

Article

How to Meditate: Part III

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The following text is the third 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, with minor revisions made for ease of reading.

Homage to the Buddha

Homage to the Dharma

Homage to the Sangha

Dogen advises in Fukanzazengi (Rules for Meditation, or Zazen Rules) to “control mind function, will, consciousness, memory, perception and understanding.” By control he doesn’t mean one should try to force anything. It is important to remember this. It is also helpful to remember that when we sit in formal meditation, either on our own or with others, we don’t bring our “what is going on with us” into the meditation; rather, we bring the meditation into what is going on with us.

One of the best descriptions on how to meditate is the following passage from the Buddhist tradition titled *Six Words that Hit the Nail on the Head*. It says that

when we are sitting, “Don’t recall, don’t imagine, don’t think, don’t examine, don’t control, rest.”

When it says, “Don’t recall” it means let go of what is past. “Don’t imagine” - let go of what may come in the future. “Don’t think” - let go of what is happening now. “Don’t examine”- don’t try to figure anything out. “Don’t control” - don’t try to make anything happen. “Rest” it says, relax *right now* and rest.

Now, about the past. When you are sitting in meditation there may be occasions when past memories arise and unfold in front of you, in your mind’s eye. Sometimes they might be a full recollection and sometimes they could be simply a flash, i.e. a fleeting glimpse of a past life. This is not a problem as long as you don’t try to force them to arise or stop them from happening. If and when they occur consider them as just natural thoughts and let them go.

Do the same with thoughts that arise about the future. While you are sitting in meditation, let go of planning. This does not mean however that from time to time a solution to a possible future difficulty will unfold in your mind without you trying to force or suppress such thoughts. Again this is part of natural thought and not a problem.

The same holds true for thoughts that arise regarding one’s current situation. Sometimes a solution to a difficulty that you are dealing with at the present time will propose itself in the middle of a sitting. This is not a problem either, as long as you do not seek after it or try to maintain it after it has passed, or try to dig it up again while you sit in meditation.

There is a distinction between mindfulness and meditation. Sitting in formal meditation, which is essential to the practice, is not exactly the same thing as mindfulness, because we are not trying to focus on what is in front of us. Mindfulness, that is paying attention to what we are doing and bringing our minds back from distraction, should be practiced throughout the day.

However, when we sit in meditation, we let go of the present moment. We do not try to do anything with the present. We do not try to control it or figure anything out. Nor do we analyze our state of mind or try to figure out what is going on. Let go of all the cogitation and for the period of the meditation simply rest.

The following passage from the Tibetan tradition is a good description of what we are trying to do during formal meditation.

“Rest in the natural Great Peace.

This exhausted mind, beaten helpless by karma and neurotic thought,
relentless in the infinite ocean of samsara,
rest in the natural Great Peace.”

We do not rest in some sort of “mind state” because all states of mind are impermanent. We simply, as Dogen says, literally just sit. Don’t try to accomplish anything by sitting, don’t try to be somebody else, don’t try to be somewhere else, don’t try to analyze anything - for the period of the meditation simply drop everything. When you are in the midst of the activities of daily life it is necessary to pay attention to what you are doing. Practice mindfulness and plan when you need to plan. Look at the past to see what was done with it and consider the future when you need to do so. However, when you are sitting in meditation let go of all of that. Then, as you practice meditation over a period of

time, the stillness, that fundamental stillness, will begin to permeate your daily life. Signs that this is occurring may include becoming less agitated, less irritated, less angry or less distracted by or with other people and events. Sometimes it is others who notice such changes in us before we do.

It is very important, as I've already stated, not to think of meditation as an isolated practice divorced from the rest of one's daily life. Formal meditation in the Buddhist tradition must be accompanied by the continual working on oneself - that is, considering one's actions from an ethical perspective, examining one's actions with respect to the Buddhist Precepts. It is essential to practice these things together. In fact, in the Buddhist tradition, without the practice of precepts and working on oneself, it is impossible to understand what meditation is about. There has to be both the working on oneself in daily life and the sitting still. They go hand in hand. If one attempts to practice meditation and being still without doing something about oneself, then meditation will simply become a mental state to which you will become attached, because it will have become a distraction from the events of daily life. It is important that this not happen.

In Buddhism there are five kinds of preceptual behaviour. To briefly summarize, one should refrain from the following: killing or harming; lying or saying that which is not true, which includes engaging in harmful speech; taking that which is not given and the various forms of stealing; the various forms of what the Theravadans call sensual indulgence - that is, losing oneself in various aspects of the senses. Misuse of sexuality is emphasized, but the intended and broader meaning of this precept is to refrain from misusing the senses.

And then, what strikes many people as kind of funny, is the fifth precept, which has to do with refraining from intoxicating oneself. On a mundane level it

means to abstain from taking substances (e.g. alcohol and drugs) which cause one to become intoxicated. However, the real meaning of this particular precept is to keep one's mind clear in order to make ethical decisions, and not to do anything that will muddy one's thinking. This can include imbibing ideas as well as substances. It is to refrain from getting drunk on ideologies or getting caught up in other people's ideas and delusions.

This precept is particularly applicable when it comes to politics. It is easy to become drunk on other people's ideas and opinions. To a degree, people who follow harmful teachers are doing the same thing. They are drinking somebody else's wine, and becoming intoxicated on somebody else's delusions. In such a case it can be extraordinarily difficult to break free.

It is important to remember that the various scriptures that are recited, particularly in our tradition, all have to do with meditation. They are all pointing towards what one is doing when one sits. This is particularly true of the Heart Sutra, i.e. the *Scripture of Great Wisdom*. Many, maybe even most people, looking at this scripture, think of it as a philosophical document. But in fact, it is talking about the practice of meditation.