathing through them? Around them? Straight into them? See what works.

As you play around with the breath in this way, you'll make some mistakes—I've sometimes given myself a headache by forcing the breath too much—but with the right attitude the mistakes become a way to learn how your perceptions shape the way you breathe. You'll also catch yourself getting impatient or frustrated, but then you'll see that when you breathe through these emotions, they go away. You're beginning to see the impact of the breath on the mind.

The next step is to breathe in and out with a sense of refreshing fullness and a sense of ease. Here, too, you'll need to experiment both with the way you breathe and with the way you conceive of the breath. Notice how these feelings and conceptions have an impact on the mind and how you can calm that impact so the mind feels most at ease.

Then, when the breath is calm and you've been refreshed by feelings of ease and stillness, you're ready to look at the mind itself. You don't leave the breath, though. You adjust your attention slightly so that you're watching the mind as it stays with the breath. Here the Buddha recommends three areas for experimentation: Notice how to gladden the mind when it needs gladdening, how to steady it when it needs steadying, and how to release it from its attachments and burdens when it's ready for release.

Sometimes the gladdening and steadying will require bringing in other topics for contemplation. For instance, to gladden the mind, you can develop an attitude of infinite goodwill or recollect the times in the past when you've been virtuous or generous. To steady the mind when it's been knocked over by lust or to reestablish your focus when you're drowsy or

complacent, you can contemplate death, realizing that death could come at any time and you need to prepare your mind if you're going to face it with any finesse. At other times, you can gladden or steady the mind simply by the way you focus on the breath itself. For instance, breathing down into your hands and feet can really anchor the mind when its concentration has become shaky. When one spot in the body isn't enough to hold your interest, try focusing on the breath in two spots at once.

The important point is that you've now put yourself in a position where you can experiment with the mind and read the results of your experiments with greater and greater accuracy. You can try exploring these skills off the cushion as well: How do you gladden the mind when you're sick? How do you steady the mind when dealing with a difficult person?

As for releasing the mind from its burdens, you prepare for the ultimate freedom of nirvana first by releasing the mind from any awkwardness in its concentration. Once the mind has settled down, check to see if there are any ways you can refine the stillness. For instance, in the beginning stages of concentration you need to keep directing your thoughts to the breath, evaluating and adjusting it to make it more agreeable. But eventually the mind grows so still that evaluating the breath is no longer necessary. So you figure out how to make the mind one with the breath, and in that way you release the mind into a more intense and refreshing state of ease.

As you expand your skills in this way, the intentions that you've been using to shape your experience of body and mind become more and more transparent. At this point, the Buddha suggests revisiting the theme of inconstancy, learning to look for it in the effects of every intention. You see that even the best states produced by skillful intentions—the most solid and refined states of concentration—waver and change. Realizing this induces a sense of disenchantment with

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and dispassion for all intentions. You see that the only way to get beyond this changeability is to allow all intentions to cease. You watch as everything is relinquished, including the path. What's left is unconditioned: the deathless. Your desire to explore the breath has taken you beyond desiring, beyond the breath, all the way to nirvana.

But the path doesn't save all its pleasures for the end. It takes the daunting prospect of reaching full awakening and breaks it down into manageable interim goals—a series of intriguing challenges that, as you meet them, allow you to see progress in your practice. This in and of itself makes the practice interesting and a source of joy.

At the same time, you're not engaged in busywork. You're developing a sensitivity to cause and effect that helps make body and mind transparent. Only when they're fully transparent can you let them go. In experiencing the full body of the breath in meditation, you're sensitizing yourself to the area of your awareness in which the deathless—when you're acute enough to see it—will appear.

So even though the path requires effort, it's an effort that keeps opening up new possibilities for happiness and well-being in the present moment. And even though the steps of breath meditation eventually lead to a sense of disenchantment and dispassion, they don't do so in a joyless way. The Buddha never asks anyone to adopt a world-negating—or world-affirming, for that matter—frame of mind. Instead, he asks for a “world-exploring” attitude, in which you use the inner world of full-body breathing as a laboratory for exploring the harmless pleasures the world as a whole can provide when the mind is steady and clear. You learn skills to calm the body, to develop feelings of refreshment, fullness, and ease. You learn how to calm the mind, to steady it, gladden it, and release it from its burdens.

Only when you run up against the limits of these skills are you

ready to drop them, to explore what greater potential for happiness there may be. In this way, disenchantment develops not from a narrow or pessimistic attitude but from an attitude of hope that there must be something better. This is like the disenchantment a child senses when he or she has mastered a simple game and feels ready for something more challenging. It's the attitude of a person who has matured. And as we all know, you don't mature by shrinking from the world, watching it passively or demanding that it entertain you. You mature by exploring it, by expanding your range of usable skills through play.

16 STEPS OF BREATH MEDITATION

Breathing in long, one discerns, "I'm breathing in long;" or breathing out long, one discerns, "I'm breathing out long."

Or breathing in short, one discerns, "I'm breathing in short;" or breathing out short, one discerns, "I'm breathing out short."

One trains oneself, "I'll breathe in and out sensitive to the entire body."

One trains oneself, "I'll breathe in and out calming bodily fabrication" [the in-and-out breath].

One trains oneself, "I'll breathe in and out sensitive to refreshment."

One trains oneself, "I'll breathe in and out sensitive to ease."

One trains oneself, "I'll breathe in and out sensitive to mental fabrication."

One trains oneself, "I'll breathe in and out calming mental fabrication."

One trains oneself, "I'll breathe in and out sensitive to the mind."

One trains oneself, "I'll breathe in and out gladdening the mind."

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One trains oneself, “I’ll breathe in and out steadying the mind.”

One trains oneself, “I’ll breathe in and out releasing the mind.”

One trains oneself, “I’ll breathe in and out focusing on inconstancy.”

One trains oneself, “I’ll breathe in and out focusing on dispassion.”

One trains oneself, “I’ll breathe in and out focusing on cessation.”

One trains oneself, “I’ll breathe in and out focusing on relinquishment.”

—*From Majjhima Nikaya 62, translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu*

Thanissaro Bhikkhu is abbot of Metta Forest Monastery, outside of San Diego, CA. He is the author of a series of books on meditations, available for free at accesstoinsight.org.

—*from Summer 2008*

I LIKE IT... BUT IS IT MEDITATION?

Finding a balance between “sitting” and “the rest of life.”

BARRY EVANS

My life is full of meditation: I gassho before I eat. I turn the shower to Cold before I get out. I visually check the state of the tide in our bay every morning en route to our local coffee shop. I do the *New York Times* crossword over coffee. My pal Mike and I play pool at our neighborhood bar Monday nights. I take my kayak out on Humboldt Bay several times a week. I usually check the stars (or, more likely, the overcast sky) from the darkness of our hot tub before going to bed. These are my rituals.

Meditation? What’s all that got to do with meditation? Well, it depends how you define it. Strictly speaking, and in the Soto Zen tradition in which I practice, meditation is sitting quietly on a zafu, eyes half open, mindfully paying attention to my breathing. It starts with a bell ringing and ends with a bell ringing. Kinhin—walking meditation—is an extension of *shikantaza*, “just sitting.”

That’s what I think of as “formal” meditation, 30 minutes or so a day. Then there are the myriad openings for informal meditation, like those I’ve mentioned above. Pool? Crosswords? Tides? Oh sure, and much more: the daily—hourly, even—opportunities to be mindful, to

stop and pay attention, to take a breath of gratitude, to appreciate the Ultimate Fact of Life: *I'm here!*

For the first two thousand years of its existence, Buddhism was mostly confined to monasteries with strict rules, timetables, and hierarchies. In contrast, Zen in America today finds the majority of its followers in the lay world, where most of us have families, jobs, and homes. Our zendos are places to visit, perhaps daily, but more likely once or twice a week: refuges, perhaps, from the “real world” of money and responsibility.

Along with the “layification” of Zen has come a sharp distinction, for most of us, between meditation and the rest of life. While the monks of old lived and breathed, day in day out, year in year out, in an atmosphere of stillness and contemplation— their entire lives were one unbroken meditation!—we modern practitioners stop what we’re doing when we sit, and restart our everyday lives when the bell signals that time’s up. The result of this is an apparent dichotomy: either I’m meditating (on my zafu, often in the zendo, sometimes at home), or I’m not meditating (the rest of the time).

What’s lost in this either/or distinction is the idea that meditation can be anything I choose to make it. Sure, I can define meditation rather narrowly as the time spent on my cushion. But if I do so, I’m elevating sitting over everyday awareness and thus diluting the possibilities for all those other quotidian opportunities for mindfulness.

So what is meditation, if it’s not *zazen*? It’s easy to think of it in terms of the *zazen process*: solitary (even when you’re elbow-to-elbow with fellow sangha members), quiet, physically upright, mentally focused (in most forms), precisely timed, free of outside stimulation. That’s usually how meditation is defined: how it looks and what we do for those 30 or 40 minutes.

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Another way to look at it is from the point of view of *what it offers*. I recognize that this is anathema to many meditators—for years, on being asked why I meditated, I'd say something like, "I don't know, I just do it." (*Attainment?* Oh, please!) The fact remains that, consciously or unconsciously, I do things for a reason. I wasn't born a blank slate. I came with a standard-equipment brain that constantly makes decisions based on the available information. At some level, whether I'm aware of it or not, I meditate because of some perceived benefit.

I suspect it's the same for everyone—I've asked fellow meditators the same question, and they all give me some reason, from "helping me get through the day" to "taking me to the root of things" to "seeing the big picture of life." My own "why" list is something like this:

A sense of gratitude (Hey, I'm alive!)

Playfulness (My mind sure knows how to have fun)

Self-awareness (I'm aware that I'm aware, whoa!)

Humility (Okay, Barry, don't take yourself so seriously)

Intimation of mortality (This breath is one breath less...so don'tsquander!)

Creativity (I've got to remember that great idea for later)

Adventure (Wonder what's coming next?)

All these gifts usually appear to me at some time or other during zazen. But the rest of life offers so many opportunities for welcoming exactly the same gifts, *so long as I'm willing to notice and accept them*. It just (just!) takes the slightest mental nudge to transform the usually unnoticed happenings of my life into rich servings of observed experience. It helps to think of them as mini-meditations.

Take pool. I'm a mediocre—make that bad—pool player, but I'm also lucky. Sometimes, when I'm in the flow, I'm like Paul Newman's

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Fast Eddie, effortlessly potting one ball after another. At those times, I'm never more alive, never more aware of the bittersweetness of this life, gratitude balanced by poignancy: one day this will end. And the humility of watching the cue ball roll unerringly toward the corner pocket. It's meditation writ large, it's fulfilling and engaging and just plain fun.

Same with solitary kayaking, cold showering, gazing up at night—with all of my rituals, in fact: appreciating the enormity of it all compared to this meager body and mind, taking refuge in my breath, finding myself still here, giving thanks for being a player in Life, all available simply for the noticing.

It's not that there's anything wrong with zazen—in fact, I credit zazen with helping me to pay attention to non-zazen events. It's just that when I put so much stock in formal meditation, I forget that it's only one way of helping me see the magic that surrounds me and that is me. Redefining meditation simply as “the opportunity to notice” opens up a world of possibilities.

Seeing zazen as simply one more activity—no more or less meaningful than solving a cryptic clue or watching a pelican dive-bomb for his lunch or sinking the eight ball—helps level the playing field between “sitting” and “the rest of life.”

And guess which of these I spend more time in?

Barry Evans is a member of the Arcata Zen Group in California. He also sits with Akira Kasai in Guanajuato, Mexico. When he isn't being cynical, he thinks meditation may save the world.

—*from Summer 2009*

THE PROBLEM
WITH MEDITATION
INSTRUCTIONS

Meditation is not about following an instruction as much as it is about allowing your experiences to unfold.

JASON SIFF

Before we meditate for the first time, we have ideas about what meditation is, what it does, and where it should lead. Then when we get our introductory instructions—either out of a book or magazine, or from a teacher leading a class or a retreat—we’re hopeful that the instructions will fulfill our purpose for meditating and that meditation will do for us what it has reportedly done for others. We look forward to becoming calmer, to our physical pain diminishing, and to our emotional stress and turmoil being eased; we anticipate meditation granting us the peace of mind we so earnestly seek.

We often do not even consider that we could have problems following the meditation instructions, or that the meditation instructions may not be the “right” ones for us. We assume that meditation practices are proven to work for most anyone, so when we experience frustration with the task of meditating, we often lay the blame on ourselves. We don’t see that the meditation practice itself has something to do with it.

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Contemporary Buddhist teachers often instruct that the real obstacles, or hindrances, in meditation are negative emotional states or unskillful types of thinking. Unfortunately, this view only deflects our attention from what actually keeps us stuck in our practice: the way we do our meditation practice. In fact, it is not what we experience in meditation that creates the hindrance, it is how we apply the instructions. Having negative emotions and discursive thoughts are common meditation experiences, but they do not control our practice in the same way the meditation instructions do.

Over the last two decades in which I have been teaching meditation, I have observed that much of our frustration, struggle, and feelings of failure and low self-esteem as meditators is linked to the way we have been applying meditation instructions. This is in part due to the way that we hold on to the correctness of the instructions and how we adopt rules that prohibit certain experiences, both of which can create impasses in our meditation practice. These are two of the most common causes for the experience of being stuck.

Many of us encounter an impasse when we are trying to figure out how to do the instructions correctly. The notion that there is a definitive right way of doing a particular meditation practice keeps the impasse alive. We assume that if we can figure out the right way to sit, and just do it, our sittings will be harmonious.

For example, instructions for watching the breath in the Vipassana tradition often raise questions about following the instructions correctly. Is it correct to observe the breath at the nostrils or the abdomen? If it is correct to observe it at the nostrils, how are you supposed to observe it—as a sensation of air passing over your upper lip on the way out and as a sensation in your nostrils on the way in? Is it okay to follow the breath into the lungs? And what about the abdomen? Are we noticing

the breath going in or out of our bodies, or are we supposed to notice the rising and falling of the abdomen only? And why the abdomen? Don't we naturally experience our chest heave and fall as we breathe? What about being aware of the sound of the breath? That, too, is a part of our experience of breathing. But Vipassana teachers often tell us that there is one correct way of observing the breath and that other ways are not right.

The Vipassana tradition and most other Buddhist traditions generally discourage doubting the meditation instructions we are given. We are often told that doubting our teachers and their traditions is a hindrance to practice, but this puts us in a bind: If we discover a way to do a meditation practice that seems more conducive to concentration and wisdom than the established way, we have to either disregard our discovery or disobey the instructions. If you take the approach of not doubting the instructions, you are likely to try to follow the instructions with more effort in order to make them work as well as, or better than, the way you discovered on your own.

But this direction often strengthens obstacles instead of weakening them. Pushing yourself to follow the instructions more correctly—and then finding yourself stuck in similar ways, and then trying harder to follow the directions—often just puts you in cycles of meditative success and failure. As long as you are primarily focused on doing a practice correctly, you will only examine the practice through the lens of figuring what you are doing wrong so that you can stop doing that and just do the practice in the right way. But what you don't see is what the practice is doing to you.

Although we are not often taught this, the most skillful way through an impasse in meditation is to become aware of it and of what holds it together and keeps it running. To do this, you need to keep doing the meditation instructions that have gotten you to this point, but in-

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stead of following them “harder,” try approaching them in a softer, gentler manner. Do them loosely, and don’t do them all of the time. Instead, try doing them when it is easy to do them, or, when you feel you need to. But also be willing not to do them every single time you feel the need.

By adding flexibility and choice to a meditation practice that has become rigid and restrictive, we move our attention away from a narrow focus on doing the instructions correctly to a broader awareness of how we are doing the instructions. We discover that sometimes we are using the instructions to get to some desired or anticipated meditative state, and other times we are using them to avoid certain feelings, memories, or thoughts. Then there are those times when we would otherwise feel lost and confused in our meditation sittings and need the instructions as an anchor. There are many ways we have held onto the instructions we have received, so by giving more space around them and giving ourselves permission not to follow them, we can begin to see what they are actually doing for us.

As we learn to work skillfully with the instructions instead of resolutely pushing ourselves to follow the instructions as correctly as possible, we will begin to see the other most common cause for impasses: adopting rules that prohibit certain experiences. On a basic level, meditation instructions are rules you should follow during meditation. If they don’t start out as rules, they eventually turn into rules. A simple instruction to bring your attention back to the breath when the mind wanders becomes a rule prohibiting thinking, reminiscing, planning, drifting, contemplating, and so on. Even if a teacher then states that you should practice greater acceptance of the wandering mind and only gently bring your attention back to the breath, the rule prohibiting mind-wandering still remains intact. The way we tend to relate to contradictory meditation instructions (which is what “Bring your attention back to the breath” and “Have

greater acceptance of the wandering mind” are) is to resolve the contradiction in favor of the rule that clearly exhibits the fundamental principle of the meditation practice: to train one’s attention to stay with the breath.

The kinds of impasses we get into when we meditate according to a system of rules are those based on controlling and dominating our experiences. We have a rule about not drifting off in meditation, and so we work to stop ourselves from doing so. We have a rule about not rehashing the conversations and events of the day, so we try to get through those segments of our sittings and on to something more “meditative.” We have a rule to sit with our backs straight, and so we correct our posture each time it slumps. We have rules about not fantasizing or planning or ruminating or working on projects, and so we devalue or disregard those experiences.

I suggest you become aware of the rules in your meditation practice and not just try to stop them, for that would just be creating a rule not to have rules. You will have rules in your meditation practice, but they need to be ones that serve you rather than oppress you. The rules need to be open to questioning, to reassessment, and to further refinement. Global rules, where you have to do the same thing in all instances, are not as helpful as rules that have specific contexts in which they are used. For example, a rule to “always stop one’s mind from wandering” is not as helpful as a rule to “disengage from planning the execution of a harmful action” (such as seeking revenge).

Are there meditation instructions that don’t foster the exclusion of experiences? Even when a meditation practice is presented as accepting of everything, as open to the full range of one’s experience, there are still experiences—such as drifting off or having mundane thoughts—that tend to be excluded. It might be quite a revolution in our thinking about meditation to consider including all types of experiences in our regular sittings. If you are going to include the various experiences of

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thinking, you may find yourself thinking quite a bit more than your comfort level can withstand. If you include drowsiness and dull mind states, you may find yourself falling asleep. “How would this be meditating?” you might ask.

There is a middle way here between the extremes of rigidity and passivity, one that offers a more legitimate form of meditation. The beginning instructions I have given for nearly two decades provide just enough of a grounding in the seated body for the meditator to develop a capacity to be with thoughts, feelings, and sensations as they arise. These suggestions are loose and open, but you can make them tighter if you need to. The instructions are as follows:

Sit in a comfortable position, one that you will not need to change during the sitting (or one that will require the least amount of movement). If you do need to change your position, do so slowly and consciously. You may also lie down, but try to adopt a position that you would not normally sleep in.

Bring your attention to the touch of your hands resting in your lap or on your thighs. But do not try to hold your attention there. Allow thoughts, feelings, and sensations to arise, and let your attention go with them.

If your attention leaves the touch of the hands for a long period of time (several minutes), you can gently bring your attention back. Otherwise, just sit with what comes up. If you encounter an experience that is hard to tolerate, after a while of being with it you can bring your attention back to the touch of the hands. But only hold it there long enough to feel grounded or relaxed, and then, if your mind goes into that kind of experience again, just let it do so.

People have made rules out of these instructions, and you might too. That is fine. At some point, hopefully, you will become aware of those rules. But for now it is enough to know that there is no way to do this wrong, as it is not about following an instruction as much as about

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allowing your experiences to unfold. Seeing for yourself, from your own experience, what works and what doesn't is what meditation is all about.

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—*from Fall 2009*

DO NOTHING

How to Meditate

DZONGSAR KHYENTSE RINPOCHE

I'm going to talk a little about *shamatha* meditation, and I thought it would be good to try and actually do the meditation as we go along. The actual technique is very simple: all the great meditators of the past advised us to sit up straight when we meditate. When we sit up straight, there is a sense of alertness, a sense of importance—it produces the right atmosphere. In this particular instruction, I'm going to suggest we don't use an external object, such as a flower, but instead follow the standard Theravada tradition of using our breath as the object. So we concentrate on our breathing: we simply follow our breath in and out. That's it. Our mind is focused on the breathing, our posture is straight, our eyes are open. That's the essential technique: basically doing nothing.

Let's do that for a while.

[*Short meditation session.*]

We simply sit straight and we watch our breathing. We are not concerned with distractions, with all the thoughts that occupy our mind. We just sit—alone, by ourselves, no reference at all. Us, the breathing, and the concentration. That's all we have.

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[*Short meditation session.*]

So we sit, we concentrate on the breathing, nothing else. Then some thoughts may come, and any number of distractions: things you talked about yesterday, movies you watched last week, a conversation you just had, things you need to do tomorrow, a sudden panic—*did I switch off the gas in the kitchen this morning?* All of this will come, and when it does, go back to the breathing. This is the slogan of shamatha instruction: just come back. Every time we notice that we've gotten distracted, we remember the instruction and we come back to the breath. Let's do this for a while.

[*Short meditation session.*]

If we have ambitions—even if our aim is enlightenment—then there is no meditation, because we are thinking about it, craving it, fantasizing, imagining things. That is not meditation. This is why an important characteristic of shamatha meditation is to let go of any goal and simply sit for the sake of sitting. We breathe in and out, and we just watch that. Nothing else. It doesn't matter if we get enlightenment or not. It doesn't matter if our friends get enlightened faster. Who cares? We are just breathing. We just sit straight and watch the breath in and out. Nothing else. We let go of our ambitions. This includes trying to do a perfect shamatha meditation. We should get rid of even that. Just sit.

The beautiful thing about having less obsessions and ambitions—and just sitting straight and watching the breathing—is that nothing will disturb us. Things only disturb us when we have an aim. When we have an aim, we become obsessed. Say our aim is to go somewhere, but some-

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body parks right in front of our car, blocking us. If something gets in the way of our aim, it becomes a terrible thing. If we don't have an aim, though, it doesn't matter.

Meditators often have a strong ambition to achieve something with their meditation. But when meditators get distracted, they go through all kinds of hell: they lose their confidence, they get frustrated, they condemn themselves, they condemn the technique. This is why, at least during the few moments of meditation, it doesn't matter whether we are getting enlightened or not, it doesn't matter whether the hot water is boiling in the kettle, it doesn't matter whether the telephone is ringing, and it doesn't matter whether it's one of our friends. For a few moments things don't matter.

[Short meditation session.]

You don't have to meditate for the sake of attaining enlightenment. If you are not interested in enlightenment, you can practice shamatha to be natural—to be not so swayed by circumstances. Most of the time we are not in control of ourselves; our mind is always attracted to, or distracted by, something—our enemies, our lovers, our friends, hope, fear, jealousy, pride, attachment, aggression. In other words, all these objects and these phenomena control our mind. Maybe we can control it for a split second, but when we are in an extreme emotional state, we lose it.

Letting go of ambition is a bit like the renunciation that Buddhists talk about. The Buddha renounced his palace, his queen, his son, and his parents, and went out in search of enlightenment. You can say that Buddha was trying to diminish his ambition. At least, he was trying to see the futility of it, and he was letting go.

Letting go is quite important if you want to become a shamatha

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practitioner. In fact, we do shamatha meditation so we can achieve the power to let go; it is the downfall of our obsession, the downfall of our fixation.

Meditation is one of the rare occasions when we're not doing anything. Otherwise, we're always doing something, we're always thinking something, we're always occupied. We get lost in millions of obsessions or fixations. But by meditating—by not doing anything—all these fixations are revealed. Beginners might find this a little frightening, but slowly they will gain inner confidence, and these fixations will automatically lessen. The classical meditation instruction texts say our obsessions will undo themselves like a snake uncoiling itself.

[Short meditation session.]

Thoughts are coming, and I'm telling you to go back to the breathing. You automatically interpret this as "We should stop the thoughts." This is not what I mean. I'm not saying you should stop thinking. All I'm saying is, Concentrate on the breathing. When thoughts come, don't stop them, don't increase them, don't encourage them, don't discourage them. Your job is to concentrate on the breathing. That's it. Stopping the thoughts is not your job. It's important to understand the difference: thoughts are going to come; all you do is just concentrate on the breathing. That's it.

[Short meditation session.]

Lord Maitreya had some really good advice for shamatha practice: When we are doing shamatha and the mind gets distracted, it is impor-

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tant that we remember the antidote: The antidote here is very simply to go back to the breath. We call this “applying the antidote.”

But sometimes we apply the antidote too much, which can cause both dullness and agitation. You got that? If you keep applying the antidote—antidote, antidote, antidote—it’s like applying the antidote when there’s no poison. That becomes a problem.

[*Short meditation session.*]

Always do short but frequent shamatha sessions. I’m talking especially to beginners. If you’re going to meditate for 15 minutes, start fresh at least 30 times. Over time we can start doing longer sessions—in a 15-minute session, we can do it 15 times with a break in between. And when you take a break, take a *real* break—walk, stand up, do something else. Don’t just linger there half meditating, half not-meditating. After a while, you can practice 7 times within 15 minutes.

Keeping it short is important because if you do too much at the beginning, you’ll get fed up with the technique. We are human beings—we don’t like to get bored. We like to change what we eat, we like changing our clothes. We like change.

Likewise, the spiritual path is a long process, and we need a lot of patience. We need to like the path, so keep the meditation short and precise and frequent. That way we develop strong habits. Later on, it becomes part of us. It’s like drinking alcohol: when we first start drinking, we drink a little; we don’t drink two or three bottles at one time. If we did, we’d get so sick we’d never touch it again. So practice shamatha for a short time but many times. That way you’ll get habituated. This is necessary. Shamatha should become part of your life.

And during the off sessions, also, if it’s possible, remember you

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are breathing. We always forget that we are breathing.

Also, you should not limit your meditation to only in the morning or only in the evening: you should do it any time, all the time. Practice time is always now—it's never in the future. Don't ever leave your shamatha thinking, "I'm going to do it next weekend, next month, or next year." Do it now. Anyway, you're only doing it for about 45 seconds (if you're a beginner). It's easy. You can do it anywhere. It only requires this: to sit straight.

[Short meditation session.]

As we meditate, we simply sit straight and watch the breath. So what does that do? It creates space. In fact, the technique itself is just a trick. The main point is to recognize all these thoughts and distractions that are constantly bombarding us. We still get angry, but we know that we are angry. When we are angry and know it, the anger has a lot of humor. With that kind of anger, we have more control.

The frustrating thing about our life is that there is no control over these emotions. That's why there's no fun. The whole purpose of Buddhism is to have fun, isn't it? And in order to have fun you have to have control. If someone else has control over you, that's it: there's no fun.

[Short meditation session.]

Shamatha involves a lot of discipline. Because of this, lamas often advise us to do meditation in a group. When we are doing meditation in a group, we want to be the best, the fastest; we have so much pride and ego, and we're so competitive. Why not use this competitiveness as a tool on the path? It's like working out—if you buy the machines and

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bring them home, you do three or four days and the machines end up in the garage. But if you go to a gym, you see the other people who are diligently doing it, and all the other beautiful bodies, and it gives you inspiration. What a wrong motivation! But at least it will lead you somewhere.

Keep it simple, don't make it complicated. Concentrate on the breathing, sit straight—that's all. Every day, do a few minutes, and, on top of that, do it spontaneously in different places—not just in front of the shrine, but everywhere. There's so much merit in just sitting there.

Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche was born in Bhutan in 1961 and is recognized as the main incarnation of Dzongsar Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö (1894–1959). From early childhood, he has studied with some of the greatest contemporary masters, including His Holiness Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. He has established dharma centers in Asia, North America, and Australia.

—from Winter 2009

A MINTY FRESH MIND

Five sure-fire tips to get yourself on the cushion every day

BRAD WARNER

So now you're convinced. You've read the Wikipedia page about Buddhism, watched a few videos of famous masters on YouTube, gone to the local New Age bookshop and bought a couple of Buddhist magazines, and now you're ready to try some meditation for yourself. You visited the local sangha and sat with the group and listened intently as the teacher there told you the secret to practice was to meditate every single day. So you took the plunge and went to the gift shop and bought yourself a genuine meditation cushion. You set it up in the corner of your bedroom, where it waits for you every morning, lonely, sad, and neglected.

The problem is, you just can't seem to find the motivation. Your will is strong. Your belief is there. But darn it all, you just never seem to be able to get it together to meditate. Whenever you find a moment to meditate, you seem to do something else instead.

I hear you. I too suffered from the same problem. So I'd like to share with you my five surefire tips to get you on the cushion every day.

1. There are no sure-fire tips to get yourself on the cushion every day.

That was just a come-on to get you to read the rest of this. If there's one lesson that runs through pretty much every Buddhist tradition, it's this:

there are no magic solutions. Our belief in magic solutions that may happen some day in the future keeps us from doing what we really need to do right here and right now. So forget about sure-fire tips to get yourself on the cushion every day. That's my first sure-fire tip.

2. Motivation is overrated. While it's nice to be motivated, the people who really manage to get things done are those who find a way to work at whatever it is they're interested in even when they don't really feel like doing it. This goes for musicians, athletes, world-class chefs and all the rest. And it goes double for meditators.

I meditate every morning and every evening, and to tell you the truth, there are plenty of times when I just hate it. Meditation doesn't always feel like bliss and peace. Sometimes it feels like a five-car pileup in the middle of World War III during an alien invasion and a peewee football game gone mad. My head is buzzing with nervous energy and my body just can't seem to find anything even close to comfort. But I meditate anyway. Discipline is being able to do things when you don't want to do them.

3. Don't worry about results. You might have heard that the secret to meditation is to have no gaining ideas. But you have all kinds of gaining ideas! You want peace of mind, you want reduced stress, you want enlightenment. You never can seem to get rid of these desires. Should you just give up?

Nope. Everybody has gaining ideas. Everybody. Including the Buddha himself. It's not that you need to make these ideas go away. You just need to stop worrying about them. Whatever you might gain from your practice won't be anything like what you imagine it will be. So just leave those ideas as they are. They'll pass of their own accord if you let them.

And if they don't, that doesn't matter either. Sit with your gaining ideas.

4. Meditate before breakfast. This is the only thing resembling a technique that I really have to offer. I discovered this trick long ago, and it seems to work. I'm not allowed to eat breakfast until I finish my morning sitting. I'm pretty strict with myself on this one. There are no Fruity Pebbles for Brad until he is done with meditation, and that's final.

Maybe breakfast doesn't work for you the way it works for me. But there's something in your life you like to do every day. So tie that in with your practice. You don't get to do whatever that thing is until you finish your meditation.

5. Wake up half an hour earlier. You're busy. I know. So am I. So is everyone. But when I decided to commit myself to a daily practice, I looked honestly at what I did each day, and I saw a lot of wasted time. I did all kinds of things in the name of "leisure" or "relaxation" that weren't really that relaxing. I shopped. I watched inane television shows. I goofed off in a myriad of ways. So I revised my schedule and started going to bed a little earlier and waking up a little earlier so that I could meditate. Maybe the same thing can work for you. That one last thing you need to look up on the internet can wait.

These days, meditation for me is like brushing my teeth. Remember how it was when you were young? Your parents had to force you to brush your teeth. But now you do it every morning and night without being asked. Why? You do it because you know how much better you feel after you finish. You do it because you'd never get a date if you didn't. You do it because you'd be embarrassed to talk to your coworkers with stinky breath and stuff stuck to your teeth. So you do it for yourself and you do it for others.

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Do your meditation for the same reasons. Do it because you know how much better your interactions with others are on days when you do your meditation as opposed to days when you find some excuse to skip it. Do it because it makes your mind feel minty fresh! Then you won't need any sure-fire tips.

Brad Warner is a Zen monk, writer, bass player, and filmmaker. He is the author of four books, most recently *Sex, Sin, and Zen*.

—*from Spring 2012*

EVERYDAY MEDITATION

A nine-minute daily practice

JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN

Recently I was thinking about some close friends who are younger than I am, raising families, with busy lives in the world. I could appreciate that it might be quite some time before they would be able to sit a long retreat. So I started wondering if there was a way for people in those circumstances to integrate some kind of meditation technique into their daily activities that could really touch the transformative power of the practice. On longer retreats it's easier to access meditative depths, but when we're otherwise intensely engaged, it can be quite a challenge.

The foundation of the Buddha's path to liberation is known as right understanding, and it consists of two main strands. One is the understanding and application of the teachings on the law of *karma*—that is, that our actions have consequences. Seeing this we undertake the practice of generosity and the practice of the precepts. We take care with what we do so that we're creating conditions for happiness rather than suffering, both for ourselves and others. This strand is frequently talked about, and it covers a lot of what people who are committed to the path usually practice.

But, in the context of one's daily life, the second strand is more dif-

difficult to work with. This is the basic understanding of *anatta*, or “no-self”—the absence of an inherently existing self. In Pali, the language of the oldest written Buddhist teachings, the belief in some core notion of self is called *sakkaya-ditthi*; this is sometimes translated as “personality belief.” It’s said to be the most dangerous of all the defilements, more dangerous than greed or even hatred, because these are rooted in this mistaken belief. This wrong view of self is central to how we go about in the world, and all kinds of unskillful actions come out of it.

Of course, the Buddha is talking about the unwholesome effects of acting out of this wrong view—this personality view—not only in terms of one life, but of many lifetimes. It’s an extremely powerful conditioning force. And the aim of the practice, central to everything we’re doing, is to free the mind from this misconception.

So the question then arose: how can we really address this issue as laypeople caught up in our day-to-day activities? Quite spontaneously a nine-minute-a-day plan came to me, a way to ‘turbo-charge’ our ongoing practice by doing three short meditations a day, each three minutes long. Each of these sessions targets a particular area of identification where the mistaken sense of self is created and strengthened.

SESSION 1: WHO IS KNOWING?

During the first three-minute session we simply sit and listen to sounds, in whatever surroundings we find ourselves. It makes no difference whether we’re on a noisy street or in a quiet room. As we open and relax into the awareness of the various sounds, we ask ourselves a question: “Can I find what’s knowing these sounds?” Clearly, we’re aware of them. But can we find *what* is knowing? When we investigate, we see there’s

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nothing to find. There's no *knower*, even though knowing is happening.

This seems a very straightforward way of loosening and hopefully breaking the identification with the knowing as a knower. All that's going on is just hearing. There's no "I" behind it. No knower can be found.

So that's the first three-minute exercise: listen to sounds, see if you can find what's knowing them, and then explore the experience of not being able to find a knower, even though knowing is still there.

SESSION 2:

BREAKING IDENTIFICATION WITH THE BODY

The second three minutes helps break through the very deep identification with the body. For this there are two exercises that could be alternated, or the time could be divided between them.

The friends I had in mind had both lost one parent recently, so the focus of one session is to reflect on anyone we know who has died. If we were with them during that process, what was happening as they were dying, during their last days? Or if we don't have this personal experience, we can reflect on the great sweep of generations over time, that birth inevitably ends in death. Really try to take in the truth of the body dying, take in what our bodies are and what happens to them. This is something that will come to pass for us all.

The idea of this exercise is to reflect on dying in as vivid a way as possible, and to apply it to our partner, to our children, to our friends—seeing that this is what naturally happens to all of us. It isn't morbid, but rather a way of keeping front and center the truth that we all die. This can serve as a powerful reminder that our body is not "self." It is simply going through its own process. One day, it's going to decay and die—that's nature. It's just how it is.

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The other exercise for loosening identification with the body is carried out in motion. When I walk somewhere, for example, if I'm mindful and really feeling the body moving, I notice that I'm simply experiencing sensations in space—pressure, motion, lightness. That's all that's happening. There's not the sense of a solid body, and certainly not the sense of an "I" that's doing the walking.

When sensations in space are being known, through the act of walking or any other movement, we begin to get a sense of the body as a fluid energy field. This can be illuminating—it can free the mind from being caught in the notion of the solidity of the body.

These two approaches are a good way of weakening the identification with the body as being self.

SESSION 3: AS THE THOUGHT ARISES...

The last area where we get caught a lot in terms of self is the identification with our thoughts. We have thousands of thoughts a day, most of which are casual and low-key. Often we're not even aware of them. And almost all have to do with self—our activities, our future projects, our memories, and the imagined events that involve us.

During an earlier retreat, I noticed that this more subtle stream of thought is like a dream state, and the thought arose, "*I'm just dreaming myself into existence.*" Reflecting on this in the time since then, I see that we're continually dreaming ourselves into existence because we're not aware of thoughts as they're coming through. So the sense of self is continually being reinforced.

For the third three minutes, then, we simply watch for thoughts arising and passing, as we often do in meditation, but with a further

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turbo-charge: we pay more careful attention so that we're right there, *precisely* as the thought arises. If the awareness is sharp, we'll observe a thought arise and vanish in the moment. That experience repeatedly weakens the identification with thought. We discover that there's hardly anything there, just a wisp. In our normal lives, with our usual level of attention, we're not conscious of this. But for three minutes we can bring in enough focus so that we actually see it.

This is what I call “the nine-minute-a-day turbo-charged path to enlightenment.” It's important to add, though, that nine minutes a day by itself won't be enough. It needs to be built into the foundation of a daily meditation practice, together with the cultivation of the first strand of right understanding mentioned earlier: the awareness that our actions have consequences. If this nine-minute-a-day program is combined with other aspects of a daily practice, then I believe it can really enliven our understanding of how to apply the teachings in the midst of a very busy life.

Joseph Goldstein is the cofounder and guiding teacher of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, and its Forest Refuge program, and helped establish the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. His recent books include *A Heart Full of Peace* and *One Dharma: The Emerging Western Buddhism*. This article first appeared in the Fall 2011 edition of *Insight Newsletter*, an Insight Meditation Society publication, available at dharma.org.

—*from Spring 2012*

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Moving toward unconditional fulfillment and freedom

PAMELA GAYLE WHITE

You're bright, curious, and driven. Maybe competitive, certainly inspired by a good challenge, and possibly interested in contributing something to make the world a better place. Maybe you've even thought about what it will take for you to reach 80 or 100 and be able to say: This is what I set out to do, and I've done it. There have been ups and downs, but I've pretty much stayed on track.

You may think: *To go from here to there—becoming a successful and satisfied person with a big chunk of life behind me—I'll need to get this, achieve that, go there.* If you're a romantic, your success will depend on relationships; if you're family-oriented, it'll be family; if you're a materialist, you'll need to acquire certain things; if you're an adventurer, adventures; if you're an intellectual, knowledge. The list goes on. You may well have eminently worthy and admirable goals—especially if contributing to the welfare of others is part of what makes you tick.

But if our fulfillment and happiness depend on obtaining or doing something, will we be unhappy or frustrated if we don't obtain it or do it? Is our happiness dependent on something that is ultimately beyond

our personal reach? Does it depend on other people, other events? If those things, people, events, states or relationships that we depend on for our fulfillment change, what happens? They will change, they do change. Sometimes for the better—but not always. Then what?

It is useful to take a closer look at what actually makes us happy. What do we mean by happy? Where do peace and fulfillment come from? What about dissatisfaction, pain and anguish? How do we define these experiences? And who—or what—is this potentially fulfilled person—this “me”?

Around 2,600 years ago the Buddha, aware that we all share the desire to be happy and to avoid pain, asked himself these exact same questions. And 2,600 years ago the Buddha came up with answers that are still—according to Buddhists, anyway—the most intelligent, pertinent response to human needs in terms of philosophy and practice.

The Buddha was born to a royal family in what is now southwestern Nepal. A holy fortune-teller told the Buddha’s father, the king, that the boy would grow up to be either a great ruler or a great renunciant and spiritual guide. Naturally his father liked the first version better, and he did everything in his power to make sure Prince Siddhartha Gautama was happy. We can imagine the palace, the gardens and fountains, the peacocks, banquets, dancing girls, silks and brocades, musicians and jasmine, and all the rest of it. The king made sure his son never saw anything unpleasant, troubling, or jarring. And we can presume that the handsome, gifted prince believed he was leading a meaningful, satisfying life. He was happily married, had a fine son, and his wish was everyone’s command.

But then, the story goes, he went beyond the perimeters of his idyllic life and for the first time witnessed the shocking truths of aging, illness, and death. And suddenly a yearning for peace and meaning that were

not contingent on commodities like health, youth, and wealth arose and was stronger than everything else. So he left in pursuit of something like unalterable happiness, and he tried to find it through the extreme ascetic practices that were the going thing back then. After six years of astonishing self-abnegation, he came to the realization that the two extremes of earthly pleasures and self-mortification weren't going to take him where he meant to go. So he had some lovely rice pudding, sat on a grass mat under a pipal tree in what is now Bodh Gaya, and vowed he wouldn't quit until he found the absolute happiness he was looking for. "Let only skin, sinew, and bone remain," he said, "let the flesh and blood dry in my body, but I will not give up this seat without attaining complete awakening." After a long and very eventful night, he became Buddha, the Awakened One.

Seven weeks later, he gave his first teaching. It laid out the whole story, from our misguided pursuit of happiness to the possibility of awakening and peace, in four points: the Four Noble Truths. His first truth, the Truth of Suffering, states that suffering is a given in any form of existence that is dependent on causes and conditions. It defines suffering as all levels of discomfort, ranging from blatant pain to the subtle discomfort of change and the far subtler existential suffering that goes along with being alive.

The second truth is the Origin of Suffering, and here the Buddha explains that the origin of suffering is not some god who has it in for us, or some arbitrary finger of fate, but our own ignorance and its karmic by-products. Revolutionary! We'll come back to this one.

The third truth is the Truth of Cessation, or the truth of peace: the unequivocal peace that is realized when our veils, confusion, and selfishness have ceased, have been removed, and our natural goodness and wisdom have fully blossomed. *Pure* happiness.

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And finally the fourth truth, the Truth of the Path, maps out the practice that leads us to the Truth of Cessation. That route is essentially right view, right action (learning how to be truly helpful), and right spiritual practice, as traditionally expressed by the condensed guide to a wholesome lifestyle called the Eightfold Noble Path.

The origin of suffering is ignorance. The word in Sanskrit is *avidya*—not knowing, not being aware of our fundamental nature or essence as being *buddha*, awake, and of the nature of conditioned manifestation, including us, as being interconnected and devoid of any sort of solid, independent self; impermanent and subject to change, whether we like it or not; and composite, meaning that pain will be part of our experience, since everything that exists as an aggregate necessarily falls apart sooner or later. Even the Buddha, who went on to give teachings on different subjects in different places over a span of nearly 50 years, left his body behind at age 81.

Ignorance means that we don't have all of the elements we need to make informed choices about life. We're all looking for comfort, or meaning, but we make clumsy choices that lead to painful results (eating too much chocolate is a personal case in point). Because of ignorance, we are unaware of the ultimate, fundamental interconnectedness of existence, and our universe is perceived not as the ever-changing lace of illusion it is but as a solid, somewhat static confrontation between self/me and other/everything else.

We divide our world into me/you, friend/enemy, desirable/undesirable, fulfilling/frustrating, and so on. It's a natural process, but a very arbitrary, utterly subjective one. Somehow we're able to *ignore* this last fact. We're in dualistic division mode, and we act on that; all sorts of emotions come into play, and we act on them. We reinforce the tendencies—Buddhists might say, we create or compound karma—that make the illusion

thicker, stickier, more solid. And the further we are from truth, the more elusive happiness becomes.

A great 20th-century teacher from Tibet, the 3rd Jamgon Kongtrul, gave a talk at State University of New York at Albany in 1985. “Most of the time our relationship to the world around us accords not with its basic nature but with our incomplete perceptions of it,” he said. “We do not experience our own basic nature; instead we experience only what we see. The result is tremendous conflict in our lives. No matter how hard we try to work things out, there is always disorder and dissatisfaction, always something missing. No matter how much we seem to have accomplished, there is still more to achieve. This dissatisfaction continues and its scale increases, because what we are fundamentally and how we perceive are not the same.”

Jamgon Kongtrul refers to our basic nature: according to many teachings attributed to the Buddha, our basic, ultimate, objective nature is impossible to define in words, but it includes that potential for awakening that he presented in the third noble truth, Cessation. It has been described as luminous awareness, emptiness, basic goodness, and budhanature. Basic nature has absolutely nothing to do with being a Buddhist; all beings share this innate spark of perfection. What Buddhism tries to do is give us the means to recognize, kindle, and experience this potential, no matter who we are.

On a relative level, as beings subject to confusion or ignorance in varying degrees, we are interdependent, impermanent, and subject to the suffering we seek to avoid. The underlying motor of our experience is karma. Essentially, karma refers to the fact that actions and thoughts have results; nothing exists without a cause. This is both bad news and good news.

It’s bad news if we choose to remain in “head-in-the-sand” mode,

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because our tendency will be to relate to happiness and pleasure or frustration and dissatisfaction as having external causes and external solutions. We deal with them by focusing on a prize or a culprit and reacting according to our confused patterns: we turn on the charm, or scheme, or run away, or fight. But as Jamgon Kongtrul explained, “what is fundamentally true is that the experience of pain or pleasure is not so much what is happening externally as it is what is happening internally: the experience of pain or pleasure is mainly a state of mind. Whether we experience the world as enlightened or confused depends on our state of mind.”

And that’s the good news.

It’s good news because there is always the potential for being truly aware of what’s going on and using that to deepen our understanding. There’s always the potential for opening our eyes and being *buddha*: awake. Furthermore, interdependence means that good actions bring positive, happy results for us and for others; and impermanence means that painful situations can change for the better and that we can perceive them differently and use them more wisely.

The Tibetan word for Buddhist, *nangpa*, means “insider,” as in “those whose focus is directed inside: on the mind, its workings and development.” The Buddha taught that *true* happiness, or fulfillment, is independent of outer causes and conditions. So for Buddhists, the pursuit of happiness involves training in looking inward. Once we know who we really are, from the inside out, we’re less likely to believe in the viability of our patterns and addictions. We realize that if we’ve been in cahoots with dissatisfaction and confusion, it’s because we haven’t discovered our own birthright.

An oft-given analogy is that of the starving person who is unaware of the larder in the cellar. I always imagine an emaciated fellow in rags,

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too defeated or unimaginative to think to pick at the dirt floor of the filthy hovel he's wasting away in. Too discouraged to find the big iron ring just under the surface of the dirt that would lift weightlessly away if pulled, revealing an illuminated cellar filled with cool spring water, gorgeous fruit, lots of good French cheese, fine crusty bread, and so on.

If we're inspired to dust off the big iron ring and give it a pull, if we're interested in working toward replacing our confusion with clarity and peace of mind, in discovering our birthright, Buddhism gives us tools. One of the main tools, which guides us in observing and working with the mind, is meditation.

Meditating isn't about nuking the thoughts and emotions that arise in our mindstream; it isn't about floating around in a bliss bubble; and it isn't about shaving our head, changing our name to Wangmo and living in a cave. So what *is* it about? Remember that the Buddhist take on existence includes both the absolute and relative levels. When we meditate, we relate to both. We relate to absolute wisdom and relative confusion, and we do it without judgment or politics. The basic meditation called *shamatha*, or "calm abiding," is a neutral process of acknowledging and letting go. It's the Switzerland of practices. We're willing to cut through our attachment to thought—but we are *not* trying to stop the process of thinking, because thoughts are not the problem. Our hopes and fears, attachment and rejection, the tension they create and veils they reinforce are the problem.

Meditation takes many different forms; there are endless variants, and each variant focuses on revealing one or another of those treasures in the larder. Shamatha is the practice that introduces us to the mind's capacity to be trained and to develop composure. And though composure is not the final goal, stability is the basis for all other practices, some of which can be quite dynamic and demanding. If the mind is constant-

ly scurrying around like a ferret on caffeine, how can we train it?

If we look at where the mind is going as it dashes and darts here and there, we see that our thoughts are concerned with the past—things we wish had happened differently, situations we enjoyed and want to recreate, events that are dead and gone—and the future, which doesn't exist, and never unfolds the way we write the stories anyway. When we meditate, we relate to that unsettling, ineffable commodity: the present. We train in letting go of thoughts and feelings as they arise, and settle back into the present: that gap between two concepts—past and future—that don't actually *exist*. We're simply being, here and now. Because just being is so unfamiliar to us, we develop our practice through any one of many methods for calming the mind, like following the breath. We just sit down, settle our mind on the breath, acknowledge what's arising, drop it and go back to our breathing. If we're aware of tension, we soften and let it go. If we're aware of agitation or drowsiness, we make use of diligence and apply a remedy.

Pay attention. Stay open. Note discomfort and go back to your breathing. Use your curiosity. Be patient. You're doing something vital: you're pulling the iron ring. You're moving in the direction of unconditional fulfillment and freedom. You're pursuing happiness the only way that truly makes sense: from the inside out.

Pamela Gayle White translates from Tibetan and teaches meditation and Buddhist philosophy in Bodhi Path centers in the Americas and Europe. This article was adapted from a talk she gave at Bryn Mawr College's Multicultural Center in December 2008. After the talk, a student meditation group was formed.

—*from Spring 2012*