

## Article

### How to Meditate: Part II

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*The following text is the second 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

In part one I talked about what the Buddha did underneath the Bodhi tree and how this is the basis for how and why we meditate in the Serene Reflection tradition. I also talked about the relationship between what we practice and what the Buddha discovered for himself which he then taught to others. In this tradition what we practice is literally just sitting. I do mean, *just*

*sitting*. However, it is not possible for most of us to fully comprehend what this actually means without undertaking the practice of it for a long period of time.

When we say that our meditation practice is not something that is done in stages we mean that we do not practice meditation as a progression of stages or steps. That is not to say that over time one's meditation practice does not deepen or that there isn't sometimes an arriving at an understanding or insight. As a matter of fact, such arriving at insight and understanding is absolutely necessary.

We just mean that in our tradition, when we sit, we are not trying to attain levels of jhanas or samadhis or various states of meditation. These various types of meditation states, particularly the more deeper ones, do occur in people who practice Serene Reflection Meditation.

However we are not *deliberately* trying to achieve any particular state. In essence, we are not trying to make anything happen. Rather, we are simply practicing the fundamental meditation of the Buddhist tradition - out of which all the other various types of skillful means come.

It is why Zen Master Dogen in his *Rules for Meditation* says, "The means of training are thousandfold." These thousandfold means of training are what the Buddha used and are still being taught to the present day. Thus, if somebody comes to the teacher with a very distracted mind the teacher may very well recommend that they

count the breath during meditation, or touch the earth during meditation to anchor themselves, or focus on their breathing to help calm down an agitated mind. All of these things are included in the various skillful means of training.

However, Dogen also said, “but pure meditation must be done.” Pure meditation, in the sense of just sitting without adding anything to the practice, is the fundamental basis of all types of meditation in the Buddhist tradition. It is the fundamental basis of Shikan taza (Serene Reflection Meditation), of Vipassana and Shamata and of all the varieties of meditational practices found within the Tibetan tradition. Therefore, it is essential that people learn how to practice just sitting in order to understand how to engage with the Buddhist tradition, or undertake Buddhist training.

When we say just sitting, we do not mean a type of mindfulness on the act of sitting itself.

This is not to say that mindfulness cannot be practiced as one of the myriad means of training. By mindfulness I simply mean paying attention to what you are doing. I do not mean any other fancy state. Mindfulness, in the Buddhist tradition, is paying attention to what you are doing. Paying attention to what the mind is doing does not depend upon whether the mind is in a pleasant or unpleasant state. It is not dependent on whether one is serene or non-serene. It is about paying attention to what your mind is doing.

In the same way that mindfulness is a useful means of training so too are the various means of calming the mind. The various means of bringing the mind back from distraction are all excellent and should be practiced very much within the context of daily life. But one must realize that Shikan taza, Serene Reflection Meditation, the meditation practiced by the Buddha underneath the Bodhi tree, is something much more fundamental than what we do with the mind.

The Buddha said that within this six-foot long body is to be found the entire universe of training. This means that within our body and mind right now is everything that we need to train ourselves and everything that we need to meditate effectively.

Meditation instruction can be like “fingers pointing at the moon” so it is important to understand what this phrase means. Think of it as a road sign telling us to go along a particular road to reach a particular town. If it weren’t for the road sign we would get lost and could wander about for some period of time without ever finding the town. However, it does not mean that we would never find the town if we didn’t have the road sign. And it also does not mean that the town does not exist until we find it. This is very important to ponder. The town exists already. The road sign simply points us towards it.

The same thing is true for learning to meditate in the Serene Reflection Meditation tradition. The Soto tradition agrees very much with the Dzogchen and the Mahamudra traditions as well as the basic Shamata and Vipassana traditions. In the earliest

Buddhist scriptures, and this is something found within all of the above traditions - it says, “Our essence of mind is intrinsically pure.” This statement comes from the Pali Canon and can be found in the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Zen Ancestor as well as in the aforementioned Great Perfection (Dzogchen) and Great Seal (Mahamudra) traditions. Our essence of mind is intrinsically pure. Our essence of mind is intrinsically pure.

Therefore, when sitting in meditation, let go of analyzing what meditation is or should be. Let go of speculating about the past. Let go of anticipating the future. That does not mean to say that you will not find yourselves thinking of the very things that you need to let go of. But that is not a problem. The essence of the practice of meditation is found in that *letting go*.

Do not look for a type of clarity as a state attained by you. Rather, get yourself out of the way. How do we get ourselves out of the way? We learn to see through, to look *through* our ideas, thoughts, and opinions rather than *at* them.

You must understand that meditation is not simply something that is done when sitting on one’s cushion, bench or chair. An old master, Tozan I believe, once said, “I practice what I cannot meditate and meditate what I cannot practice.” This means that what you do throughout your daily life very much has an impact on your meditation practice, and the other way around. This is called movement and stillness. Or, going in and going out. Or, “Sometimes we raise the eyebrows of old Shakyamuni, and sometimes we do not.”

If meditation is just something that you do once a week with others or even something that you do every morning, then it is not meditation in the Buddhist tradition unless one practices throughout all of one's daily life. This is because meditation in the Buddhist tradition is not something you simply do with your mind; it is something that you do with the body as well. Otherwise, meditation simply becomes like taking a yoga or macramé class or getting together for tea with people - all of which can become a means of reinforcing the self, of reinforcing selfishness.

Meditation in the Buddhist tradition cannot be divorced from practice. It cannot be divorced from your daily life. If meditation is simply something you do in the morning or the evening or both, or on a weekend, and has no impact on your daily life, then it is not meditation as the Buddha taught. What the Buddha taught was very much the importance of what we, ourselves, you as an individual do with our lives, what we do with our body and mind.