



TRICYCLE TEACHINGS

# Meditation

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VOLUME 2

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A TRICYCLE E-BOOK

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. “Your Life is Your Practice,” by Glenna Olmsted
2. “Take the One Seat,” by Jack Kornfield
3. “Sitting Still,” by Henepola Gunaratana
4. “Like a Dragon in Water,” by Roshi Pat Enkyo O’Hara
5. “Evaluate Your Meditation,” by Gil Fronsdal
6. “Unlearning Meditation,” by Jason Siff
7. “Meditation in Motion,” by Jill Satterfield
8. “Something from Nothing,” by Ken McLeod
9. “What You’re Made of,” by Bodhipaksa
10. “Leaving the Lotus Position,” by Susan Moon
11. “Fruitless Labor,” by Gaylon Ferguson
12. “Meditation, Mental Habits, and Creative Imagination,” by Martine Batchelor
13. “Reflect, Without Thinking,” by Ezra Bayda
14. “Sticking With It,” by Sharon Salzberg

1

# YOUR LIFE IS YOUR PRACTICE

An everyday meditation guide

GLENN A OLMSTED

*In human life, if you feel that you have made a mistake, you don't try to undo the past or the present, but you just accept where you are and work from there. Tremendous openness as to where you are is necessary. This also applies to the practice of meditation, for instance. A person should learn to meditate on the spot, in the given moment, rather than thinking, "...When I reach pension age, I'm going to retire and receive a pension, and I'm going to build my house in Hawaii or the middle of India, or maybe the Gobi Desert, and THEN I'm going to enjoy myself. I'll live a life of solitude and then I'll really meditate." Things never happen that way.*

—Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, *Transcending Madness*

As a dharma practitioner with a career as well as commitments to care for others, I felt for years that there was seldom time to do solitary retreat. This was something that was continuously on my short list of the most important things to do. Frustrated, I became determined to find a way. Then, when I lived at Gampo Abbey, a Shambhala Buddhist monastery in Nova Scotia, I experienced both practice and work within the same day, every day. This was our way of life there. So here was an answer! I

don't have to wait until life gets quiet, or until I'm retired with nothing else to do. Nor do I have to become a nun before I start doing retreat. That's how I began doing "working retreats," and I decided to share the idea with my sangha in Steamboat Springs, Colorado. Word got out to other sangha friends in other places, and one friend who is a journalist said that I needed to share this more widely. So here it is.

My hope is that this way of doing retreat will take the resistance out of establishing a retreat habit for those who thirst to do retreat but can't seem to find the time. The working retreat is not intended to take the place of solitary retreat. It is simply a way to overcome your hesitation to do retreat because you have a job, a business, or other ongoing responsibilities to attend to.

One key to a successful retreat is setting your intentions. If your intentions are clear and focused, the work that you do while on your retreat will become another aspect of your meditation rather than a distraction. When doing a week or more of this type of retreat, try to plan that you have two days off from work, just like in the real world. That way you will end up with two full days of solitary retreat per week.

The Buddha taught us to bring patience, generosity, and kindness into everything that we do. Observing such virtues during your work period will strengthen good habits and character, whether you are on or off the cushion, in or out of retreat. Setting our intention to do "retreat" creates a mindset of awareness and purpose in our daily activities and eliminates our daily excuses for why we can't practice, showing us a way to a more settled mind as we go through our daily routines.

Below are some examples of what a working retreat might look like during a 24-hour time period. It doesn't matter where you do it; you can be at home or in a retreat cabin. "Work" can mean anything from caring for your children when they are home (maybe you even have a newborn baby) to being in the office 8 hours a day. The principal idea is the same:

Wake up earlier than you usually do, sit for as long as you can, go to work and practice with the intention that you have set for yourself, then come straight home after work and continue with your retreat schedule. Whatever your situation, set your intention that the day or days you have committed to are for “retreat” and for working on your choice of a virtue such as patience, generosity, or kindness. Remind yourself of that intention throughout the day and again before you fall asleep.

Besides keeping patience, generosity, and kindness in mind at all times, the most important thing is that you work diligently and as quietly as possible with an open, spacious mind. Use patience and generosity with kindness when dealing with others while you work. When you set your intention to be in retreat beforehand, everything you do when you are not sitting can be practice. If you notice agitation, remember your intention. If you see other emotions arising, remember your intention. If your retreat schedule gets off because something unexpected comes up and your work time is extended, just keep remembering your intention and get back to your cushion as soon as you can. However, make sure that these “unexpected things” are really important enough to interrupt your schedule. Something may seem important that can actually be done when the retreat is over. Sometimes it’s just another temptation to break retreat with the neurotic idea of being “always busy.” It can wait. You are doing a retreat.

Set up your retreat schedule for a week, two weeks, five days, or a month, or whatever you choose, but choose to make a commitment to a certain length of time. Then stay with the length of the intended retreat and the retreat schedule as best you can. Remembering your intention to be in retreat is like coming back to your breath in shamatha (calm abiding) meditation practice; it creates a habit of returning to practice even when you have not formally committed the time to meditating.

For any retreat, preparing ahead of time is important. Set up your shrine, a place within your retreat space where you can light a candle, offer incense, or display a photo of your teacher or someone (or something) that opens your heart. Clear your space so that you aren't distracted by disorganization. Arrange simple meals and have the food that you need on hand. You want your focus to be on meditation and working with your mind, not on the mundane tasks that usually keep us "busy." Retreat time isn't the time for fasts or diets; however, it is an excellent time to eat healthy, simple food without alcohol, fast food, or sweets.

### A BASIC RETREAT GUIDE

If you have a meditation teacher, tell him or her about your plan for a working retreat and ask for reading material, a particular practice, and/or liturgies that you can use. If you haven't had meditation instruction, this may be the time to look for a reputable teacher or a seasoned practitioner to help you get started.

On the evening before your retreat, have a quiet period at your shrine. Kneeling in respect for all that brought you to this moment and all that is to come, take a few minutes to set your intention for the retreat: determine the qualities you would like to emphasize, and, if you choose, dedicate the merit of this retreat to a person or deity, to some worthy or needy group, or to the betterment of some particular situation. Then:

Sit for ten minutes.

Before going to bed, read from something inspirational.

You should bring this book with you on your workday retreat.

Lights out.

### RETREAT SCHEDULE FOR AN 8-HOUR WORKDAY

Here is a basic guideline for a retreat during an 8-hour workday, one that would give you 4 hours of practice. Adjust it for more or less sitting time to suit your work schedule, commuting time, and practice experience. You might also gradually increase your sitting time as the retreat progresses.

6:30 A.M.

Arise. Your wake-up time should be as early as possible, but just be sure to decide ahead of time and then stick to the schedule for the duration of your retreat. Light your shrine and sit. Take a 2-minute break to stretch after 20 minutes if necessary. During this period you can also incorporate liturgy (prayers or sutras) or practices that your teacher suggested, or include a walking meditation.

7:30

Eat breakfast, dress, and go to work.

9:00

Start work, keeping to the guidelines of awareness discussed earlier.

1:00

Lunch, followed by light exercise or a short reading.

2:00

Return to work.

5:00

Return to practice.

7:00

Read or study.

**8:00**

Have dinner and relax.

**9:00**

Return to practice.

**10:00**

Read briefly, relax, and go to sleep.

RETREAT SCHEDULE  
FOR A SHORT WORKDAY (3.5 HOURS)

**6:00 a.m.**

Get out of bed as soon as you wake up, or as soon as the alarm rings.

Light candles at your shrine, offer incense, and so on.

**6:15**

Before beginning sitting meditation practice, take time to settle on your cushion and recite any liturgy suggested by your teacher, or say a prayer or read an inspirational poem.

**6:30**

Meditation.

**7:30**

Light exercise. Breakfast.

**8:30**

Return to your cushion for sitting meditation; you can stand and stretch for 5 minutes every 20 minutes or so. If you are unaccustomed to sitting this long, break up the time by walking with simple awareness, alternating with stretching and sitting.

10:50

Break.

11:00

Read and contemplate on one of the books you have brought on retreat.

**12 p.m.**

Lunch.



TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: MEDITATION, VOL. 2

12:30

Start work.

4:00

Return to sitting meditation.

6:00

Dinner.

7:00

Sitting.

7:30

Read.

8:00

Sitting.

8:30

Recite out loud something you love to read, or something your teacher has recommended. Then sit.

**9:00**

Dedicate the merit of your practice, or take a moment for thoughtful appreciation of the opportunity to do this retreat. Then relax and go to bed.

RETREAT FOR A STAY-AT-HOME PARENT

5:30 A.M.

Wake up as early as possible, but make sure you decide ahead of time when and then stick to the schedule for the duration of your retreat.

Light your shrine and sit. Take a 2-minute break to stretch every 20 minutes if needed. Say liturgies, do whatever practices your teacher has given you, and do walking meditation when appropriate.

**6:30**

Eat breakfast, dress.

Practice until you have to start attending to your children. (Make your own time adjustment here.) Whatever you do with your children, stay with your intention to practice awareness, gentleness, and kindness. If they have an outside activity that doesn't require your presence, this is a good time to go back to your cushion for more meditation. You might also find a quiet place near their activity (if possible, out in nature) to meditate until you need to pick them up. Whenever they are asleep is a great time to do your meditation practice. When they are awake again, remember your intention to observe awareness, gentleness, and kindness until the next break. Once they are down for the night, you can return to sections of one of the schedules above.

Do you have a job with odd hours? No problem. Do you care for children, hold meetings or classes, want to schedule time for art or writing? No problem. The principal idea is the same. Wake up earlier, sit for as long as you can, do what you need or want to do while remembering your intention to practice awareness, patience, generosity, and kindness—then come straight home and return to your retreat schedule.

I hope that these suggestions will benefit you and all beings. Now there is no reason to not do retreat! After making retreat a habit, you may realize one day that you are living your life with less chaos and more as though you are on retreat all of the time.

*For a dharmic person, good conduct is a sense of mindfulness and awareness: whatever you are doing, you should try to see it as an extension of your sitting practice, your general sense of awareness and your refraining from too much, unnecessary activity....You could look at yourself and smile. You could be awake and aware and, at the same time, on the spot. Constant sunrise happens. You reflect that yourself, and you always look*

*awake and aware of what you are doing. That is good conduct. You respect yourself and you respect the sacredness of your whole being, your whole existence. When you have that kind of self-respect, you don't spill your tea or put your shoes on the wrong feet. You appreciate the weather, your coffee, your tea, your clothes, your shower. There is a tremendous sense that for the first time you have become a real human being and you can actually appreciate the world around you. That appreciation comes from being aware.*

—Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, from *Seven Characteristics of a Dharmic Person*, *The Collected Works of Chögyam Trungpa*, vol. 2

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2

TAKE THE ONE SEAT

Discover your capacity to be unafraid and awake in the midst of all life.

JACK KORNFIELD

When we take the one seat on our meditation cushion we become our own monastery. We create the compassionate space that allows for the arising of all things: sorrows, loneliness, shame, desire, regret, frustration, happiness.

Spiritual transformation is a profound process that doesn't happen by accident. We need a repeated discipline, a genuine training, in order to let go of our old habits of mind and to find and sustain a new way of seeing. To mature on the spiritual path we need to commit ourselves in a systematic way. My teacher Achaan Chah described this commitment as "taking the one seat." He said, "Just go into the room and put one chair in the center. Take the seat in the center of the room, open the doors and the windows, and see who comes to visit. You will witness all kinds of scenes and actors, all kinds of temptations and stories, everything imaginable. Your only job is to stay in your seat. You will see it all arise and pass, and out of this, wisdom and understanding will come."

Achaan Chah's description is both literal and metaphorical, and his image of taking the one seat describes two related aspects of spiritual work. Outwardly, it means selecting one practice and teacher among all of the possibilities, and inwardly, it means having the determination to

stick with that practice through whatever difficulties and doubts arise until you have come to true clarity and understanding.

Every great spiritual tradition in every culture and in every age offers vehicles for awakening. These include body disciplines, prayer, meditation, selfless service, certain forms of modern therapy, and a variety of ceremonial and devotional practices. All of these are used as means to ripen us, to bring us face to face again and again with our life, and to help us to see in a new way by developing a stillness of mind and strength of heart. Undertaking any of these practices requires a deep commitment to stopping the war, to no longer running away from life. Each practice moves us back into the present with a clearer, more receptive, more honest state of consciousness.

While choosing among practices, we will often encounter others who will try to convert us to their way. There are born-again Buddhists, Christians, and Sufis. There are missionaries of every faith who insist that they have found the one true vehicle to God or to awakening or to love. It is crucial to understand that there are many ways up the mountain—that there is never just one true way.

Two disciples of a master got into an argument about the right way to practice. As they could not resolve their conflict, they went to their master, who was sitting among a group of other students. Each of the two disciples put across his point of view. The first talked about the path of effort. He said, “Master, is it not true that we must make a full effort to abandon our old habits and unconscious ways? We must make great effort to speak honestly, be mindful and present. Spiritual life does not happen by accident,” he said, “but only by giving our wholehearted effort to it.” The master replied, “You’re right.”

The second student was upset and said, “But Master, isn’t the true spiritual path one of letting go, of surrender, of allowing the Tao, the

divine to show itself?” He continued, “It is not through our effort that we progress, our effort is only based on our grasping and ego. The essence of the true spiritual path is to live from the phrase, ‘Not my will but thine.’ Is that not the way?” Again the master replied, “You’re right.”

A third student listening said, “But Master, they can’t both be right.” The master smiled and said, “And you’re right too.”

There are many ways up the mountain, but each of us must choose a practice that feels true to his own heart. It is not necessary for you to evaluate the practices chosen by others. Remember, the practices themselves are only vehicles for you to develop awareness, lovingkindness, and compassion on the path toward freedom, a true freedom of spirit.

As the Buddha said, “One need not carry the raft on one’s head after crossing the stream.” We need to learn not only how to honor and use a practice for as long as it serves us—which in most cases is a very long time—but to look at it as just that, a vehicle, a raft to help us cross through the waters of doubt, confusion, desire, and fear. We can be thankful for the raft that supports our journey, and still realize that though we benefit, not everyone will take the same raft.

Many students have come to Insight Meditation retreats to learn the Buddhist awareness practice I teach after having sampled the numerous traditions that are now available in the West. They have been initiated by lamas, done Sufi dancing in the mountains, sat a Zen retreat or two, and participated in shamanic rituals, and yet they ask: Why am I still unhappy? Why am I caught in the same old struggles? Why haven’t my years of practice changed anything? Why hasn’t my spiritual practice progressed? And I ask them: What is your spiritual practice? Do you have a committed relationship of trust with your teacher and a specific form of practice? They often answer that they practice many ways, or that they have not chosen yet. Until a person chooses one discipline

and commits to it, how can a deep understanding of themselves and the world be revealed to them? Spiritual work requires sustained practice and a commitment to look very deeply into ourselves and the world around us to discover what has created human suffering and what will free us from any amount of conflict. We must look at ourselves over and over again in order to learn to love, to discover what has kept our hearts closed and what it means to allow our hearts to open.

If we do a little of one kind of practice and a little of another, the work we have done in one often doesn't continue to build as we change to the next. It is as if we were to dig many shallow wells instead of one deep one. In continually moving from one approach to another, we are never forced to face our own boredom, impatience, and fears. We are never brought face to face with ourselves. So we need to choose a way of practice that is deep and ancient and connected with our hearts, and then make a commitment to follow it as long as it takes to transform ourselves. This is the outward aspect of taking the one seat.

Once we have made the outward choice among the many paths available and have begun a systematic practice, we often find ourselves assailed from within by doubts and fears, by all the feelings that we have never dared experience. Eventually, all of the dammed-up pain of a lifetime will arise. Once we have chosen a practice, we must have the courage and the determination to stick with it and use it in the face of all our difficulties. This is the inward aspect of taking the one seat.

There are stories about how the Buddha practiced when he was assailed by doubts and temptations. The teaching about his commitment in the face of his challenges is called "The Lion's Roar." On the night of his enlightenment, the Buddha had vowed to sit on his one seat and not get up until he had awakened, until he found a freedom and a joy in the midst of all things in the world. He was then attacked by Mara, tempta-

tion in the mind. After flinging every force of temptation and difficulty at the Buddha to no avail, Mara then challenged the Buddha's right to sit on that spot. The Buddha responded with a lion's roar and called upon the Goddess of the Earth to bear witness to his right to sit there, based on the thousands of lifetimes of patience, earnestness, compassion, virtue, and discipline he had cultivated. At this, the armies of Mara were washed away.

Later, as the Buddha taught, he was challenged by other yogis and ascetics for having given up austerity: "You eat beautiful food that your followers put in your bowl each morning and wear a robe in which you cover yourself from the cold, while we eat a few grains of rice a day and lie without robes on beds of nails. "What kind of a teacher and yogi are you? You are soft, weak, indulgent." The Buddha answered these challenges, too, with a lion's roar. "I, too, have slept on nails; I've stood with my eyes open to the sun in the hot sands of the Ganges; I've eaten so little food that you couldn't fill one fingernail with the amount I ate each day. "Whatever ascetic practices under the sun human beings have done, I, too, have done! Through them all I've learned that fighting against oneself through such practices is not the way."

Instead, the Buddha discovered what he called the Middle Way, a way not based on an aversion to the world, nor on attachment, but a way based on inclusion and compassion. The Middle Way rests at the center of all things, one great seat in the center of the world. On this seat the Buddha opened his eyes to see clearly and opened his heart to embrace all. Through this he completed the process of his enlightenment. He declared, "I have seen what there is to be seen and known what there is to be known in order to free myself completely from all illusion and suffering." This, too, was his lion's roar.

We each need to make our lion's roar—to persevere with unshak-



able courage when faced with all manner of doubts and sorrows and fears—to declare our right to awaken. We need to take the one seat, as the Buddha did, and completely face what is true about this life. Make no mistake about this, it is not easy. It can take the courage of a lion or a lioness, especially when we are asked to sit with the depth of our pain or fear.

When we take the one seat on our meditation cushion we become our own monastery. We create the compassionate space that allows for the arising of all things: sorrows, loneliness, shame, desire, regret, frustration, happiness. In a monastery, monks and nuns take robes and shave their heads as part of the process of letting go. In the monastery of our own sitting meditation, each of us experiences whatever arises and again and again as we let go saying, “Ah, this too.” The simple phrase “This too, this too” was the main meditation instruction of one great woman yogi and master with whom I studied. Through these few words we were encouraged to soften and open to see whatever we encountered, accepting the truth with a wise and understanding heart.

Whatever practice we have chosen we must use in this fashion. As we take the one seat we discover our capacity to be unafraid and awake in the midst of all life. We may fear that our heart is not capable of weathering the storms of anger or grief or terror that have been stored up for so long. We may have a fear of accepting all of life, what Zorba the Greek called “the ‘Whole Catastrophe.’” But to take the one seat is to discover that we are unshakable. We discover that we can face life fully, with all its suffering and joy, that our heart is great enough to encompass it all.

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TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: MEDITATION, VOL. 2

Rock Center. This article was adapted from Jack Kornfield's book *A Path With Heart*. Printed with the permission of Bantam Books, a subsidiary of Bantam Doubleday Dell.

3

SITTING STILL

HENEPOLA GUNARATANA

Once you sit, do not change the position again until the end of the time you determined at the beginning. Suppose you change your original position because it is uncomfortable, and assume another position. What happens after a while is that the new position becomes uncomfortable. Then you want another and after a while it, too, becomes uncomfortable. So you may go on shifting, moving, changing one position to another the whole time you are on your meditation cushion and you may not gain a deep and meaningful level of concentration. Therefore, do not change your original position, no matter how painful it is.

To avoid changing your position, determine at the beginning of meditation how long you are going to meditate. If you have never meditated before, sit motionlessly for not longer than twenty minutes. As you repeat your practice, you can increase your sitting time. The length of sitting depends on how much time you have for sitting meditation practice and how long you can sit without excruciating pain.

We should not have a time schedule to attain the goal, for our attainment depends on how we progress in our practice based on our understanding and development of our spiritual faculties. We must work diligently and mindfully toward the goal without setting any particular time schedule to reach it. When we are ready, we get there. All we have

to do is to prepare ourselves for that attainment.

After sitting motionlessly, close your eyes. Our mind is analogous to a cup of muddy water. The longer you keep a cup of muddy water still, the more the mud settles down and the water will be seen clearly. Similarly, if you keep quiet without moving your body, focusing your entire undivided attention on the subject of your meditation, your mind settles down and begins to experience the bliss of meditation.

To prepare for this attainment, we should keep our mind in the present moment. The present moment is changing so fast that a casual observer does not seem to notice its existence at all. Every moment is a moment of events and no moment passes by without an event. We cannot notice a moment without noticing events taking place in that moment. Therefore, the moment we try to pay bare attention to is the present moment. Our mind goes through a series of events like a series of pictures passing through a projector. Some of these pictures are coming from our past experiences and others are our imaginations of things that we plan to do in the future. The mind can never be focused without a mental object. Therefore we must give our mind an object which is readily available every present moment. One such object is our breath.

The mind does not have to make a great effort to find the breath. Every moment the breath is flowing in and out through our nostrils. As our practice of insight meditation is taking place every waking moment, our mind finds it very easy to focus itself on the breath, for it is more conspicuous and constant than any other object.

After sitting in the manner explained earlier and having shared your loving-kindness with everybody, take three deep breaths. After taking three deep breaths, breathe normally, letting your breath flow in and out freely, effortlessly, and begin focusing your attention on the rims of your nostrils. Simply notice the feeling of breath going in and

out. When one inhalation is complete and before exhaling begins, there is a brief pause. Notice it and notice the beginning of exhaling. When the exhalation is complete, there is another brief pause before inhaling begins. Notice this brief pause, too. This means that there are two brief pauses of breath—one at the end of inhaling and the other at the end of exhaling. These two pauses occur in such a brief moment you may not be aware of their occurrence. But when you are mindful, you can notice them.

Do not verbalize or conceptualize anything. Simply notice the incoming and outgoing breath without saying, “I breathe in” or “I breathe out.” When you focus your attention on the breath ignore any thought, memory, sound, smell, taste, etc., and focus your attention exclusively on the breath, nothing else.

At the beginning, both the inhalations and exhalations are short because the body and mind are not calm and relaxed. Notice the feeling of that short inhaling and short exhaling as they occur without saying, “short inhaling” or “short exhaling.” As you continue to notice the feeling of short inhaling and short exhaling, your body and mind become relatively calm. Then your breath becomes long. Notice the feeling of that long breath as it is without saying, “Long breath.” Then notice the entire breathing process from the beginning to the end. Subsequently the breath becomes subtle, and the mind and body become calmer than before. Notice this calm and peaceful feeling of your breathing.

Similarly, as you continue this exercise, your breath becomes so subtle and refined that you might not be able to notice the feeling of breath at all. When this happens do not worry. It has not disappeared. It is still where it was before—right at the nostril-tips. Take a few quick breaths and you will notice the feeling of breathing again. Continue to pay bare attention to the feeling of the touch of breath at the rims of your

nostrils. As you keep your mind focused on the rims of your nostrils, you will be able to notice the sign of the development of meditation. You will feel the pleasant sensation of a sign. Different meditators experience this differently. It will be like a star, or a round gem, or a round pearl, or a cottonseed, or a peg made of heartwood, or a long string, or a wreath of flowers, or a puff of smoke, or a cobweb, or a film of cloud, or a lotus flower, or the disc of the moon, or the disc of the sun.

Earlier in your practice you had inhaling and exhaling as objects of meditation. Now you have the sign as the third object of meditation. When you focus your mind on this third object, your mind reaches a stage of concentration sufficient for your practice of insight meditation. This sign is strongly present at the rims of the nostrils. Master it and gain full control of it so that whenever you want, it should be available. Unite the mind with this sign which is available in the present moment and let the mind flow with every succeeding moment. As you pay bare attention to it, you will see that the sign itself is changing every moment. Keep your mind with the changing moments. Also, notice that your mind can be concentrated only on the present moment. This unity of the mind with the present moment is called momentary concentration. As moments are incessantly passing away one after another, the mind keeps pace with them, changing with them, appearing and disappearing with them without clinging to any of them. If we try to stop the mind at one moment, we end up in frustration because the mind cannot be held fast. It must keep up with what is happening in the new moment. As the present moment can be found any moment, every waking moment can be made a concentrated moment.

To unite the mind with the present moment, we must find something happening in that moment. However, you cannot focus your mind on every changing moment without a certain degree of concentration to

keep pace with the moment. Once you gain this degree of concentration, you can use it for focusing your attention on anything you experience—the rising and falling of your abdomen, the rising and falling of the chest area, the rising and falling of any feeling, or the rising and falling of your breath or thoughts and so on.

To make any progress in insight meditation you need this kind of momentary concentration. That is all you need for the insight meditation practice because everything in your experience lives only for one moment. When you focus this concentrated state of mind on the changes taking place in your mind and body, you will notice that your breath is the physical part and that the feeling of breath, consciousness of the feeling, and the consciousness of the sign are the mental parts. As you notice them you can notice that they are changing all the time. You may have various types of sensations, other than the feeling of breathing, taking place in your body. Watch them all over your body. Don't try to create any feeling which is not naturally present in any part of your body. But notice whatever sensation arises in the body. When thought arises notice it too. All you should notice in all these occurrences is the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless nature of all your experiences whether mental or physical.

As your mindfulness develops, your resentment for the change, your dislike for the unpleasant experiences, your greed for the pleasant experiences, and the notion of selfhood will be replaced by the deeper awareness of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness. This knowledge of reality in your experience helps you to foster a more calm, peaceful, and mature attitude toward your life. You will see what you thought in the past to be permanent is changing with such inconceivable rapidity that even your mind cannot keep up with these changes. Somehow you will be able to notice many of the changes. You will see the

subtlety of impermanence and the subtlety of selflessness. This insight will show you the way to peace, happiness, and will give you the wisdom to handle your daily problems in life.

When the mind is united with the breath flowing all the time, we will naturally be able to focus the mind on the present moment. We can notice the feeling arising from contact of breath with the rim of our nostrils. As the earth element of the air that we breathe in and out touches the earth element of our nostrils, the mind feels the flow of air in and out. The warm feeling arises at the nostrils or any other part of the body from the contact of the heat element generated by the breathing process. The feeling of impermanence of breath arises when the earth element of flowing breath touches the nostrils. Although the water element is present in the breath, the mind cannot feel it.

Also, we feel the expansion and contraction of our lungs, abdomen, and lower abdomen, as the fresh air is pumped in and out of the lungs. The expansion and contraction of the abdomen, lower abdomen and chest are parts of the universal rhythm. Everything in the universe has the same rhythm of expansion and contraction just like our breath and body. All of them are rising and falling. However, our primary concern is the rising and falling phenomena of the breath and minute parts of our minds and bodies.

Along with the inhaling breath, we experience a small degree of calmness. This little degree of calmness turns into tension if we don't breathe out in a few moments. As we breathe out this tension is released. After breathing out, we experience discomfort if we wait too long before having fresh air brought in again. This means that every time our lungs are full we must breathe out and every time our lungs are empty we must breathe in. As we breathe in, we experience a small degree of calmness, and as we breathe out, we experience a small degree of calmness. We de-



sire calmness and relief of tension and do not like the tension and feeling resulting from the lack of breath. We wish that the calmness would stay longer and the tension disappear more quickly than it normally does. But the tension will not go away as fast as we wish nor will the calmness stay as long as we wish. And again we get agitated or irritated, for we desire the calmness to return and stay longer and the tension to go away quickly and not to return again. Here we see how even a small degree of desire for permanency in an impermanent situation causes pain or unhappiness. Since there is no self-entity to control this situation, we will become more disappointed.

However, if we watch our breathing without desiring calmness and without resenting the tension arising from breathing in and out, and experience only the impermanence, the unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness of our breath, our mind becomes peaceful and calm.

The mind does not stay all the time with the feeling of breath. It goes to sounds, memories, emotions, perceptions, consciousness, and mental formations as well. When we experience these states, we should forget about the feeling of breath and immediately focus our attention on these states—one at a time, not all of them at one time. As they fade away, we let our mind return to the breath which is the home base the mind can return to from quick or long journeys to various states of mind and body. We must remember that all these mental journeys are made within the mind itself.

Every time the mind returns to the breath, it comes back with a deeper insight into impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness. The mind becomes more insightful from the impartial and unbiased watching of these occurrences. The mind gains insight into the fact that this body, these feelings, the various states of consciousness, and numerous mental formations are to be used only for the purpose of gaining

deeper insight into the reality of this body-mind complex.

This excerpt is from *Mindfulness in Plain English* by Venerable Henepola Gunaratana, reprinted with permission from Wisdom Publications, Boston.

I had done walking meditation before, as kinhin on several Zen retreats, and had thought it nothing more than a few minutes of meager relief for my zafu-crippled knees. This was something different, though. Free to follow my own direction and take my own time, I felt as if I had slowly returned to my senses. It was, in some small way, a revelation.

Shortly after I returned from Massachusetts, still softened up from all the sitting and still enthralled by the reclaimed wonder of my own two feet, I stumbled upon an essay by Thoreau that my English Lit. professors had somehow overlooked. It clarified for me what had happened on retreat. One of the last pieces he committed to writing, it has the valedictory air of someone looking toward a place of final rewards, and the urgency of someone wanting to explicate a few important matters for those left behind. The essay is, Thoreau warns, “an extreme statement” and “an emphatic one.” Oddly enough, his subject is walking.

“I have met,” he tells us, “with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks, who had a genius, so to speak, for sauntering; which word is beautifully derived ‘from idle people who roved about the country, in the middle ages, and asked charity, under pretence of going à la sainte terre’—to the holy land.”

Thoreau’s own writerly progress through his argument is, indeed, extreme at times: “We should go forth on the shortest walk, perchance, in the spirit of undying adventure, never to return .... If you are ready to

leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again; if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man; then you are ready for a walk.”

But this extremity hints at the deeper point he’s making—a point as radical, perhaps, as the Buddha’s—and in preaching his “gospel according to this moment,” Thoreau is not very far from preaching the dharma: “So we saunter toward the Holy Land; till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, so warm and serene and golden as on a bank-side in autumn.”

It’s a compelling reminder of not only how to walk but also why.

**John House** is a contributing editor to Tricycle.

4

LIKE A DRAGON  
IN WATER

What can we do when our monkey minds pull us off the cushion?  
Simple, says Sensei Pat Enkyo O'Hara: Just practice.

SENSEI PAT ENKYO O'HARA

Thinking about steadiness in practice reminds me of when I was a little girl and would swim in the great breaking waves of the Pacific coast of Baja California. The surf was ragged, and sometimes treacherous, but for those who were accustomed to its rhythms, it was possible to swim through and around the currents, to bob up from under the fiercest waves. I think a key to this ability was sensing that one was part of the ocean and that to play in it was to let go into the wave, sometimes swimming under, sometimes alongside it. There were days when the ocean was utterly calm and days of wild intensity, and for a child, no matter what, there was that fish-like ease and joy of play.

Perhaps most of us enter meditation practice with the hope of finding that kind of natural joy in our lives, in the hopes of experiencing each moment fully, with the freshness of moment-to-moment awareness. And in the initial stages of our practice, many of us manage to find the quiet space that opens us to our spaciousness and spontaneous nature. Buoyed by this experience, our practice gratifies us and propels us along for a while.

And then the inevitable distraction or doubt or difficulty arises. Whether it is a subtle change in our schedule or a disturbing loss of faith, we lose our footing, drop our practice, and often completely forget for weeks at a time that we even had a meditation practice! And it is so difficult to come back, to actually stop and sit down and practice again.

We know that we should “just do it,” but our ever-subtle and tricky “monkey minds” make that “should” and that “just” infinitely difficult, even interesting, and distracting. Instead of sitting down on our cushion or going to our meditation center, we think and talk and distract ourselves with all the reasons why not to do it. Or we simply “forget” to practice.

Now if the practice is so good for us, why is it so difficult to maintain a steady practice? It may be that the notion that practice is “good for us” is the very impediment—we all know how we can resist what is good for us at the table, at the gym, and on the Internet. This mechanical notion of practice, “if I practice, then I will be (fill in the blank),” leads to discouragement because it is not true that practice inevitably leads to happiness or anything that we can imagine. Our lives, like the ocean, constantly change, and we will naturally face great storms and dreary lulls.

How, then, to put our minds in a space where practice is always there, whether tumultuous or in the doldrums? It requires a completely radical view of practice: practice is not something we do; it is something we are. We are not separate from our practice, and so no matter what, our practice is present. An ocean swimmer is loose and flows with the current and moves through the tide. When tossed upside-down in the surf, unable to discern which way is up and which is down, the natural swimmer just lets go, breathing out, and follows the bubbles to the surface.

And so it can be with our practice. Seeing our practice as our life, we just let go and do it. We just practice a steadiness in our daily meditation. Without expectations of any kind, we just practice, day in and day out, through the high points and the low. “I really doubt this practice is helping me. Okay, still, it is time to sit, right through this doubt.” Or, “Oh, I didn’t sit all week! Okay, right now I’ll sit for twenty minutes.” And each time we come back to our practice, we experience it as more inherent to our life. Maezumi Roshi, based in Los Angeles, would often use the Spanish expression for “little by little” to indicate this patient quality of practice: “Being one with the practice, you are transformed, poco a poco.”

This understanding of our practice is expressed by the great thirteenth-century Japanese Zen teacher Dogen, when he says that our meditation practice “is not step-by-step meditation; it is simply the dharma gate of peace and joy. It is the practice-enlightenment of the Ultimate Way....When you grasp this, you are like a dragon in water, or a tiger in the mountains.”

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5

# EVALUATE YOUR MEDITATION

How to get the most out of your practice

GIL FRONSDAL

After a person has been meditating for some time, it's important that he or she evaluate how the practice is developing. Is it working? Does it need adjustment? Is it the right practice to be doing? Can it be improved? Some of this evaluation can be done on one's own, some with a teacher or with friends.

Taking a step back to assess our meditation shouldn't be seen as a difficult task. We are evaluators by nature. We evaluate all the time, even if subconsciously. We decide what clothes to wear after considering a number of factors, not least of all the weather. An activity as simple as going for a walk requires a variety of considerations: How far will I walk? Does the walk require preparation? Do I need to pace myself if it is a long walk? What is the best route? Which are the best shoes?

In the same way, we can evaluate our practice. This should be done in a balanced way: not too little and not too much. Sometimes we don't evaluate enough—maybe because of complacency, or excessive reliance on faith in the practice, or teachings that downplay the role of intelligent reflection. At other times, we might overevaluate and tie ourselves up

in knots. Overevaluating can undermine our progress, like the farmer who pulls out a corn seedling to see if it's growing yet. Imagine trying to learn to ride a bike while obsessing, "Am I doing this right? How do I look?" We may be looking for approval when we should be looking for balance, or expecting perfection when what is needed is lots of repeated practice.

Below is a useful list that can serve as a guide for evaluating your practice. While no two practitioners are exactly alike, these are general areas you can check that will give you a good idea where you are.

### MOTIVATION

First, ask yourself what your motivation is. Why are you practicing? Meditation practice flourishes when it is supported by clear intention.

There are many answers to this question. Because no one should decide for you what your goals are, it is useful to spend some time reflecting on this. I regularly advise people to discover what their deepest intention is. What do they really want? What is the heart's deepest wish? While some people have worthwhile intentions for their meditation, the practice can have greater value when it is clearly connected to what is most important to us.

At times our intention is well-articulated; at other times it may not be obvious. Chances are you've experienced both of these ways. Sometimes, early on, I intuitively knew I wanted to sit, but I didn't know why. I just knew there was a strong pull towards practice. At other times, the reason was clear: I knew I suffered and that I wanted to be free of my suffering. Sometimes I was aware of conventional suffering; sometimes, although free of conventional suffering, I had a clear insight that there was a deep, inner dissatisfaction, that suffering was at the core of the way my mind worked. I wanted to somehow find it, touch it, and understand



it. Meditation was the only route I knew to reach this core, and I was highly motivated to do so.

Our motivation can be to awaken and cultivate beautiful qualities of the heart and mind—love, peace, courage, compassion, insight, understanding, the pursuit of the truth and liberation. Developing these qualities does not need to be for oneself. Sometimes my primary motivation to practice has been not for my own sake but for other people. In fact, I believe that if you do it only for yourself, you are unlikely to sustain your motivation over many years. A significant way to fuel meditation practice is to do it with the wish that it will somehow benefit others as well as yourself.

There are long-term and short-term motivations. Experiences of realization may be worthy long-term goals, but in the short term it can be useful to have modest aims such as cultivating small but noticeable improvements in concentration, nondistractedness, compassion, or patience, as well as small, immediate movements toward letting go and experiencing freedom. I have found there is a beautiful way in which practicing with immediate, realistic goals allows for a steady maturing into some of the more developed areas of meditation practice.

It's also important to know if your aspiration is appropriate for yourself given your present life situation. If for reasons of time, opportunities, abilities, or disposition you are not suited for the goals you have set for yourself, the primary result will be frustration, a state that is counterproductive to a practice meant to increase freedom from suffering. While it can be important to allow for grand aspirations – there is no need to be afraid of our heart's deepest wish – it is important to consider which steps are realistic. For example, if our body carries a lot of tension, it may be important first to focus meditation on deep physical relaxation. Or, if our minds are easily distracted, it might be helpful

to cultivate mental discipline before hoping for enlightenment.

### UNDERSTAND YOURSELF

There's always more room for motivation, but does your aspiration match who you are? You can read a book feeling convinced that you should do A, B, and C, but it may not suit your life at this time. Or maybe what your teacher is telling you is not a fit. For instance, if we should be focusing on our personal ethics, it may not be appropriate to spend a lot of time with a teaching that emphasizes ultimate liberation.

Do you know how you learn best? Some people learn best by reading, others by listening, others by watching, and others by doing. Some people do best when there is discipline and structure. Others learn best through playfulness, self-direction, or intuitive experimentation. Some people find reading and studying helpful; others may not. Extroverts might find it helpful to discuss their meditation with friends; introverts may find they work best when they have quiet time for personal reflection. By knowing yourself in these ways, it may be possible to find an approach to meditation that suits you. Since it is important not to tailor a meditation practice around personal preferences and attachments, it can be useful to ask a meditation teacher or another meditation practitioner for feedback about your approach to the practice.

### UNDERSTANDING THE INSTRUCTIONS

You may be strongly motivated but not know how to do the practice. I meet plenty of meditators who are vague about what they are actually doing in meditation beyond relaxing and trying to have some focus. Some people know the basic instruction but not much about how to practice with the difficulties that may occur while attempting to act on that instruction. Some people who do mindfulness meditation may

know how to be mindful of their breath or their body sensations but have little understanding about how to be mindful of emotions or mental states. In insight meditation there are whole series of instructions for working with the breath, body, emotions, thoughts (quality of mind), and intentions, as well as for walking meditation and mindful speaking. It is useful to know them all.

Do you understand what the relationship is between meditation practice and your daily life? Hopefully, for Buddhists, one's whole life is one's practice. Do you know how to live your daily life so that it supports your meditation? And do you know how to meditate so that it benefits your daily life? The poet Gary Snyder wrote:

All of us are apprenticed to the same teacher that the religious institutions originally worked with: reality. Reality insight says, "Master the 24 hours, do it well, without self-pity." It is as hard to get the children herded into the carpool and down the road to the bus as it is to chant sutras in the Buddha hall on a cold morning. One move is not better than the other; each can be quite boring, and they both have the virtuous quality of repetition. Repetition and ritual and their good results come in many forms: changing the oil filter, wiping noses, going to meetings, picking up around the house, washing dishes, checking the dipstick. Don't let yourself think these are distracting you from your more serious pursuits. Such a round of chores is not a set of difficulties we hope to escape from so that we may do our practice, which will put us on the path. It is our path.

You might understand the instructions but not know how to do the practice. For example, if your practice is to follow your breath, do you know how to do it? If it is done with striving, expectation, hesitation, or laziness, meditation probably won't unfold well. One might not know what specifically to focus on when concentrating on the breath, so the

mind never settles into concentration.

One's attitude toward practice is very important. Is there adequate patience, equanimity, kindness, energy, and discipline? Do you understand the balance between having a goal in practice and at the same being present without being preoccupied with the goal?

### BALANCE

Is your life balanced enough to support a regular and useful meditation practice? It can be counterproductive to add meditation to a life already packed with too many activities. Do you have a healthy balance between work and time off? Is there an appropriate balance between time with others and time alone? Do you get enough exercise so that a good sense of vitality supports your practice? Do you get enough sleep to stay awake during meditation? Some people need sleep more than meditation.

A number of factors need to come into balance during meditation itself. There is the balance between faith and wisdom or confidence and understanding. There is the balance between energy and concentration. Some classic teachings stress the importance of balancing the quieting forces of calm, concentration, and equanimity with the activating forces of investigation, effort, and joy.

The balance between the body and the mind are important. Ideally, meditation practice engages both. One of the very useful things to cultivate in meditation is a balanced meditation posture that allows for a dynamic interplay of physical relaxation with physical alertness or uprightness. It is possible to cultivate a body that is both soft and strong. It is lot easier to work with the mind in meditation if the body has been included from the start.

## OBSTACLES

What are your obstacles in meditation practice? Where are the attachments? Where do you get stuck? Are there any regular patterns to the challenges you have in meditation?

One of the important ways to sharpen your meditation practice is to understand the difficulties in meditation. Among the many challenges are obsessive thinking, desires, aversions, sluggishness, restlessness, psychological or emotional issues, fear of altered states, boredom, complacency, and excessive striving. Attachment to pleasure or resistance to discomfort may also interfere.

Unethical or unskillful behavior can also be a significant obstacle to deeper states of meditation. Here's a story that points to this idea:

A few years ago, at an alcohol treatment center in the suburbs of Chicago, staff members reported an intriguing discovery. Many of the counselors lived at some distance from the facility, each day commuting via a tollroad. Then one day the state of Illinois instituted an honor system in the toll collection booths in the area. No attendant, no barrier gate, just a basket into which motorists were expected to toss their coins. Staff at the treatment center made observations that soon added up to an axiom: counselors who don't throw their money in, their patients don't get well. As one counselor phrased it, "How can you instill honesty in a program if you're not honest yourself? Honesty is indivisible."

Another interesting thing to look at is how much self is involved when you practice. Self-judgment, self-criticism, self-image, self-definition are among the forms of self-concern that when used excessively undermine meditation practice. All meditation practices require that one relax self-preoccupation. Just like being too tense to ride a bike, when people are too concerned with themselves it can be very difficult for the mind to be soft enough to settle into meditation.

Every meditator has challenges. Rather than taking the obstacles as problems or as unfortunate distractions, a more useful attitude is to patiently and contentedly learn the skills and insights that can transform them into stepping stones along the path of practice. Every meditation tradition has its own approach to working with meditation obstacles. When one learns to recognize one's own obstacles then one can ask a meditation teacher what her or his approach is.

### INSIGHT

An important part of practice is appreciating the insights that come with it. It's not just a matter of becoming calm, but also understanding how your mind works, how your heart works, and what the causes and conditions of suffering and liberation are. As you look more deeply, can you see how you create a sense of self?

We often take the self for granted. But Buddhist practice shows us that much of what you think of as self is a construct, an activity shaped moment by moment. If you see this creative aspect, you'll gain an insight that is freeing.

There's also insight into beautiful states of mind: how compassion works and its value; lovingkindness and how to cultivate it. Insights into these states help to cultivate and strengthen them. One of the purposes in meeting with a teacher is not to discuss your difficulties but to discuss your understandings and insights. "This is the understanding I've come to. What do you think of that?"

The most important insight is to understand how clinging works—the nature of grasping and clinging in all its gross and subtle forms. All of Buddhism will open up for you if you understand the nature of clinging, what you cling to, and how to let go.

### UNDERSTANDING THE BENEFITS OF PRACTICE

Sooner or later our practice brings benefits. Sometimes you have to be patient; sometimes, the benefits are immediate. Ideally, you see how even a single moment of meditation has immediate benefits. At the same time, I hope practitioners have some sense of how it can lead to deeper possibilities of liberation.

Over time, meditation should bring some clear benefits such as greater compassion, joy, ease, and self-understanding. Some people discover greater capacities for courage and resolve. Others feel increased appreciation and gratitude. And hopefully, one finds increased experiences of freedom. If after a couple years of regular meditation practice one doesn't experience any of these benefits, it is important to reevaluate what one is doing. Perhaps the criteria given above could help to discover some way that the meditation can be improved. Or perhaps it is time to discuss one's meditation practice with a good teacher. However, sooner or later I hope that all meditators can become their own teachers. Learning to evaluate one's own practice wisely is an important step toward such independence.

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6

# UNLEARNING MEDITATION

What to Do When the Instructions Get In the Way

JASON SIFF

Unlearning meditation is positive. The “un” in “unlearning meditation” is sometimes taken negatively as criticism of the various meditation practices that are currently being taught. I have had to counter that criticism with a clarification of my intention of teaching unlearning meditation: this is about seeing into the habits of mind that create obstacles and impasses. People practicing unlearning meditation have permission to continue doing the meditation practices they have been doing, though they are asked to reflect back on their experience of doing those practices and “learn” about how they have been doing them. The unlearning comes about through the learning of what has not been beneficial in their meditation practice. Seeing that their meditation practice has been dominated by forceful means, adherence to rules and techniques, or strategies to exclude or avoid certain states of mind, can lead to a questioning of those methods and to disentangling from their hold.

How can anyone unlearn a meditation practice without becoming aware of what he has learned as that meditation practice? When people try to adopt a meditation practice without unlearning the previous practice first, all they really do is substitute one practice for another. The



same habits of mind that have shown up as obstacles and impasses in the previous practice will most likely emerge in the new one. That is because these habits of mind are ingrained and inform most of an individual's undertakings, not just meditation. At this level, unlearning meditation is using meditation as a tool to see into what sustains many of one's unsatisfactory ways of being.

In unlearning meditation the meditator develops positive qualities, though not in a linear, directed fashion. I have already mentioned greater awareness of, and discernment into, the existing habits of mind found in their meditation practice. But there are other equally important beneficial qualities that are touched upon and cultivated through unlearning meditation. A very noticeable quality at the beginning of this practice is that of gentleness, of kindness to one's self and others. This quality is supported by a meditation practice that allows the meditator's attention to go to anything that draws his attention—by surrendering control over where the attention goes in meditation, a meditator can learn to meet each experience in a softer, kinder manner. And gentleness is most effective when someone is not gentle, for by being kind to one's harshness and aggression, the hard edge can soften and become gentler.

When meditators have unlearned many of the strong habits of mind that have created obstacles and impasses in their meditation practice, they might find their meditation practice moving less in the direction of unlearning old meditation practices and more in the direction of being able to sit with what comes up in meditation and trusting in their own meditative process. This may sound like a minor development compared to the notions of “enlightenment” that occupy the popular imagination. But it isn't a small thing in one's life. For some people it is a revolution in their ways of seeing, being, or doing. It may show up as a feeling of relief, of freedom, of finding a path or it may be a connection with their

inner worlds in meditation that is vital, focused, and creative. While for others it may be all of these things, things I haven't mentioned, or none of the above. For with unlearning meditation there are no promised results—there is what you experience from having undertaken it.

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7

# MEDITATION IN MOTION

How to be present in your body

JILL SATTERFIELD

Meditation in Motion is a way of practicing being present by being in our body, wherever it is and whatever it is doing. When we are exactly where our body is, we are in the present moment. The body isn't in the past or future, it's not conceptual or imagined; it's part of nature and contains all of nature's elements. It houses our awareness, is shaped by our stories, thoughts, and emotions, and holds our memories within its tissues. The body is our house—and how we live in it and where we occupy it are uniquely ours, as well as being part of the common human experience. The body is a treasure trove and an exquisite vehicle for our practice of waking up and being with what is.

The body senses thoughts and emotions, and it displays this psychic knowing in sensations before our mind actually cognizes them. So being in tune with our bodies is a way to be intimately involved in having choice. Noticing a small vibration, a contraction, or a tightening of the breath all can signal that something is about to be announced, and if not heeded it might be announced in a rather big way. (Think of the rumblings of the ground before the eruption of a volcano.) As we inhabit our body with increasing sensitivity, we learn its unspoken language and patterns, which gives us tremendous freedom to make choices. The prac-

tice of cutting thoughts and dispersing negative repetitive patterns can be simplified by attending to the patterns in the body first, before they begin to be spun around in the mind.

Formal meditation practice is the ground of training that influences all we do at other times. As an outgrowth of the concentrative awareness developed by our meditation practice, there is a natural seeping of wakefulness into our daily life. We begin to notice what we're doing while we are seated, walking, lying down, or assuming some sort of posture.

But our mind training doesn't have to stop when we are not in a seated meditation posture, because most of the time we are in some sort of posture without actually naming it as such. For instance, sitting at the desk and craning our neck forward toward the computer is a posture, albeit not one of very good alignment. If we're standing in front of a crowd and giving a talk, we are in a posture, depending on how confident we feel, and if we simply walk through a crowd of people we don't know, our body mirrors our self-consciousness by assuming some sort of posture called *the way we carry ourselves*. A posture is a posture whether we give it a name, practice it in a class, or abide in it unconsciously.

So how are we occupying the posture we are in? By simply locating our breath at any given moment, we begin to develop an intimate relationship with our body, its posture or shape, and the way it is reflecting our thoughts and emotions. In the Buddha's discourse on the four foundations of mindfulness (*Satipatthana Sutta*), he asks the monks to notice the breath, whether it be short or long, and he says: "He trains himself, 'I will breathe in sensitive to the entire (breath) body.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out sensitive to the entire (breath) body.'" We can notice what our breath is doing and, just as importantly, how it is reacting to what is going on both internally and externally, especially if we are sensitive to the entire body.

In many traditions consciousness and breath are considered to be two wings of a bird—I like to think of breath and consciousness as travel partners. For instance, when we are asked to breathe into an area of the body, what are we actually doing? Certainly we aren't literally breathing into our hands, for example, but we are beckoning our consciousness into our hands, or wherever we might choose to bring it. Consciousness, breath, *chi*, *prana*, energy—these are all words pointing toward the same thing. What's important is primarily the experience of it, then the naming of it in order to communicate about it with others. What we notice when we metaphorically breathe into an area of our body is that we *feel* something. That something may be difficult to describe, as many esoteric things are, but it is an undeniable experience.

Mindfulness of breath can also organically lead us to be mindful of when we are not breathing. We may also recognize the conditions of the body around the area where we sense a contraction or holding of breath, bringing our mind and heart together to be with sensations—pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. When awareness becomes quite keen, we notice our patterns of moving breath away from discomfort in the body. This refined awareness can eventually translate into knowing our patterns of holding, tightening, and controlling breath when we are in emotional discomfort. It's easier to be aware of breath related to physical discomfort than it is to be aware of breath associated with emotional discomfort, so we can train the mind to stay with what is in the body first, and then take it up a notch to be aware of breath and body when experiencing emotional difficulties. This is not a conceptual practice; it is experiential, personal, and intimate.

Eventually we might choose to follow breath into many areas of the body as a continuation of training, to see how the mind and breath are intimately connected, and how they actively mirror each other both

playfully and protectively. As we “see” how the breath and mind are connected, we begin to have the ability to move our awareness around our body, locating areas of emotional blocks and areas of unconsciousness.

After intentionally traversing our inner landscape with breath and mind, we can prescribe a practice that might hold the most treasure for us at any given moment. By witnessing how we are, in our body, heart, and mind, we become armed with the necessary information needed to respond thoughtfully and with care. There are as many types of practice as there are mind, body, and heart states: whether we are seated, walking, or in a purposeful posture, we have the means to address ourselves with real kindness. This intention to pay attention leads us to skillful action—in our own inner and more private world and in the shared world at large. Ultimately, taking care—by taking time to be with what is—will provide a key to being more spacious and at ease, able to be present with whatever our lives hold for us for as long as we have life, in this body, right now.

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8

SOMETHING FROM  
NOTHING

A teacher of Buddhism reveals how the instruction “Do nothing” was the most challenging and freeing instruction of all.

KEN MCLEOD

What is it like to do nothing? I mean, really do nothing, nothing at all—no recalling what has happened, no imagining what might happen, no reflecting on what is happening, no analyzing or explaining or controlling what you experience. Nothing!

Why would you even try? We struggle in life because of a tenacious habit of wanting life to be different from what it is: The room you are in is too warm, you don’t like your job, or your partner isn’t quite the person of your dreams. You adjust the thermostat, get a new job, or tell your partner what you need. Now it’s too cool, you are earning less money, or your partner has found some flaws in you. The more we try to make life conform to our desires, the more we struggle, and the more we suffer. The only way out of this vicious cycle is to accept what arises, completely: in other words, do nothing.

Paradoxically, such radical acceptance opens a way of living that we could hardly have imagined.

Years ago, I attended a three-week retreat in Colorado. I had done

many retreats, including seven years in France during which I had no communication with the outside world. There the days were full. We started meditation sessions well before sunrise and ended late in the evening. We had daily and weekly rituals and much preparatory work and cleanup. We practiced different meditation methods, with set periods for practice, set periods for study, and a set number of days on each method. With so much to do and to learn, there was no free time.

This retreat was different. The only meditation instruction was “Do nothing.” “That’s it?” I thought. “I came here to do nothing for three weeks?” We met for meals, one teaching session in the morning, and one group practice session in the evening. We had a meditation interview every few days. The rest of the time was our own. Email, cell phone, text messages, all the usual means of communication weren’t available. With no practices to learn, no commentaries to study, no preparations for rituals, I had quite literally nothing to do except sit, lie down, or go for a walk.

My cabin was on a hillside that looked over a magnificent view of tree-covered hills, with a range of mountains just visible on the horizon. The silence was highlighted by the songs of birds, the wind in the trees, rain and thunderstorms, and the grunts, scuffles, or calls of animals in the dark. Every day the sun rose, crossed the sky, and set, with the moon and stars dancing in the night.

“What a relief,” I thought, “plenty of time to rest and practice.” But I soon found that doing absolutely nothing, not even entertaining myself, wasn’t so easy.

Ajahn Chah, one of the great Thai teachers of the 20th century, gave the following practice instruction:

*Put a chair in the middle of a room.*



*Sit in the chair.*

*See who comes to visit.*

One has to be careful with such instructions. I once gave this to a woman who came to see me and was surprised to learn that she put a chair in the center of her living room, sat in it, and waited for people to visit. When nobody knocked on her door, she decided that meditation wasn't for her. Ajahn Chah was, of course, speaking poetically. Nevertheless, in some sense, all of us are like this woman, waiting for something to happen.

No shortage of visitors for me! Relief, peace, a deep sense of relaxation, joy, and happiness all paid their respects. "Good," I thought. "All this will deepen, and wisdom or insight will come." After all, I had read in many texts that as the mind rests, it naturally becomes clear.

Instead, the visitors continued, but with a difference. The more deeply I relaxed, the more I became aware of stuff inside me, stuff stored in rusting boxes in mildewed basements. Along came memories, pleasant and unpleasant, stories about my life, old desires, boredom, and a sense of futility. I kept pushing these visitors away, or analyzing them, trying to understand them so I could be free of them. I was back in the old struggle, trying to control my experience. The visitors became more disturbing, more demanding of attention. Some harbored hatred and a desire for revenge. Others cried with unfulfilled longing and yearning. Still others drugged me into a dull lethargy. They had no awareness of the beauty and peace around me. I began to lose hope that I would achieve anything in this retreat.

Hope is the one quality left in Pandora's box, and it is not clear whether it is a blessing or a curse. T. S. Eliot, in *Four Quartets*, writes:

*I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope  
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love  
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith  
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.*

Wait without hope? The prospect seemed unimaginable. A chill crept down my spine, and I found myself slipping into hope's counterpart, fear. Was I going to sit on the side of this mountain and have nothing to show for it? A consistent theme in the many texts I had read and translated was "No hope, no fear." I had never thought of applying that instruction to my concern about achievement.

For most of us, the demands of each day keep us busy. Hope and fear come as reactions to specific situations—rumors about possible promotions or layoffs, our child's first competition or performance, illness in a parent, and so on. The deeper hopes and fears remain, untended, forgotten perhaps, but there all the same. Again, from *Four Quartets*:

*And the ragged rock in the restless waters,  
Waves wash over it, fogs conceal it;  
On a halcyon day it is merely a monument,  
In navigable weather it is always a seamark  
To lay a course by: but in the sombre season  
Or the sudden fury, is what it always was.*

One of my ragged rocks was hope for achievement. I feared an acute disappointment if, at the end of the retreat, all I had done was sit on a mountain and contemplate my navel. Slowly, I realized that to do nothing meant I had to let go of deeply cherished beliefs that I was just beginning to sense, the belief, for instance, that I had to achieve something.

Most of us are quite happy to do nothing for a few minutes, perhaps an hour or two, or, if we have had a particularly demanding stretch, for a day or two, a few days at the most. But to do nothing, to produce nothing, to achieve nothing for a month, a year, six years or more, is quite a different kettle of fish.

I thought of my own teacher, who had spent years in mountain retreats in Tibet. As he had told me himself, he would quite happily have stayed in the mountains, but his teacher had demanded (in the strongest terms possible) that he return to the monastery and teach training retreats. What was it like, I wondered, to be at peace with doing nothing day after day, month after month, year after year?

Then I thought about Longchenpa, the 14th-century teacher, whose text was the basis for this retreat. He had spent fourteen years in a cave near Lhasa. What had it been like for him to sit day after day doing nothing?

The depth to which these teachers, and many others like them, had let go of any concern with success or failure was like a knife in my heart. Here I was, practicing for a mere three weeks, worrying about whether I was going to achieve anything. Only now did I appreciate what letting go of hope, ambition, or achievement meant, and I found myself feeling a quite different kind of respect and appreciation for these teachers.

The classical texts have relatively little to say about the emotional turmoil that intensive practice often uncovers. Here too, these lines from Eliot apply, even though he was writing about old age:

*...the rending pain of re-enactment*

*Of all that you have done, and been; the shame*

*Of motives late revealed, and the awareness*

*Of things ill done and done to others' harm*

*Which once you took for exercise of virtue.  
Then fools' approval stings, and honour stains.  
From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit  
Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire  
Where you must move in measure, like a dancer.*

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From the beginning of the retreat, space surrounded and permeated my experience, but I had been unable to relate to it. I had been completely caught up in trying to control my experience. Now I stopped ignoring it and just stared into space. My relationship with the emotional turmoil changed, subtly.

Space, I realized, has many dimensions. In front of me was the vast space of the sky. It didn't depend on anything, and nothing depended on it. I watched the play of light and colors as the day passed. When the sun set and the sky lit up with shades of rose and yellow and blue, the space that let me see the sunset didn't take on any color, yet it was not something apart. At night, it became an empty blackness, punctuated by a thousand points of light, but the panorama of stars was not separate from space. Likewise, thoughts, feelings, and sensations are not different from the space that is mind.

Silence is another kind of space. When everything is quiet and suddenly there is a noise, we ordinarily say the silence was shattered. But it's more accurate to say that we forget the silence and listen only to the sound. I started to listen to the silence, around me and inside me.

Time is another dimension. Kant once said that time is the medium in which we perceive thoughts, just as space is the medium in which we perceive objects. Hopes and fears, projections into the future, regrets and joys are all thoughts that come and go in time. Because there was nothing to do with any of them, I began to experience them as comings

and goings, like the mists that rose from the ground in the early morning, only to vanish as the day progressed. Some days, what arose was more of a thunderstorm, but, like the thunderstorms in the mountains, the turmoil came and went on its own, leaving the space as it was before and the ground and trees refreshed and rich with life.

I became aware of another dimension, an infinite internal space that had to do with my ability to experience my body. This dimension had more the quality of depth: it seemed to go down forever. There was no bottom. There was no me there. It was like looking into a bottomless abyss, except that sometimes I became the abyss. Years later, when I was discussing this experience with an aging teacher, he used the Tibetan phrase *zhi me tsa tral*, or “No ground, no root.”

*Two young boys were playing together. One asked the other, “We stand on the ground and the ground holds us up. What does the ground stand on?” “Oh, my father explained that to me,” the second boy said. “The ground is supported by four giant elephants.” “What do the elephants stand on, then?” “They stand on the shell of a huge turtle.” “What does the turtle stand on?” The second boy thought for a long time and then said, “I think it’s turtles all the way down.”*

Like the woman in the chair who waited for someone to knock on her door, I had been waiting for something to happen, some experience or insight that would make sense of everything, put all the ghosts to rest and silence the “thousand voices in the night.” For decades, I had held the belief deeply embedded in our culture: Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

“You have to be kidding,” I thought. “I have to let go of belief in truth?” Slowly, it was becoming clear to me that there is no truth out there—or in there, for that matter. There is only the way we experience things. To let go of this belief required a very different effort. Again,

from Eliot:

*Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:  
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the  
dancing.*

Here is where faith and devotion come into the picture. Devotion, whether to a tradition, a practice, a teacher, or an ideal, is the fuel for faith. I had practiced with devotion before, in the form of guru yoga, or union with the teacher. It's a powerful practice, greatly valued in the Tibetan tradition, where there are numerous prayers with titles such as "Devotion Pierces the Heart." The teacher at this retreat exemplified this. He felt such devotion for his own teacher that he could not talk about him without crying.

Faith and devotion do not come easily to me. Now, here, at this retreat, I felt a different kind of devotion for my teachers, and with that understood that there was nothing to do but to experience whatever came through the door.

We have a choice between two very different ways to meet what arises in experience.

The first is to rely on explanation. We interpret our experiences in life according to a set of deeply held assumptions. We may or may not be conscious of the assumptions, but they are there. Even when we explore our experience, we are usually looking for evidence that supports or confirms them. These assumptions are never questioned. They are taken as fundamental. A self-reinforcing dynamic develops that results in a closed system in which everything is explained, the mystery of life is dismissed, new ideas, perspectives, or approaches to life cannot enter and certain questions can never be asked. This I call belief.

The other way is to open and be willing to receive, not control, whatever arises—that is, not only allow but embrace every sensation, feeling, and thought, everything we experience. In this approach, we allow our experience to challenge our assumptions. Here, there are no fundamental or eternal truths, and some things cannot be explained; they can only be experienced. This willingness to open to whatever arises internally or externally I call faith.

*This being human is a guest house.*

*Every morning a new arrival.*

*A joy, a depression, a meanness,*

*some momentary awareness comes*

*as an unexpected visitor.*

*Welcome and entertain them all!*

—Rumi

Early in the retreat, when difficult experiences arose, I would analyze them, trying to understand what had happened and why. I thought this would help to resolve them and then I wouldn't have to be bothered by them. Sometimes I would be completely swallowed by emotions and sensations and only come to my senses a few minutes—or a few hours—later. Frequently, I just couldn't face what was arising. I shut it down, or went for a walk. In short, if what arose didn't fit my picture of what I wanted or needed, I would start doing something.

Gradually, I learned just to stare into space, in any of its dimensions—the sky, the silence, time, or the infinite depth in my own body. I

recognized that the only way I could do nothing was, well, to do nothing. I had to receive whatever arose, experience it, and not do anything with it. I needed faith to experience powerful feelings of loneliness, worthlessness, despair, or shame, because I often felt I would die in the process. I recalled how many times my teacher had said this, albeit in different words: “Rest in just recognizing.” But no one had said that “just recognizing” might lead to pain so intense that I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy. And I came to appreciate that all my efforts in previous practice had built the capacity so that I could now rest and just recognize.

When I did open to everything, there was no opposition— there was no enemy. I didn’t have to struggle with experience. At the same time, there was no truth, no state of perfection, no ideal, no final achievement. Years later, in a conversation I had with another teacher about this experience, he said, “Don’t worry about truth. Just develop devotion so strongly that thinking stops, and rest right there.”

Any concept of higher truth creates hierarchy, and with that, authority, boundaries, dualism, and opposition. What various religious traditions, including Buddhism, call truth is better described as a way of experiencing things. Such phrases as “All experience is empty” or “Everything is an illusion” are better viewed as descriptions of experiences: stories, in effect, not statements about reality.

What, then, do we make of all the teachings of various spiritual traditions and other forms of human knowledge? For me, God, karma, rebirth, emptiness, brahman, atman, heaven, hell, all of these are stories that people use to understand, explain, or give direction to their lives. The same holds for scientific views, astronomy, biology, quantum mechanics, or neurology. If we wish to be free of suffering, to be free of struggle, then the way to look at experience is to know “There is no enemy” and stop opposing what arises in experience. Is it difficult and



challenging? Yes, but it's possible. And the way to learn to do that is to simply do nothing.

“How strange!” I thought, as the retreat came to a close, “Who would have thought you could find a way of freedom simply by doing nothing?”

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9

## WHAT YOU'RE MADE OF

Bodhipaksa guides us through the Buddha's powerful Six Element practice to equanimity, pure and bright.

BODHIPAKSA

I first learned the reflection on the Six Elements thirteen years ago, on a four-month retreat in the mountains of southern Spain. It was my first introduction to insight meditation, and although at times since then the practice has given rise to uncomfortable experiences, it has more often brought a sense of lightness, freedom, and expansiveness as well as a greater sense of connectedness to the world.

The Six Element practice—a profound contemplation on interconnectedness, impermanence, and insubstantiality—is one of the most significant insight practices in the Pali canon. The Buddha recommended it as a way of “not neglecting wisdom,” and taught it as a technique for developing equanimity and cultivating meditative absorption, or *jhana*. In the Six Element practice, we contemplate in turn earth, water, fire, air, space, and consciousness, noting how each element is an ever-changing process rather than a static thing.

One of the most striking features of this practice is the thorough way in which it deconstructs our experience. By contemplating every aspect of our physical and mental being, we begin to understand its true nature. In classic insight meditation, we notice the impermanence and

insubstantiality of sensations, thoughts, and feelings. We do that in this practice, too, but we also develop a literally visceral sense of the body's impermanence and insubstantiality by contemplating the various processes by which its elements come into being and pass away. The Six Element practice is highly analytical, but it's also intensely poetic, bringing us into contact with the reality of our interconnectedness with the world. It is experiential, focusing on our present-moment experience, and it is imaginative, encouraging us to envision ourselves as part of a wider process of change and flow.

This isn't a meditation I do every day, although it frequently becomes the cornerstone of my practice while I'm on retreat. It's not a practice that I teach to complete beginners, as I believe that the Six Element practice needs both a reasonable grounding in tranquility practice (*samatha*) and a healthy sense of emotional positivity. Most often I teach it on retreat, to students who have at least a few months of solid practice behind them.

Simply reading this article will give you no more than a faint flavor of the practice. If you want to experience it more strongly, read through it again, pausing frequently and giving yourself time to turn the words into felt experiences. I do most of my meditation, including this practice, with my eyes closed. You may wish to do the same. As with any sitting practice, we need to find a posture that's comfortable yet dignified, and that allows the chest to be open so that we can remain alert and focused.

Usually I spend a few minutes cultivating lovingkindness (*metta*) before launching into the practice. I'll contact my heart, see how I'm feeling, and encourage a sense of acceptance for whatever emotions happen to be present at that time. Then I'll wish myself well by repeating phrases such as "May I be well. May I be happy. May I be at peace," before taking that well-wishing into the world, sensing that my loving-

kindness is radiating outward. Although the Six Element practice is often affirming, it can also be challenging, and it's best to be in at least a minimally positive state of mind before we start reflecting in depth on our own impermanence.

## EARTH

First we call to mind the earth element within ourselves. The earth element is everything solid and resistant, everything that gives us form. Notice first of all those aspects of the body that you can directly experience: the physical presence and weight of the body, the feeling of the sitting bones pressing into the cushion or bench, the hands resting on the lap, the knees on the floor, the teeth. Simply notice these experiences of solidity.

Besides noticing our immediate sensations, we enter into an imaginative exploration of the whole of the body. Even though we can't experience all these objects directly, in sutta 140 of the *Majjhima Nikaya* the Buddha encourages his students to call to mind the flesh, sinews, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, and every other conceivable solid matter in the body, including the feces in our intestines. Rather than starting trains of thought about the various organs of the body, discursively talking to ourselves about our anatomy, we can think more in terms of visualizing the organs, or simply knowing that they are there and that they're composed of solid matter..

Having reflected on the earth element within, we now call to mind the earth element externally—everything that is solid and resistant outside of ourselves—starting with the floor upon which we sit, then expanding outward to recall buildings, vehicles, roads, mountains, rocks, pebbles, soil, the bodies of other beings, trees, wild plants, and crops growing in fields. Again, we don't aim to start trains of thought, but

simply aim to evoke memories in the form of sensory impressions, letting images, sounds, and tactile sensations come into consciousness, and mindfully experiencing them.

Then we reflect that everything solid within the body and everything solid externally is the same earth element. There's really no "me" earth element or "other" earth element—it's all the same stuff. We normally think of our form, our body, as being us, as being ourselves, but here we recollect how everything of the earth element that is within us comes from outside and returns to the outside.

Being of a scientific bent—and I think the Buddha was, too—I often call to mind the process of conception. My body started with the creation of one cell from the fusion of a sperm and an egg from my parents, who are not me. The fertilized ovum divided and grew into an embryo as it absorbed nutrients from the world outside—from my mother's bloodstream, but ultimately from the plants and animals she ate. Those foodstuffs weren't me, either. And from that point on in my life, every molecule that has contributed to the earth element in this body similarly has come from outside. We can visualize the flow of the earth element from fields and soil into the body, and know that there's not a single molecule of solid matter within this body that is self-originated. It's all borrowed.

And we have to give it back. In fact, we are giving it back, every moment of our lives. The earth element within us is returning to the outside world, right now. We shed hairs and skin cells, and we go to the bathroom and defecate. We visualize all this in the practice. Solid matter is combusting within the body and being exhaled. Even our bones, which we may think of as the most solid and enduring part of the body, are involved in a continuous process of dissolving and rebuilding. There are cells in your body that have no other function than to dissolve the

surrounding bone, while other cells are involved in building it back up again. Even your bones are processes rather than things.

So the earth element within is borrowed, and it's always returning to the outside world, flowing through us like a river. And as we recollect the earth element flowing in this way, we can reflect: "This is not me, not mine, I am not this." There's not even any question of "letting go." The earth element never was "us." It never was "ours." We never were holding on to it, because how can we cling to something that's flowing?

The earth element provides the paradigm for the remaining physical elements, which are all treated in the same way—recollecting the element within us, recollecting the element outside of us, reflecting that everything that is "us" is really just borrowed from the outside world and constantly returning to it, and finally noting, as we contemplate the element flowing through us that this is not me, not mine, that I am not this.

## WATER

We started with the grossest element, and we will progress through the rest—water, fire, air, space, and consciousness—in order of increasing subtlety. So now we call to mind the water element within the body—that which is liquid. Starting with those manifestations that we can directly experience, we feel saliva in the mouth, mucus, the pulse of the blood, sweat, the feeling of moisture in the outbreath, the pressure of urine in the bladder. Then we move on to those things we can only experience more imaginatively: lymph, fat, synovial fluid in the joints, cerebrospinal fluid, and all the liquid that permeates and surrounds every cell in the body. Even though you can't experience these things directly, you can know they're there.

Then we contemplate the water element outside of ourselves: calling

to mind the oceans and rivers and streams, the water that permeates the soil, the rain and clouds, the water inside plants and animals. We see, hear, and feel these things as we recall our experience of them. Then we recognize that all of the water within the body, which we think of as us, and ours, as ourselves, is in reality simply borrowed for a while from the outside world, that it's quite literally flowing through us, and that we don't own it. There is only one water element—there's no “me” water and there's no “other” water. And so we reflect: “This is not me. This is not mine. I am not this.”

## FIRE

The Buddha defined the fire element as “that by which one is warmed, ages, and is consumed, and that by which what is eaten . . . gets completely digested.” In other words, the fire element within is metabolism. It's our energy. So sitting in meditation, we can experience the heat of the body, feeling the cooler air we inhale contrast with the warmth of the air as it leaves the body, feeling the heart pumping, and calling to mind the myriad chemical combustions taking place at the cellular level, sparks of electricity in the muscles, nerves, and brain. And knowing that all of this energy is borrowed from the fire element outside of us..

The fire element outside is the raw physical energy in the universe, from the nuclear fusion in the sun to the warmth of a cup of coffee, from the molten core of our planet to the chemical energy stored in our food as fat, sugars, and proteins. We feed the body by taking in the sun's energy stored in plants or flesh. We warm ourselves in the rays of the sun, either directly or through burning fossil fuels that grew in the sunlight of ages past. And we have to keep replenishing the body's fuel, because the fire element is forever leaving: radiating from our skin, wafting away on our exhaled air, lost in the warmth of our feces and urine. And so the

fire element, like earth and water, simply flows through us, unstoppable. We observe and reflect on this. And as we observe the energy within the body, we can be aware that it's actually another river—a river of energy—passing through this form, that it's really not ours at all. “This is not me. This is not mine. I am not this.”

## AIR

As soon as we call to mind the air element within the body—the air in our lungs and other body cavities, even the gases dissolved in our blood—we're immediately aware of the breathing, aware that air is flowing rhythmically in and out of the body. So almost simultaneously we recall the air element outside of us—the air surrounding us and touching the skin in this very moment, the winds and clouds and breezes that we hear and see moving branches and grasses. We're taking in and giving out this element right now. Right now, the air element is entering and leaving the body. Right now, air is entering, oxygen is dissolving in the bloodstream, being taken to cells to provide energy, and carbon dioxide is being exhaled.

Where's the boundary between inner air and outer air? There is only one air element, and what's within us is simply borrowed for a few moments. We can't hold on to the air element any more than we can hold on to any of the others. In fact we can only live by letting go, never by holding on. To hold on is to die. And so we reflect that the air element, like the other physical elements, is not me, not mine, that I am not this.

By this point in the practice I usually sense in a very immediate way the impermanent, transient nature of the body. I have a heightened appreciation that what I normally assume to be a relatively fixed and solid physical form is actually a dynamic process. I often find myself thinking that to watch the elements flow through this body is rather akin to sit-



ting by a river. I can watch the water pass “my” stretch of the riverbank, and I say “that’s me, that’s me,” but in every moment of claiming, of grasping, what I’m trying to cling to flows inexorably past. Clinging is futile and painful. Letting go is to recognize how things are. Letting go is to be free and open.

There’s a sense of curiosity, wonder, and openness. The world is more alive. I’m less attached to my physical form, and my sense of identification has expanded outward: everything that has ever passed through my body—the solid matter, air, water, and energy—is now “out there” in the form of fields, clouds, forests, and soil. In a way, those things are all me. And because this very body is made of these same things, I am them. Having this direct sense of interconnectedness is enlivening and empowering. I’m no longer separate and small, but an intimate part of the vast cycle of the elements.

## SPACE

Space is a strange and different element. It’s just there. We can’t see it, we can’t touch it, we can’t say how far it extends. We can’t even say what, if anything, it’s made of. According to Einstein, it expands and contracts depending on what velocity we’re moving at, and it gets bent out of shape by the presence of solid matter. That’s all very hard for me to get my brain around, conditioned as it is to think in a paltry three dimensions. But there is one thing that my deluded mind “knows” about space, which is that there’s space that’s “me” and there’s space that’s “not me.” Cut to Einstein, in one of his less mathematical and more religious moments:

A human being is part of a whole, called by us the “Universe”—a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts, and feelings, as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical

delusion of his consciousness.

This very basic distinction—or delusion—of there being an inner world and an outer world is so fundamental that we rarely question it. This stage of the Six Element practice gives us an opportunity to question that assumption. So first of all, as we're sitting with our eyes closed in meditation, can we feel any sharp division between “me space” and “not-me space”? I've noticed that without the “optical delusion” of there being a delineation between inner and outer, the body loses its sense of having fixed boundaries. The hands no longer have five fingers; they have become just a mass of interwoven sensations—tingling, warmth, pressure. The whole body becomes a fuzzy ball of energy. That passing car I hear: Is the sound inside me or outside? The sound waves are happening in the air outside, but all hearing takes place in the brain, which is inside. The assumptions begin to show cracks..

Even if the boundaries of my space are fuzzy, I still have some space I can claim as my own, right? Well, maybe not. Even when I'm sitting absolutely still, I'm moving. The planet is spinning on its axis and revolving around the sun, the whole solar system is swinging around the galactic core, and the galaxy itself is rushing away from every other galaxy at an incomprehensible velocity. So although I think there's a “me space,” I'm never actually in the same space for two consecutive moments.

Space isn't really divided into “me space” and “not-me space.” It's all one space, and it flows through us. Space is just borrowed. We can't own it.

## CONSCIOUSNESS

It isn't obvious that consciousness is an element like the physical elements or even space. Perhaps even more so than with space, we can't even say what consciousness is. But somehow in the evolution of the

material universe life has arisen, and in the evolution of life consciousness has come into being. Perhaps we could say that consciousness is the other elements knowing themselves.

The Buddha introduces the element in this way: “Then there remains only consciousness, bright and purified.” It’s just possible that he was referring here to mind’s intrinsically empty nature, or he may simply have meant that the mind has been brightened and purified by letting go of grasping after the other five elements. In any event, we’ve started to realize at this stage of the practice that there’s nothing we can grasp hold of and so our mind now turns its attention to itself: the grasper.

In this stage of the practice we notice—and reflect upon—the way in which sensations, thoughts, images, emotions, and habitual patterns come into being, persist for a while, and then vanish into emptiness. None of them is permanent, and all are simply passing through us in the same way that the earth, water, fire, air, and space elements are flowing through our physical form. So these “elements of consciousness” are not intrinsic to us, are not a fixed part of us, and are not us. Just as there is nothing we can grasp, there is no one, ultimately, to do any grasping.

When feelings of fear or discomfort arise in the practice, as they sometimes do, we treat them in just this way, experiencing the feelings in a nonattached way, surrounding them with mindfulness and loving-kindness, and realizing that they are not ultimately a part of us.

Having explained that the contents of consciousness—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—arise and pass and cannot be clung to, “there remains,” in the words of the sutta, “only equanimity, purified and bright, malleable, wieldy, and radiant.”

This is the equanimity that comes from letting go, from ceasing to identify with our experience. It’s the equanimity that comes from not getting caught up in our inner dramas, from not reacting to unpleasant

feelings with aversion and by not responding to pleasant feelings with grasping. It's the equanimity of acceptance. Through the Six Element practice, we come to the insight that we're not the physical elements, nor the space that contains them, nor again the consciousness that knows those things. So we may well ask, what exactly are we? This is a question that, in this meditation, we can consider experientially rather than through discursive thought. Rather than try to work out an answer in logical terms, we simply ask the question, and sit, and listen patiently for the heart's intuitive response.

Sometimes what arises is a sense that we are the universe become aware of itself; that we are nothing more than conscious, living energy; that the mind is inherently pure, luminous, wise, and loving; and that we are beginning to know our intrinsic nature, which is emptiness.

Whatever arises from our reflections, we simply continue to sit and to experience the fruits of the practice, until we feel ready to move on. I'd encourage you once again to engage with this practice as an experiential exercise in letting go. To live is to let go, and in order to live fully we must learn to let go fully and to embrace the flow that is the universe.

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10

LEAVING THE LOTUS  
POSITION

The necessity of alternative meditation postures

SUSAN MOON

I sit in a chair. Yes, of course, but I mean I sit *zazen* in a chair. This is a recent development, arising no doubt from a karmic web of causes and conditions, but the primary one is osteoarthritis in my knees.

Everybody knows that a Zen student truly dedicated to the Way sits cross-legged on the floor. Buddha was sitting cross-legged when he was enlightened under the pipal tree 2,600 years ago, and there are millions of Buddha statues to prove it— sitting cross-legged on altars and bookshelves all over the world. Several of them are in my house.

The image of Shakyamuni in seated meditation is the essential icon of Buddhism. And 800 years ago, Eihei Dogen, founder of Soto Zen in Japan, instructed seekers of the way to “sit either in the full lotus or half lotus position.” These are ancient yogic *asanas*, sacred positions—they come with a warranty. Back in my limber days, I believed that I was bound to get enlightened if I just sat still long enough in half lotus on my black zafu. Now I see how unreasonable it would be if the cross-legged people were the only ones who got to cross over to the other shore.

These days sitting cross-legged causes me intense pain. Everybody knows that not turning away from suffering is at the heart of Zen prac-

tice, and this includes not turning away from pain in the knees. Sesshins (long Zen meditation retreats) are an opportunity to learn to sit through pain. When there is pain in the knees, if I can see it as nothing other than pain in the knees, then I will be a happy person with pain in my knees. So I have been taught, during more than 30 years of Zen practice.

Some years ago, when I was still a floor sitter, a fellow practitioner had to move to a chair after knee surgery. (The anecdotal evidence I've heard suggests that a remarkably high proportion of Zen practitioners require knee surgery.) I asked how he liked it, and he said he missed his pain because now it was "harder to focus" during zazen. That threw me for a loop. I too have found that pain focuses the mind, but what does it focus the mind on? Pain! Is that useful?

Another friend had an epiphany in zazen. He was in pain, but he promised himself he wouldn't move before the end of the period, no matter what. The pain got worse and worse, and he just stayed still and stuck to his wallgazing, and a few minutes before the end of the period, the whole universe opened and he saw that everything was everything. "No pain, no gain," he explained, when he described the experience to me later. That never happened to me, though.

A teacher once asked me, "If you avoid pain now, what will you do down the line when you are old and sick and have pain you can't avoid? Don't you want to learn to live with it?" I've decided to cross that bridge when I come to it. I figure there's enough pain coming my way anyway, why should I take on extra?

I have learned some things about pain through my sitting practice. If I move too soon to adjust my posture, the pain will chase me wherever I go, but if I just sit still when the pain starts, it often goes away, or recedes into the background. That kind of pain is like a child who wants attention and gets bored if you don't respond. This anti-fidgeting train-

ing also has useful applications to secular life beyond the zendo, to the concert hall for example, or the business meeting, or the MRI gurney.

I have also learned that there comes a point in zazen when the pain is so intense, I know it's not going to ebb away—it just gets worse, until I am raging against it and against a spiritual practice that would ask this of me. Pain is, after all, an early warning system devised by evolution to prevent us from injuring ourselves. It hurts when you touch the hot stove so that you don't burn the skin off your hand.

Pain is an important aspect of ritual in various religious traditions: the penitents beat their backs bloody during Holy Week; some pilgrims climb up stone steps on swollen knees to sacred shrines; Native Americans on vision quests stand still and naked in the sun's burning heat. But these are special rites of passage, not everyday practices.

I have come to the point of diminishing returns as far as sitting crosslegged goes. When I started practicing Zen, I was 32 and sat in a half lotus position with manageable discomfort. My legs hurt in sesshin, but I knew this was part of the bargain. Now I'm 65 and I have arthritis in my knees. I can sit cross-legged for 10 or 15 minutes, with four or five extra support cushions propping me up, and then the pain begins in earnest. When I consulted an orthopedist last year about the trouble I was having with my knees, I mentioned that I do Zen meditation and he scolded me for sitting cross-legged. I now have doctor's orders to sit in a chair. I could have asked him for a note for my teacher, but I didn't need to, because these days, fortunately, all the Zen teachers I know have become quite tolerant of chair sitting. It's allowed, even though it's not exactly *de rigueur*. The harsh taskmaster within is the one who still gives me trouble.

Not Long ago I swallowed my pride and sat my first sesshin in a chair. This was a turning point. There were several other chair sitters,

and I was grateful not to be alone at this higher elevation, not to have my lone head sticking up like a sore thumb in the thin air above the clouds. Lo and behold, this was the first sesshin in years in which I wasn't fighting myself—*Why the hell am I doing this?* I settled down. It was the first sesshin in which I didn't once pray for the bell to hurry up and ring for the end of the period. I was able to be here now—or rather, at this writing, to be there then.

I praise the chair as a spiritual aid. A chair is a tool for sitting in, a gift invented and produced by human beings for human beings. This body knows how to sit in a chair. There's a lovely geometry to a person in a chair, with the legs, seat, and back of the living body parallel to the legs, seat, and back of the chair, in a double zigzag, expressing the rightness of right angles.

Sometimes I miss being down on the floor—it feels good to be grounded, to *get down*. So I remind myself: if I am sitting on a chair and the chair is on the floor, then I am sitting on the floor. Besides, it's important to be able to get up again when the bell rings; after all, there are two parts of Zen practice: sitting down and getting up, and for me, getting up from the floor takes too much time away from the next activity. I don't want to miss my chance to use the bathroom before the next period of zazen.

In a recent sesshin at a traditional Zen practice center, my second in a chair, I was the only chair sitter, even though I wasn't the oldest person. This gave me pause. Was I the only one because I was the person with the least amount of cartilage in my knees, or because I was the wimpiest person, or the person who cared the least what others thought of me? I realized, sitting there in my chair, that it didn't matter. The only real question was and always is: am I making my best effort? If I am making my best effort while sitting in a chair, then I am sitting perfectly.



There are plenty of challenges to chair sitting, so don't worry that it's too easy—you can still be miserable. The five hindrances of lust, sloth, ill will, restlessness, and doubt assault me in a chair as easily as they did when I sat on the floor. Pain visits me, too, on occasion, sharp and hot between the shoulder blades, but I know it's not injuring me, and it doesn't stay.

Sitting in a chair, I feel gratitude for the practice. I enjoy sitting upright. I enjoy my breathing. I am not guarding against the onset of pain, and I am not fighting with myself for being a sissy. I am not making bargains with myself the whole time, such as *Ten more breaths and then I will allow myself to move*. I check my posture: I feel my feet firmly planted on the floor, I feel the uprightness of my spine, I feel my sitting bones on the seat of the chair. I am close to the others in the room; whether they are on the floor or in chairs, we are practicing together, held by the same silence.

What's next? Perhaps I'll go on to hammock practice, or sitting zazen in a chaise longue, poolside. I'll let you know how that goes when I get there.

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11

FRUITLESS LABOR

Forming bad habits is hard work.

GAYLON FERGUSON

“Training” has many meanings—and our experience with training has a much longer history in our lives than we might realize. We can get physical training at a gym or yoga studio, professional training in a school, and training of the mind at a meditation center. But in a wider sense, we have also been training our body and mind just by living our life. When we were first taught to say “good morning” and “good night,” when we went to a childhood friend’s birthday party and someone suggested we take along a gift, when we went to our grandmother’s funeral and first experienced human grief—all these experiences were shaping our heart, our mind, our life. Since we were not born speaking a particular language or knowing the customs of our culture, these things are acquired knowledge, abilities we gain through learning and training. I still have vivid memories from my childhood of my mother’s and aunts’ wails of grief after my uncle was killed suddenly in a head-on automobile collision. It left a strong impression: this is how we mourn our dead.

In this wider sense, our entire life has been training. The question is: training in what? This question means: training in which direction? If we train ourselves to reach for a snack or pick up the phone to text-message whenever we feel frightened or bored, this is definitely training. The next time we feel uncomfortable we will also tend to reach for some

comfort outside ourselves, eventually establishing a deeply ingrained habit, another brick in the wall of our mental prison. Are we training in how to distract ourselves from inner discomfort or anxiety? Are we training in numbing ourselves in the face of fear, or training in waking up? Training in opening the heart, or training in shutting down?

When we first sit down to meditate— and later when we return to the cushion—we can immediately recognize that we are not starting with a clean slate. If we’ve fallen in love, then the glow of passion and romance will deliciously perfume our meditation experience. If we’ve had a particularly stressful week at work, then our Saturday morning meditation session may have some of the irritating flavor of recent conflicts and disagreements. We may find ourselves replaying difficult conversations repeatedly—in a tape loop of irritation. A friend who worked as an accountant once told me that his discursive thoughts in meditation during tax season were often exclamations in numbers: “534! 63,000! 10, 10, 10!” Whatever the previous day, week, month, year, decade have brought—it is immediately clear that our minds are already in motion, already have movement and momentum in a particular direction before we sit down. Our experience when we sit down to meditate—whether we’ve been sitting for 30 minutes or 30 years—will often reflect our previous physical and mental “training.”

In other words, the wildness of mind that we experience when we sit quietly noticing our body and breathing for five minutes is the result of everything we’ve been doing before those five minutes. Frequently we discover that our minds do not rest in radiant contentment for the entire meditation session. Why not? Because we have been training for years in desiring, reaching, grasping, getting, and then wanting more, and then, of course, more—all reinforcing the underlying feeling that this moment is not enough. This pervasive feeling of some-

thing lacking, something missing (“not enough, not enough, when can I get something else, something different, something better?”) is itself a powerfully motivating force. This is what we notice when we simply sit quietly with ourselves for even a few moments: we experience the accumulated momentum of mental noise, booming and buzzing. We notice how strongly we are trained to want something different from what is happening. We notice that our minds are very well trained in dissatisfaction and distraction. Almost always our focus is on something else—not this. We seek another moment of greater happiness—not this moment. Contentment seems always elsewhere—never here.

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12

MEDITATION,  
MENTAL HABITS,  
AND CREATIVE  
IMAGINATION

MARTINE BATCHELOR

We have to be careful not to think that meditation is about getting rid of thoughts. On the contrary, I would say that meditation helps us to creatively engage with our thoughts and not fixate on them. When people say they cannot concentrate, I say, “No, no, no! You are concentrating—too much on any one thought!”

It is interesting in meditation to notice all the different places where our thoughts lead us—what distracts us and what occupies our minds. It is important to notice these things in meditation because these will be the same things that occupy our minds in daily life. As we become more familiar with our thoughts in meditation, we will see how repetitive our thoughts are. We often think very similar things over and over again and it is actually rare to have what I would call a creative, original thought.

What I recommend is to follow the breath, or let sounds be the object of your concentration [see here], or try body-awareness meditation. Then ask yourself, Where did I go? When I was distracted, what did I do?

And then you can see that you have many different types of thoughts, which generally fall into three categories: light, intense, and habitual.

Often we try to work with our thoughts only when they reach a high level of intensity. By then I would say it is too late, because they are already so strong and so powerful that it is very hard to work with them. The only thing we can do when we are really caught in heavy, obsessive thoughts is to realize the cause—maybe something happened and you are upset. Just be careful not to feed the intensity. I think that meditation practices can help here. For example, when coming back to the breath time after time, if you're really obsessive then you'll eventually notice, "Oh, I'm obsessive." Then try to come back to the breath just a little bit, just for a few seconds. Then keep coming back. This may not remove the intensity of the thoughts completely, but at least their intensity will diminish, and generally the thoughts won't last as long.

As we meditate, we become more aware of the habitual nature of our thoughts. I think of this level as consisting of the mental grooves that our thoughts habitually follow. Meditation helps us break free of these habitual patterns and unleash the original and creative power of thought.

Daydreaming is an important mental habit to be aware of. Daydreaming can be very frustrating. If you have a tendency to daydream in daily life, then you will often compare what you experience in your life to what happened in your daydream, where everything went according to plan. Daydreams are seductive. It's like a film where we are the actor, the scriptwriter, the director, the producer. We even sell the popcorn. It can be wonderful, we can tweak whatever we like and do whatever we want—but then we have to come back to reality, where things don't always go our way. I think we need to know when we are daydreaming—not in order to judge but to come back to the moment and say, "Oh, I'm

lost in a daydream.”

I remember when I was a nun and was meditating ten hours a day. Instead of meditating, though, I would daydream about it! I would daydream about going to a hermitage, practicing very hard, becoming awakened, and saving everybody. When I realized this was not meditation, I went back to truly cultivating my practice. I was then able to restore the mental energy I spent daydreaming to its original purpose: creative imagination. When I write a book, I don't daydream about writing a book. I just think: What about this? What about that? When I go to write, I become very imaginative and creative. I bring it all back to creative imagination.

Light mental patterning is natural, and it is the easiest level to work with. A live brain is active, constantly firing and thinking of something. We will have aimless trains of thoughts, weird association of ideas, shopping lists or light planning. These are interesting in that due to their lightness, we can play with them more easily and also laugh at them as we recognize certain motifs and see how unnecessary they are. I can see a “preparing luggage” loop. Since I recognized this loop, I only indulge in it near to the time of departure and not for very long. Having become aware of it, I find it pointless, as I know that I am quite able to do my luggage quickly and efficiently.

We need to recognize light mental patterning, because under certain circumstances we move quickly from light to habitual to intense and we find ourselves in the grip of an obsession, which just started as a faint wisp of thought in the mind. We do not need to be afraid of our mind. We can go on a journey of discovery and experiment. Then we are able to play with our mental processes and develop our mental ability in wisdom and compassion.

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13

REFLECT, WITHOUT  
THINKING

On learning how to enjoy our little human dramas

EZRA BAYDA

Practice implores us to do the simplest yet most difficult thing: to sit still and simply be present. In meditation, we let whatever comes up, come up. We invite it in. We welcome all of it, including the resistance, the boredom, the judgments, and the endless spinning. We let it all come up and just watch it.

When things come up that we don't like, we try to remember that these thoughts and feelings are our teacher—we can learn from them. They're not the enemy that we have to get away from. In other words, we don't try to change our experience; we just try to be aware. Observing ourselves in this way does not require thinking, judging, or analyzing. It only requires watching. This is what it means to watch with curiosity as our experience unfolds, without trying to make ourselves different.

We don't have to live out of our cherished self-images. We don't have to appear to be calm or clear, or to look "spiritual." Instead, can we acknowledge who we are—including all of our so-called shortcomings? Can we give up our ideals of perfection?

on our energy but also the source of much of our anxiety. Without

our self-images, we feel exposed, both to ourselves and to others; we feel that if the truth about us were known, we would be seen as worthless, or, at least, as not enough.

The alternative to living out of these self-images is to honestly acknowledge ourselves as we are; to let whatever comes up be observed and felt, with no added judgments; to watch the many ways we present ourselves; and to reflect, without thinking. This is one way we can bring kindness to ourselves, just as we are, no longer making so much of an effort to present ourselves in some special way. Needing to be special keeps us solidly stuck in unhappiness. So whether we're at work, walking down the street, or visiting with friends, we could watch the need to be special, notice the self-images we're holding onto, and feel what that feels like.

Simply watching also allows us to stop struggling: to stop trying so hard to accomplish, to prove ourselves, to measure up—to cover over whatever sense of lack we might have. It may be frightening when we first stop struggling; we've become accustomed to this way of being, and feel anxious about leaving the comfort of the familiar. But when we stop the struggle, we then have the space to be at home with ourselves.

Learning to be at home with ourselves is one of the prime benefits of meditation practice. But remember: practice is never a straight line to a fixed goal. It is always a mixture of moments of confusion and moments of clarity, periods of discouragement and periods of aspiration, times of feeling like a failure and times of going deeper.

For example, what usually happens when we sit down to meditate? If we happen to have a busy mind, we often think that something is wrong. And when we think that something is wrong, we usually translate that into the belief that something is wrong with us. Furthermore, we think that we have to do something about it.

But there's an alternative way to approach our so-called problems. No matter what we bring to our meditation, no matter how we may be feeling, the practice is to simply sit down, acknowledge what's going on, and then let it be. What this requires is the basic understanding that our states of mind are not problems to be solved or obstacles to be overcome. Just because something seems off doesn't mean that something is, in fact, off. Things simply are what they are. It's primarily our judgments about them—our expectations about how things should be—that cause us endless difficulties.

For example, if we get bored or sleepy during sitting, we will often proclaim it a bad sitting. If we get agitated or upset, we will often think that we have to become calm. If we get confused, we will long for clarity. But the fact is, no matter what may be happening with us, all we need to do is acknowledge what's happening, and then be as fully aware as we can. And in that very awareness, our upsets become our path. The underlying principle is that awareness heals.

So the idea is to simply let it be. Please be clear: this is not a passive or pseudo detachment; we still need the discipline to stay present, to remain still, and to be precise in our self-observation. But there's a particular attitude of mind that's simply willing to look, to be open to what comes up, to be curious, and to cease judging and resisting.

And as we cease our resistance to what is, there will be a growing willingness to be with, and perhaps even enjoy, our repeating patterns, our little human dramas, the whole passing show. We learn how to rest in our experience without falling into the trap of wallowing in it.

This practice, in a way, is very simple. But it is also very difficult to do; the mind is not inclined to let things be. It does not want to give up its pictures, its opinions, its ideas of how things should be. It is much more interested in analyzing, blaming, controlling, and, above all, mak-

ing things “better.” But it’s possible to learn one of the most important secrets of spiritual practice: that we don’t have to be some particular way, nor do we have to feel any special way. When we truly understand this, it’s like letting go of a very heavy burden.

Although the emphasis is on just watching our experience and letting it be, that does not mean that our sitting practice is amorphous or spacy. We still stay focused. So through all of the ups and downs, the practice is to rest your mind in the breath, to feel it fully. Rest your mind in the environment—feeling the air, hearing the sounds, sensing the spaciousness of the room. Rest your mind in the silence, which includes the endless mental chatter. Remember, though: we enter the silence not by trying to enter, but through the constant soft effort to just be here.

Let whatever else comes up, come up, including the mindless daydreams, the compulsion to plan or have internal conversations, the moments of spacing out, and the periods when discomfort or pain, both physical and emotional, get intense. Just watch all of it. This is how we use the experience of sitting still—basically doing nothing—to awaken our sense of what’s most real, and what’s most important. As long as we live in the bubble of our thoughts and judgments, we cut ourselves off from the mystery of our being. Yet we can often tap into the mystery through just a quiet presence in the moment. Through watching, and reflecting without thinking.

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14

STICKING WITH IT

How to sustain your meditation practice

SHARON SALZBERG

A friend invited me out to lunch one day and in the course of the meal offered the following confession: “I’ve been meditating for about three years now,” he said, “and I’d have to say honestly that my experience when I’m sitting isn’t what I thought it would be or should be. I still have ups and down; my mind wanders and I start over; I still have bouts of sleepiness or restlessness.

“But I’m like a completely different person now. I’m kinder and more patient with my family and friends, and with myself. I’m more involved with my community. I think more about the consequences of my actions, and about what habitual responses I bring to a situation. Is that enough?”

“Yeah,” I replied, beaming at him. “I think that’s enough.”

This is why we practice meditation—so that we can treat ourselves more compassionately; improve our relationships with friends, family, and community; live lives of greater connection; and, even in the face of challenges, stay in touch with what we really care about so we can act in ways that are consistent with our values.

One of the things I’ve always found so interesting about meditation practice is that the arena can seem so small—just you in a room—but

the life lessons, the realizations and understandings that arise from it, can be pretty big.

The process is one of continually trying to greet our experience, whatever it is, with mindfulness, lovingkindness, and compassion; it helps us to realize that everything changes constantly and to be okay with that. The effort we make in meditation is a willingness to be open, to come close to what we have avoided, to be patient with ourselves and others, and to let go of our preconceptions, our projections, and our tendency not to live fully.

Meditation practice helps us relinquish old, painful habits; it challenges our assumptions about whether or not we deserve happiness. (We do, it tells us emphatically.) It also ignites a very potent energy in us. With a strong foundation in how to practice meditation, we can begin to live in a way that enables us to respect ourselves, to be calm rather than anxious, and to offer caring attention to others instead of being held back by notions of separation.

But even when you know that these benefits make meditation well worth the effort, it can be hard to keep up a new meditation practice. On the following pages you'll find some suggestions for strengthening your commitment.

I used to feel, very early in my practice, that mindfulness was awaiting me somewhere out there; that it was going to take a lot of effort and determination, but somehow, someday, after a great deal of struggle, I was going to claim my moment of mindfulness— sort of like planting a flag at the top of a mountain.

My view of the matter was enlarged and my understanding transformed when I realized that mindfulness wasn't inaccessible or remote; it was always right there with me. The moment I remembered it—the moment I noticed that I was forgetting to practice it—there it was! My

mindfulness didn't need to get better, or be as good as somebody else's. It was already perfect. So is yours. But that truth is easily forgotten in the midst of our busy lives and complicated relationships. One reason we practice is to recall that truth, so that we can remember to be mindful more and more often throughout the day, and remember more naturally. Regular practice makes mindfulness a part of us.

Meditation is never one thing; you'll experience moments of peace, moments of sadness, moments of joy, moments of anger, moments of sleepiness. The terrain changes constantly, but we tend to solidify it around the negative: "This painful experience is going to last the rest of my life." The tendency to fixate on the negative is something we can approach mindfully; we can notice it, name it, observe it, test it, and dispel it, using the skills we learn in practice.

As you continue with your meditation practice, each session may be very different from the one that preceded it. Some sittings feel great, and some are painful, with an onslaught of all of the hindrances magnified. But these varied experiences are all part of our process. A difficult session is just as valuable as a pleasant one—maybe more so, because it holds more potential lessons. We can look mindfully at joy, sorrow, or anguish. It doesn't matter what's going on; transformation comes from changing our relationship to what's going on.

I was recently teaching with the psychiatrist and author Mark Epstein. He told the class that since beginning his meditation practice in 1974, he'd tried to attend a retreat each year. And from the start he has kept a notebook in which he jots the most compelling insight of the retreat, along with the teacher's single most illuminating, profound, or provocative statement. A few years ago, he told us, he decided to reread his notebook. He was startled to find that year after year, he'd recorded some variation of the same thing: "What arises in our experience is much

less important than how we relate to what arises in our experience.”

Mark’s central discovery can be restated in several ways: “No matter what comes up, we can learn new ways of being with it.” “We have a capacity to meet any thought or emotion with mindfulness and balance.” “Whatever disagreeable emotion is coursing through us, we can let it go.” Rereading those words may keep you going when sitting down to practice is the last thing you want to do.

Breaking away from our habitual ways of looking at things, thinking at a new level, and responding differently take a good deal of courage. Here are some ways to help you rally when your courage flags—when you feel too scared (or tired or bored or stiff in the knees) to continue your practice:

### START OVER

If your self-discipline or dedication seems to weaken, remember first of all, that this is natural and you don’t need to berate yourself for it. Seek inspiration in the form that works best for you—reading poetry or prose that inspires you, communicating with like-minded friends, finding a community of meditators, maybe a group to practice with. Or form your own meditation group. If you haven’t been keeping a meditation journal, start one. And keep in mind that no matter how badly you feel things are going, no matter how long it’s been since you last meditated, you can always begin again. Nothing is lost; nothing is ruined. We have this very moment in front of us. We can start now.

Guided meditations are meant to be read and listened to again and again. Don’t dismiss them, saying to yourself, *I heard that already, and I get it*. They repay revisiting; they are opportunities to practice, and they deepen over time. Each time you use one of the meditations again, it’s different. Work with these meditations daily, and watch how you feel



connected one day and drift off the next. The hard day and the easy day each teach you a lot. And the next day holds the promise of a fresh, new experience.

### “JUST PUT YOUR BODY THERE”

I once complained to my teacher Munindraji about being unable to maintain a regular practice. “When I sit at home and meditate and it feels good, I’m exhilarated, and I have faith and I know that it’s the most important thing in my life,” I said. “But as soon as it feels bad, I stop. I’m disheartened and discouraged, so I just give up.” He gave me quite a wonderful piece of advice. “Just put your body there,” he said. “That’s what you have to do. Just put your body there. Your mind will do different things all of the time, but you just put your body there. Because that’s the expression of commitment, and the rest will follow from that.”

Certainly there’s a time to evaluate our practice, to see if it’s useful to us and worth continuing. But the evaluation shouldn’t happen every five minutes, or we’ll be continually pulling ourselves out of the process. And when we do assess our progress, we need to focus on the right criteria: Is my life different? Am I more balanced, more able to go with the flow? Am I kinder? Those are the crucial questions. The rest of the time, just put your body there.

You may think, *I’m too undisciplined to maintain a practice*. But you really can manage to put your body there, day in and day out. We’re often very disciplined when it comes to external things like earning a living, getting the kids off to school, doing the laundry— we do it whether we like it or not. Why can’t we direct that same discipline (for just a few minutes each day) toward our inner wellbeing? If you can muster the energy for the laundry, you can muster the energy to “put your body there” for a happier life.

### REMEMBER THAT CHANGE TAKES TIME

Meditation is sometimes described this way: Imagine you're trying to split a huge piece of wood with a small axe. You hit that piece of wood ninety-nine times and nothing happens. Then you hit it the hundredth time, and it splits open. You might wonder, after that hundredth whack, *What did I do differently that time? Did I hold the axe differently; did I stand differently? Why did it work the hundredth time and not the other ninety-nine?*

But, of course, we needed all those earlier attempts to weaken the fiber of the wood. It doesn't feel very good when we're only on hit number thirty-four or thirty-five; it seems as if we aren't making any progress at all. But we are, and not only because of the mechanical act of banging on the wood and weakening its fiber. What's really transformative is our willingness to keep going, our openness to possibility, our patience, our effort, our humor, our growing self-knowledge, and the strength that we gain as we keep going. These intangible factors are the most vital to our success. In meditation practice, these elements are growing and deepening even when we're sleepy, restless, bored, or anxious. They're the qualities that move us toward transformation over time. They're what splits open the wood, and the world.

### USE ORDINARY MOMENTS

You can access the forces of mindfulness and lovingkindness at any moment, without anyone knowing you're doing it. You don't have to walk excruciatingly slowly down the streets of a major metropolis, alarming everyone around you (in fact, please don't); you can be aware in less obvious ways.

Rest your attention on your breath, or feel your feet against the

ground—in a meeting, during a telephone conversation, walking the dog; doing so will help you be more aware of and sensitive to all that is happening around you. Throughout the day, take a moment to stop your headlong rush and torrent of doing to simply be—mindfully eating a meal, feeding a baby, or listening to the flow of sounds around you. Even in difficult situations, this pause can bring a sense of connection or of relief from obsessing about what you don't have now or about what event or person might make you happy someday in the future.

Once when I was teaching a retreat, I had to go up and down a flight of stairs many times a day. I decided to make walking on that staircase part of my practice. Every time I went up or down, I paused first to remind myself to pay attention. It was useful, and it was fun. I've also resolved to do lovingkindness practice whenever I find myself waiting. Waiting on line in the grocery store. Sitting and waiting in a doctor's office. Waiting for my turn to speak at a conference. And I count all forms of transportation as waiting (as in waiting to get to the next place or event), so on airplanes, subways, buses, in cars, and when walking down the street, I begin: *May I be peaceful; may I be safe; may I be happy*. Why not, in those “in-between” times, generate the force of lovingkindness? You're likely to find that this weaving of meditation into everyday experience is a good way of bringing your meditation practice to life.

## MAKE SURE YOUR LIFE REFLECTS YOUR PRACTICE

Many years ago my colleagues at the Insight Meditation Society and I hosted a teacher from India and accompanied him around the country, introducing him to various communities where interest in meditation was growing. At the end of the tour we asked him what he thought of America. “It is wonderful, of course,” he said, “but sometimes students

here remind me of people sitting in a rowboat and rowing with great earnestness, but they don't want to untie the boat from the dock.

"It seems to me," he went on, "that some people here want to meditate in order to have great transcendent experiences or amazing alternate states of consciousness. They may not be too interested in how they speak to their children or treat their neighbor."

The way we do anything can reflect the way we do everything. It's useful to see whether our lives outside of meditation practice are congruent with our lives as we sit. Are we living according to our deepest values, seeking the sources of real happiness, applying the skills of mindfulness, concentration, and lovingkindness throughout all areas of our lives? As we practice, that begins to happen naturally over time, but in the meantime we can look at our lives to see if there's any disharmony we want to address. Are there disconnections between our values in meditation and our values in the world—our habits of consumption, for example, or how we treat a particular person, or how well we take care of ourselves? If we find something off-kilter, we have the tools to work for balance.

We all have cherished hopes about what our meditation practice should look like. However, the point is not to achieve some model or ideal but to be aware of all the different states that we experience. That's a difficult message to believe, and somehow we need to hear it again and again.

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