

Meditation in Daily Life

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1. Introduction

The Dalai Lama wrote: “To make our spiritual practice stable and enduring, we must train consistently. A fair-weather practitioner has little hope of achieving his or her goal. It is extremely important to practice the teachings day after day, month after month, year after year. [...] During the (meditation) session we are actually refuelling or recharging our energy to be able to practice after the session. Therefore the more we are able to mould the mind during the session, the better we will be able to face difficulties afterwards.”¹

This underlines the importance of sticking to a regular formal meditation practice. It is even more important to carry these skills into our daily activities. The following will give some hints about how to start and continue your meditation practice outside of a meditation centre.

This text is a modified excerpt from my book “Introduction to Buddhism and to Buddhist Meditation”.

2. Formal meditation

Time of the day

Set up a certain time of the day for your formal practice. The best time, in my opinion the only time with some chance of success, is the early morning. If necessary get up half an hour earlier and make it the first thing you do after your bathroom rituals. Many may find the early morning to be very conducive for meditation and it might be easier to avoid distractions, eg by other family members or external noise.

The second best time is the evening, before going to bed. But it is more difficult to stick to a regular evening meditation than an early morning meditation. The evening is the time for all kinds of activities and social events. Visiting friends, meeting others for dinner, going to the cinema or somewhere else is quite often accompanied by the use of alcohol or other kinds of drugs. Alcohol and meditation do not mix. Other drugs are even worse. Even without, you will probably be tired – maybe too tired.

The third best time is when you come home from work and before you start your leisure activities. But during this time demands on you by other family members or the necessary duties like shopping, preparing meals and cleaning may be quite heavy. Additionally you may be tired or quite exhausted by your job.

Try to use the early morning, sitting every day for 30 minutes at least. If you have more time to spend, fine. You may want to sit for a longer period or have a second sitting at another time of the day. You will not reach deep stages of concentration with only 30 minutes of meditation daily, but half an hour to calm the mind, to reflect on what is happening in your life, will help you to accept life as it is. The need to manipulate relationships, situations or the environment according to your likes and dislikes will lessen. You will become more content and balanced, more valuable to ourselves and others.

It is nice and beneficial to end sittings with a few minutes of loving kindness meditation or even devote a whole session every now and then to this kind of practice.

¹ Dalai Lama in Literature / 1 / , page 72/73

Suitable place

Set up a certain place for your practice, a place you exclusively reserve for formal sitting meditation practice. This may be a spare room or just a corner; you may decorate it with flowers, a picture, a sculpture or whatever. It should not be a fancy place, but a spot where you want to be, free of distractions, a place to calm down, to relax, to look inside.

Group support

Try to find a group of fellow meditators. Nowadays you will find in many towns in the West groups who come together for spiritual development regularly, maybe once or twice a week. It has not necessarily to be a Buddhist group, as long as they sit quietly and meditate. Look in the newspapers, in magazines or on the internet. The group support and the group energy will help you to stick to the formal practice.

As the need for spirituality grows, there are all kinds of esoteric offers available. Many are honest; some just aim to make money. Choose carefully your group or teacher. Ask the teacher where and how long he or she has studied and why; and how long she or he has been teaching – find out for yourself whether the teacher is appropriate for you, do not believe just because the teacher is famous, or because others have told you. A recommendation by Venerable U. Vimalaramsi says: “The way to select a good teacher is by observing if their students are kind, pleasant, friendly and supportive.” Of course the teacher should also show the same qualities. If there is no meditation group in your vicinity, you could start one to attract like-minded people.

Short-term retreats

Try to do a short-term retreat with friends or alone at home from time to time. Maybe you can reserve a weekend dedicated to meditation and to silence. If a whole weekend is too much, just have a day of silence every now and then.

If you have the time, do a 10-day retreat maybe once a year to recharge your spiritual battery, to get more settled in the practice. Meanwhile there are meditation centers nearly everywhere in the West with some excellent teachers; many of them have practiced for years as monks in India or South East Asia.

3. Daily activities

Mindfulness

What happens at the end of your formal meditation session is very important. You can jump up and forget the whole thing or you can try to take those skills with you into the rest of your daily activities. Being mindful of all our bodily and mental activities in each moment is the goal we are striving to achieve.

For example:

- Be mindful while eating, be mindful of the movements of your hands and mouth when picking up the food with the spoon or fork and of how you raise the spoon or fork to the mouth, be mindful of tasting, chewing and swallowing the food and so on. Eat part of your meal with your left hand if right-handed to help you develop mindfulness.
- Be mindful in thought, speech and action. Listen mindfully, try to avoid gossip or harsh words. How many problems in the world are caused by wrong speech? And the forerunner of harmful speech is harmful thinking and this again is why we have to control our minds, why we have to be mindful. Be aware that you are the owner of your actions. We are not the victims of life, we can

actively shape it and if we behave mindfully, wisely and with loving kindness and compassion for our self and others, we have the chance to make others reflect about the advantages of a spiritually orientated human life. Live up to your persuasions or convictions, do not merely talk about them.

- Be mindful of what is going on in your body and mind and observe your breath while you queue up in a supermarket, bank, post office etc.

It is a long task to attain mindfulness of all our activities from moment to moment but “eventually it becomes more a way of living than a technique”, as Larry Rosenberg² puts it. It is helpful to develop mindfulness in a systematic way, not only when we accidentally think of being mindful. We can train our mindfulness for example by picking up a certain everyday activity which we want to be especially mindful of. This has to be an activity we perform many times a day, not only once a week. For example try to be mindful

- Every time you walk through a door. Just know that you are about to walk through a door. Notice it before you actually pass the door;
- When getting up from a sitting posture or when sitting down. There are many, many movements involved in getting up and sitting down, and before you do so, there has to be the intention to do so. Try to be aware of these intentions as well, know what you are going to do before you act;
- When walking up or down steps. Be aware of all the movements involved (similar to walking meditation);
- When you are switching lights on or off;
- When you are opening or closing the refrigerator and so on.

Do not try to be especially mindful of too many activities at first. Just start with one and try this for a day or two or a week and then add a second one and be especially aware of these two for another day or two or a week and then add a third and so on. If you do too much too soon you may get frustrated and stop altogether.

Food for the mind

In the West as in Asia there are numerous excellent books, tapes and CDs dealing with Buddhist or other spiritual topics or meditation in many different languages. Use these possibilities to stay in contact with the Dhamma – food for thought, food for reflection. Put some wholesome thoughts into your mind and your mind will return beneficial thoughts which will lead to wholesome action and, finally, to decent habits and a high-minded character, thus reducing suffering.

Friends, family members, colleagues

Your friends, family members and colleagues may not be enthusiastic in following or accompanying you on your path towards spiritual development. You may notice changes over the time. You may still be friends, but your interests and goals will become different. On the other hand you will meet other people on the path and make friends with them. There is ceaseless change – impermanence – everywhere and your relationships to other people are not exempt from it.

During years of practice we will get older and hopefully wiser as well. A spiritual teacher is very helpful; some say it is a must. A good teacher is ahead on the spiritual path and often ahead of age – it simply takes time to study the scriptures and to collect the necessary experiences.

² Larry Rosenberg in / 2 /, page 16

Everyone will reach to the end of aging but only few to the end of spiritual growth. For most searchers after truth it is the task of a lifetime, but, according to religious belief systems like Hinduism or Buddhism, it may take as well a few hundred or thousand life spans more.

3.1 One activity at a time

How does being mindful of the present, planning for the future and recalling the past fit together? Is this possible when we should stay in the present moment?

Of course we have to plan for the future or recall memories when we want to survive in this world – it is absolutely necessary. We have the possibility to learn, to store past experiences and to recall them, and we have the ability to form concepts and use them with the help of logic and reason to investigate into different possibilities which may occur in the future. We could hardly survive in this world without these capabilities – but remember:

One activity at a time

- when eating, eat;
- when planning, plan; but
- do not plan while eating; just do one thing at a time and be mindful of what you are doing.

It is quite common to eat and let our minds wander all over the place. The same is true of cleaning our homes or washing our dishes. But, to be mindful, we must not let this happen. We must be mindful of what we are doing.

There are times when we must plan, perhaps to go on holiday, moving home or changing our work. Then you should sit down and focus on your planning as at other times you concentrate on your bodily activities. This is much more efficient and will lead to better results than worrying about the future while engaged in some other activity.

The same holds true for your job, for example. You need to look ahead and you cannot do any job without recalling the necessary knowledge, memories, the necessary past experiences. So your mind has to go into the past gathering the necessary information and you will be mindful of this activity and not, at the same time, maybe trying to solve some private problems. One thing at a time will lead to much better results.

The key is to be mindful, to be aware of every activity of your body, of your feelings, perceptions, thoughts and consciousness – and the concentration we develop will support us with this task. The key is to guard the sense doors, to be aware of every contact of our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind and to do just one thing at a time.

This ‘one activity at a time’ – principle leads to a very important guideline for our daily lives. This guideline says: “The most important person is always the person we are actually dealing with.” Of course we may regard our children, wife/husband, parents, teachers, as more important and there is nothing wrong with it, but in that moment we are dealing with another human being, this person deserves your full and undivided attention – he or she becomes the most important person for us in this very moment. Thus we will really listen to the verbal and bodily expressions of this person. Many, many misunderstandings could be avoided if we would really listen to others. But often our mind drifts off; we only get half of the message. But it does not matter. Our mind, not lazy as it is, will construct the missing piece itself as it likes, according to its preconceptions, but that may be very different from what this person actually meant. So when dealing with your partner, children, parent, colleague, or any other person, this person deserves

your undivided attention. If you let your mind wander off while dealing with others, misunderstandings are bound to happen. All our personal relationships, all our interactions with others would benefit much; a lot of stress, tension, even violence would disappear from our lives if we follow this guideline: “The most important person is always the person we are actually dealing with.”

3.2 Changes in attitude

The more often you become aware of your actions, the better. Slowly you will notice that, little by little, your way of doing things and the way you are looking at events and situations will change. You will act more slowly and with more awareness. You become aware of actions previously undertaken on ‘auto-pilot’ and thus have the chance to question them. Old habits may appear in a new and different light and you may want to change them. You will not become a different person over night, but little by little in the course of months and years, you will see change in your view of the world, in life in general, in your own life and how you deal with others, and in how you act towards society and the environment. What you have cherished before may become less important, other issues may be higher valued, for example you may want more time for yourself or your family and spend less time earning more money; maybe you can afford to work part-time. By seeing the impermanence of all things, by knowing that lasting happiness does not depend on external matters, you may stop chasing after sensual pleasures, after new clothes, new excitements, new cars, new partners and so on. Maybe you will understand the value of a more simple life and living in tune with nature instead of helping to exploit it by using unnecessary luxuries. And maybe you do not only take a different approach to human life, maybe you can more fully respect other forms of life as well, maybe you will think of becoming a vegetarian or at least reduce your meat intake. You may change other habits as well: perhaps consuming less alcohol or other drugs, trying to stop smoking, trying to eat more nutritious food like fresh vegetables and fruit or organically-grown food, and trying to avoid unnecessary, unhealthy drinks, sweets and various salty excitements.

It is very important to have a body and mind which are friends to each other, but are body and mind really friends? Under the influence of the defilements they are often not. The mind demands all kinds of crazy excitements and the body has to take it. In reality, for many of us, the mind is not the friend of the body but its enemy. Ignorant as the mind is, its demands damage its own foundation, the body which enables it to live.

Every cigarette tortures the lungs, any alcohol the liver, the surplus of fat the heart and the intestines and, of course, there is much, much more to it.

In order to have a mind and body which are friends to each other, we have to eliminate the defilements, have to cultivate the mind. Then the mind may also be able to make friends with the ‘shortcomings’ of the body, with its pain for example.

Chasing after sensual pleasures will not lead to lasting happiness. That does not mean, of course, that we have to live like a recluse and oppose any sensual pleasure. None of our senses will go away and so we can still enjoy the delicious taste of food for example. So let us stay in daily life, giving a living example that a different approach to life is possible and beneficial, and if a sensual pleasure comes along – let us enjoy it. There is no harm in enjoying pleasant experiences. Buddhism does not ask you to avoid or reject them. But knowing they are impermanent and bound to cause a lot of suffering if we cling to them, we might be able to enjoy them and when this pleasant feeling passes away according to the law of nature, we just let it pass away. We do not try to hold on to it, we do not try to repeat it over and over again.

What is true for pleasant feelings holds true for unpleasant feelings as well. They are impermanent and will pass away, we do not have to avoid them at all costs, eg at the cost of our bodily health. Smoking,

consuming alcohol or fat, unhealthy food, pursuing exciting though dangerous sports, we all do this to escape from Dukkha (unsatisfactory states of mind). Less Dukkha automatically will lead to a healthier body and mind.

The near cause of Dukkha is attachment or clinging and to the degree we stop chasing after things, or running away from them, to that degree our problems in life will lessen. So be patient, look inside, observe those mind states, but do not become the slave of them.

You cannot always get everything you want and you cannot always avoid or push away what you do not want. But you can learn to control your mind. You can learn to look at these mind states as they really are. They are impermanent and will pass away as everything else around you. All life goes in cycles. Good times and bad times, ups and downs will follow each other due to the laws of impermanence and cause and effect. Be patient, try to accept things as they are and try to become a little detached from emotion-provoking events. Do not be idealistic about yourself, others or how things should be. On the other hand we are social beings and have a certain social responsibility towards others and towards the environment. You see how things are, accept that they are as they are in the present moment and then you can try to mindfully and wisely respond to them, and try to alter unacceptable situations or circumstances. The stress here is on 'wisely respond' not on 'blindly react'.

Here as always try to find the middle way, the middle way between accepting things as they are and behaving according to your responsibilities as a human being.

From a Christian point of view (Reinhold Niebur³, others say Francis of Assisi⁴) the above reads as:

“May god give me the power to change what I can change,
may he give me the patience to endure what I cannot change, and
may he give me the wisdom to discriminate between these two.”

When you are ready to change things, to respond to unacceptable situations, do it with a void or empty mind. Void means a calm and balanced mind, a mind free from temptation, attachment, deception, not with an agitated state of mind full of anger, hate, fear, love, etc.

Meditation has numerous benefits, but it has some possible drawbacks as well. Meditation may lead nowhere for you even after years of trying if not practiced in the right way. But an even worse problem can arise. According to the Buddhist teaching, the goal of meditation is to let go of the idea of 'I', 'me', 'mine', the root cause of suffering. But with a number of meditators quite the opposite happens. Their egos are boosted, they develop more selfish attitudes instead of reducing them. A possible reason for this might be the 'ego of knowing' which includes the 'ego of possessing certain skills' others might not possess. Meditators developing a more selfish than selfless attitude or those who already have problems in getting along in society can alienate themselves more and more from their friends, family and society.

Other meditators at risk are those who are attached to the calm and happiness which arise out of deeper concentration. These meditators replace one kind of pleasure-seeking (that after so called worldly happiness by means of eye, ear, nose, tongue, and body contact) by the happiness resulting out of concentration (mind contact). They tend to alienate others and isolate themselves as well. To some extent these pleasurable feelings out of concentration are helpful; they are kind of reward for all the hardships which may occur with meditation practice, but if attached to it, if not completed by insight meditation for example, they will block any further progress.

Both types of meditators, those with increasing selfishness and the pleasure seekers by means of concentration may become quite lonely over time, some even quite difficult to bear for others.

³ See Literature / 3 /

⁴ See Literature / 4 /

How can we know if we are heading in the wrong direction? We need to be aware of these dangers and it helps to know the right direction. Attitudes of meditators who are heading in the right direction, who seemingly have not become selfish, include:

- They are kind, they give way;
- They move and do things mindfully and quietly;
- They give a hand without being asked;
- They take care for others and the environment;
- They look after their own and the belongings of others.

In short, they are humble.

By practicing meditation in the right way we should develop great tolerance towards other human beings, it should make us humble in regard to them as well as in regard to all other forms of life, to the environment, to nature. All things are connected – we are a part of society and nature, not apart from them. Zen master Dogen said: “Even if you practice zazen (sitting meditation) so earnestly that you break through the floor, if your practice is only for yourself it will come to nothing.”⁵

The virtues of patience, sincerity and contentment are safeguards for meditators in order to enjoy a more peaceful and balanced life, in order to avoid the mentioned dangers. I would like to add ‘effort’ to these virtues because it is essential for our spiritual development.

“Effort is the duty of today, even tomorrow death may come,” is a quote from the chanting book at the Suan Mokkh International Dharma Hermitage.

Even tomorrow death may come. Intellectually we understand it, but death seems so far, far away. Why bother? Some of you are still young and hopefully death is really far, far away – but still certain. Contemplation of death is one of the 40 different meditation objects in Buddhism and it is very useful for everybody at every age.

Imagine your doctor says to you: “I am sorry, we have done what we can, but you have only three months to live.”

Contemplate this. How important are all your other ‘problems’?

- You really want to have this new car but you cannot afford it.
- Your colleague retires soon. How can you manage to become his successor?
- Shall you go to India or Thailand for your holiday?

Or maybe relationship problems like:

- You have made me angry because you have said this or that.
- He/she is always doing this. I have told him/her a thousand times that I cannot stand it, but he/she is doing it again and again.

When you compare these ‘problems’ with the problem of having only three months to live, you can see they are less significant than they appear and you may prefer to spend your last days in a different way, away from these kinds of ‘problems’. And why in a different way? Is the old way not as good as you always tried to convince yourself or as a whole industry, the advertisement industry, tries to persuade us?

If you want to spend your last days in a different way – in which way? Do you want to be more connected to your family, friends and relatives, and, of course, to yourself? Do you have fear of death and search for some spiritual help? Will you ask yourself what life is all about? But maybe, you want to spend your last

⁵ Quotation in Literature / 5 /, page 21

days in never ending indulgence in all kind of sensual pleasures – sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll, eating, drinking and so on? But this is what many have been doing until now.

Think of all these questions. They and many more will arise when you are contemplating death. They are very important for each and every one and there are no standard answers. You have to figure them out by yourself.

And why not assume your last days have begun right now. You can start to live in a way you really want to live. Do not waste time, even tomorrow death may come. Start with a regular meditation practice. You cannot spend your (free) time in a more beneficial way.

4. Literature

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