

# *Obstacles in Meditation Practice.*

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In the *Scripture of Great Wisdom* (the *Heart Sutra*), which is the essential scripture of the meditation schools of Buddhism, there is the statement that the spiritual obstacles in the mind of the Bodhisattva dissolve through oneness with Great Wisdom. It is important to know that there is no spiritual obstacle that will not eventually dissolve if one continues one's training. This is an essential element of a Buddhist's faith. With this in mind, I would like to discuss briefly a few commonly encountered difficulties in the hope of assisting people who are beginning serene reflection meditation training.

## **Irregular Meditation Practice.**

Just as our negative habits are strengthened through repetition, and especially through regular repetition, the habit of bright acceptance—the attitude of serene reflection meditation—is strengthened through repetition, especially *regular* repetition. A persistent difficulty in establishing a regular practice of sitting meditation may be indicative of an underlying fear. It can be very helpful in dealing with this difficulty to establish regular meditation periods—for example, once daily, morning or evening—in which one sits for only a very short time. Even a few minutes is sufficient in the beginning. The short duration of the meditation period will help relax the fear gently and gradually. Regularity is far more important than duration of sitting periods, though with time one will want to sit for a longer period. Every time

one sits down to meditate, one is beckoning to the Eternal Buddha Nature. In doing this regularly, we develop the habit of opening the heart to the Eternal and this habit gradually pervades and transforms our entire life. The key here is to push gently against the resistance through regular practice. Then, once a week or so, one can set a day aside in which one does not do formal meditation. (Some people find that they end up doing some that day just for the pure enjoyment of it, but it is important that there be no sense of obligation or necessity. This rest day helps invigorate a long-term practice.)

### **Striving.**

This often is just the reverse side of the reluctance that makes regular practice difficult. Striving is a well-intentioned but somewhat misguided effort. It involves pushing oneself too hard by sitting too frequently or too long. For most people, formal meditation done once or twice each day (with a day of rest or renewal as mentioned above each week or so) is adequate as the basis of daily practice. Of course, one cannot make a general rule since people differ greatly, but it can be said that when striving is present the effort is heavy and desperate. As said above, *regular* practice is the essential thing. It is enough to respectfully and regularly knock at the gates of enlightenment: it is not necessary to try to pound them in.

### **One-sided Views on Meditation and Training.**

In fifteen years as a monk, I have come to the point where I not only do not know what will, or will not, happen next, but I can be sure that if I cared to speculate on the subject I would be wrong. It is amazing how quickly our theories come to the aid of our desires—and how mistaken both can be. In doing meditation and training, a naïve and humble attitude of mind is very helpful. The spiritual life is full of inexhaustible riches which are given gradually as we

are ready to receive them. We cannot anticipate them, nor can we control them. We can only make ourselves receptive to them by training as sincerely as we can. In meditating, we must continually let go of what we have known and experienced in the past. For that to which we are opening ourselves in meditation is Infinite, and our little opinions are never going to be adequate in the presence of the Infinite. It is necessary to train in respect and gratitude, and, respectfully and gratefully, go beyond things we have read, old opinions and the *greed* to understand and control.

### **Difficulty Accepting the Full Religious Implications of Meditation.**

Many Western people come to Buddhism expecting it to be a kind of non-religious religion. And, of course, it does differ in many ways from the religions in which many of us were raised. But Buddhism *is* a religion, and it requires us to have real faith. This faith is not a matter of professed creed or belief. It is the faith that there *is* That which is a true Refuge and that we can find this Refuge through meditation and training. A person who does Buddhist practice and persists in it through all the ups and downs of life has this faith, whether he or she *knows* it or not.

The natural movement of faith is in the direction of a constant deepening. Thus it grows into the understanding and the certainty that there *is* the Eternal. Its growth is unending. Yet *we* may not always be perfectly willing for that deepening to continue. Sometimes, people try to arrest faith at a certain point in its development. This is done out of fear. One may work very hard at this “putting on the brakes,” but it never works.

In Buddhism, there is the Refuge of the Buddha (meaning both the historical Buddha and the Eternal Buddha Nature). There is also the Refuge of the Dharma—the

teaching of the Buddha and of our own Buddha Nature. And there is the Refuge of the Sangha—those who follow the Buddha and those who seek, long for and know the Eternal. In doing meditation, we are directly taking Refuge in the Eternal. And if we are sincere and continue our training, we will find that we are increasingly drawn to take Refuge in the Dharma and in the Sangha. It is important to allow the natural movement of the heart toward the *Three Refuges* to flow forth unhindered. Sometimes, people want to meditate, but do not want to hear the Buddha's Teaching or train with, and seek the advice of, spiritual seniors. A great Buddhist Master said, "the Way to the Ultimate is not hard; simply give up picking and choosing."<sup>1</sup> It is helpful, when we find ourselves putting on the brakes, to recognize that we are afraid of something and to use this as an incentive to look more deeply within our own heart for the key to a deeper trust. It is very unhelpful to get involved in one's own, or others', rationalizations and intellectual theories which always attempt to justify fears. If we remain still within our own heart and long to do the right thing, we will receive the help we need.

### **The Gap between Meditation and Daily Life.**

Many years ago, Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett's Chinese ordination master visited Shasta Abbey. His name was The Very Reverend Seck Kim Seng and he visited America, as it turned out, shortly before his death. He came to see how Rev. Master was faring in America and he spoke to each of her disciples in private with just another Chinese monk present as an interpreter. When I went in to see him I was in my mid-twenties and a very new novice monk. I had no idea what he would say. He asked me, with great kindness, what I wanted in becoming a monk. The question had never occurred to me and I said the first thing that popped into my mind: "I want to be able to meditate in everything I do." I left the room thinking that I must have appeared pretty

dumb: it did not seem like a very glorious or momentous spiritual ambition.

I have since realized how much more wisdom was embodied in my naïve answer to the old priest's question than in my afterthoughts. Many people feel, as I did, a considerable gap between formal meditation and the quality of daily life. People react in different ways to this seeming gulf. Some want to cling to formal meditation and this can lead to the problem of striving mentioned above. Others despair so much of imbuing their daily life with the serenity that they experience at times in meditation that they abandon practice altogether. The only answer I know to this problem is just to continue one's training in the faith that with time the seeming gap will disappear. And this is in fact what eventually happens. But I would emphasize that it does not happen at all as I vaguely thought and hoped it would. The reality is far greater than we can possibly anticipate. We can safely say that, while one may not know how the Truth will manifest within one's life, regular meditation, the study and practice of the Buddhist Precepts, the cultivation at all times and in all circumstances of an attitude of respect and gratitude, and the willing training with others and under the guidance of the best Teacher one can find provide the essential means to that unforeseeable goal.

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*Note.*

1. Great Master Chien-chih Seng-ts'an, "That Which Is Engraved upon the Heart That Trusts to the Eternal." For one translation of the whole poem see *Buddhist Writings on Meditation and Daily Practice: The Serene Reflection Meditation Tradition*, 2nd ed., translated by Rev. Hubert Nearman, O.B.C., with Rev. Master P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, M.O.B.C., and Rev. Daizui MacPhillamy, M.O.B.C., as consultants and editors (Mt. Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, 1998), pp. 213–221.