

Article

How to Meditate: Part I

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The following text is the first of a series of Dharma talks offered by Rev. Master Koten to the community of Lions Gate Buddhist Priory in 2016. It was transcribed and edited by Tracy Kitagawa, Michele Feist, Pierre Kohl and Rev. Master Aurelian Giles, with minor revisions made for ease of reading.

Homage to the Buddha
Homage to the Dharma
Homage to the Sangha

The Buddha left his palace and family out of compassion for them in order to try to find out why suffering exists.

“Why is the world as it is?” he asked himself. Which is also a question that many people ask now: Why do horrible things happen?

The Buddha tried all the different ways that were available during his time. He tried various forms of meditation, various forms of controlling the mind - thinking that if one forced the mind to do a particular thing, forcing would bring the solution to suffering. He tried various methods of controlling the body and forms of painful ascetic practice that were common during his time, based on the idea that people had, and that people still have, that if you maltreat the body or discipline the body that this will result in calmness of mind. After trying various things for about six years and studying under various teachers, the Buddha became completely exhausted, worn out and despondent.

Because he had been trying for a long period of time, he had attracted other people around him. He had also been declared to be the chief person in two different spiritual traditions of the period where the teachers had invited him to be their successor. Those two spiritual traditions were about maintaining various states of meditation, and the Buddha turned them down.

The Buddha as I said, practiced what everybody did at that time - starving the self, beating the self, forms of breath control, that is regulating the breathing processes, which again is popular nowadays with people, thinking that some thing would bring peace of mind. In other words, he tried everything that was available to him in the period of time in which he lived, and a lot of these things people still try today. They try to bring peace to themselves through external conditions, through changing external conditions. When Rev. Master Jiyu was in Japan one of the things that was

constantly emphasized to her was that other people are not your problem in terms of training - that religious spiritual life is about focusing on your own selfishness, your own greed, hate and delusion and training those aspects of yourself to the best of your ability.

The Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, exhausted and fed up, was sitting underneath a tree when, as the story goes, he heard some musicians as they went along the road, singers and dancers who were playing a contemporary tune. The tune went something like this: “When tuning the sitar (an Indian stringed instrument) make sure you tune it correctly. If you tune it with the strings too loose there will be no music; tune it too tight and there will be no music. Make sure and tune it just right”.

And as often happens when people reach the end of their tether on the spiritual path, these words, this little song, impinged on his hearing and struck him very much in a new way. So, he thought, maybe the problem is that I am stretching the string too tight and thus cannot produce spiritual music, if I can put it that way. Another metaphor is spinning - spinning thread. If you pull the thread too tight, it will break. If you let it go too loose it will bunch up. You have to hold it in a steady rhythm.

Realizing that he was over-straining himself, the Buddha accepted food from a local woman who gave him sweetened rice cooked with milk. After he had eaten, he went and bathed, and washed off all the accumulated dirt of his body. Refreshed, he went and sat underneath another tree.

He asked himself whether there had ever been a time in his life when he had experienced stillness. He remembered when he had been a seven-year old child. He was taken to see the plowing festival - an event in which the local ruler would take an ox out into the central area of a field and begin the first plowing of the season, after which everybody else would join in to open the season. As a little boy he sat underneath a tree and saw the plow tear through the earth. He observed that the plow, as it tore through the earth, lifted up worms and insects. Then all the little birds who were gathered there, knowing that this was going to happen, flew in and devoured all the worms and insects. Then bigger birds, and fiercer birds flew in and grabbed and tore apart and devoured the smaller birds. And then snakes, foxes and other animals came and attacked the larger birds.

Now, a person with a sensitive nature does not need to refer to two thousand five hundred years ago to recognize this situation.

When we look up the news on the internet, one of the first things we face is sorrow, confusion, people harming one another, people deluding themselves and others and this can produce feelings of sadness and despondency in us. This was very much the same for the Buddha as a child, encountering suffering at the plowing festival. It was in many respects exactly the same except we are seeing it on a screen and the Buddha was actually present. But the experience was similar because neither we nor him at that time could really do anything about it.

Bear in mind your own experience when faced with suffering on such a colossal scale that you become despondent over it. The Buddha, as a child, knew that there was nothing he could do about what he witnessed that day in the field. However, instead of despondency arising due to a feeling of helplessness, he thought there must be something more.

While not turning away from the suffering he saw, the Buddha became still. This was partly through intention, partly through happenstance, and partly through encountering something that he could do nothing about - he became still. He simply sat still. He let go of cogitating on the future; he let go of reminiscing over the past; he let go of the present.

The present is in a constant state of change. So much so that it is completely unreliable and unstable. Sometimes when people instruct other people in meditation and talk about dwelling in the present moment, they are actually not talking about Buddhist meditation, which recognizes that the present moment does not exist. These people are, as it were, putting themselves into something external called the “present moment.” When you are sitting in meditation, it is as if you are sitting on the edge of a stream. You can choose to look back up the stream and see what’s coming, or down the stream and see what has been, or you can study the present in the stream and watch the sticks and the fish and all the rest of it. But this is not the same as real meditation which is to turn about at the centre of your being and look within. In real meditation we recognize our own causing of suffering, our

own contribution to it. When the Buddha did this when he was a child he discovered a taste of peace and stillness.

So, twenty or thirty years later when he had exhausted all the different practices in India and was sitting underneath the tree and remembered that previous event when he was seven, the Buddha asked himself, “Do you suppose it isn’t complicated? That the spiritual path, is in fact, not complicated? Do you suppose that it might be that the spiritual path is not far away and it is not a question of seeking out secret knowledge, or magical books, or secret techniques? Do you suppose that actually it is found within ourselves, within ourselves now? Do you suppose that it is not a question that requires that we do all these things with ourselves in order to arrive at spiritual understanding? Are we required to change our minds around, construct our minds in various circumstances, study all sorts of scriptures, read all sorts of books, learn another foreign language - all in order to understand? Do you suppose that the answer is simply found within ourselves? And that if we cease chasing after and cease pushing away - if we cease our agendas and ideas and opinions, then peace can be found. Not far away but rather within ourselves. And do you suppose that the solution is that spiritual training is about dealing with my greed, hate and delusion rather than the greed, hate and delusion of the world? And do you suppose that in doing so this is benefitting the world? This is changing and transforming the world, this is rescuing all beings, by doing something about ourselves.”

And that night, underneath the Bodhi tree, because the Buddha had practiced for a long period of time and because the Buddha

had tried all these various things and discovered for himself that they did not work, he was enlightened to the highest degree.

After that, the Buddha wondered, “Is this going to be able to be explainable to people? Are people going to understand this? It is so uncomplicated. Perhaps it is so simple that people will not believe it.” And he thought to himself, “there are and will be, and were in the past people ready to receive such a teaching. People who have tried all sorts of other things. People who genuinely wish to relieve the suffering of beings”. The practice of Buddhism arises out of compassion for sentient beings, including oneself. Then the Buddha taught the first disciples, who had been practicing for quite a long period of time and were receptive.

He said, “Look, it’s like this. It isn’t this, chasing after, involving in; it isn’t this, pushing away; it isn’t this, grasping after; and it isn’t this; rejecting. Sit still in the middle of this, within yourself, and you will understand.” And one of the disciples, Kondanna, understood. And this is called the Turning of the Wheel of the Dharma, when the Dharma is actualized—is understood by a person for themselves. This Turning of the Wheel has been handed down to the present day.

Our particular tradition, called Serene Reflection, (Soto Zen in Japan), which also exists within China, Tibet, Korea, Vietnam, and also now in the West, does not view the spiritual path as requiring “great and curious understandings” but rather says *it is not complicated*.

It is not easy to train oneself, to train one's greeds, hates and delusions that have accumulated over a long period of time, but it is doable. The do-ability of it, the practice of it has nothing to do with, and is not in any way restricted by social class, learning, cleverness, being a man or a woman, or being a child, or being a good person or being a bad person, or being a high person or being a low person. It has to do with the applying of oneself to addressing one's own greeds, hates and delusions. And in learning to sit still within oneself. To meditate in this way is the supreme entry into the Buddha Dharma.

It is a direct way of entry. It does not require university degrees, it does not require long periods of study, it does not require a sharp intellect, it does not require cleverness, it does not require drugs, nor does it require external implements. The whole of it, the whole of all that the Buddha taught, can be found within sitting still and observing our own minds. Addressing our own selfishness, our own suffering. For when we do this, we are of immense benefit to the world.

This is called stopping and seeing. Stopping old patterns of greed, hate and delusion that do not work. And through meditation, seeing things as they actually are.

Homage to all the Buddhas in all worlds
Homage to all the Bodhisattvas in all worlds
Homage to the Scripture of Great Wisdom.