

Exploring Meditation

1. Getting Started by Bhante Dhammika

Good morning and welcome,

today and for the next few weeks, we're going to talk about meditation. It's a subject that everybody is interested in and many people want to do and so I thought it might be good to talk about meditation in purely practical way. So, that those of you who would like to take up this practice will be able to. And I think, that the best place to start on this subject is to talk about - first of all- the reasons why somebody would want to meditate. That it is important to be clear in your own mind: why it is that you want to meditate? And a reason why I say that it is important is because there are many different types of meditation having many different goals and you need to do the practice, which is suitable for your particular goal (whatever happens to be).

Now, it seems to me that you could say, that the people who meditate, meditate for, or who are interested in meditation, are interested for one of three reasons: practical reasons or what I would call - therapeutic reasons or for onto the better term - for transcendental reasons. I think, that the majority of people, are interested in meditation for practical reasons. That is, they find that their life is very stressful or they find that they've got a lot of anxiety or are not as happy as would like to be and they think that meditation will help them and so they take up meditation to help improve the quality of their life. Now, all the research (and there is a lot of research on this subject) indicates that meditation is very, very good for this. It actually does help you to relieve stress, it does increase the quality of your life. So, that's the first reason, why people would take up the practice of meditation.

The second reason why people would take up the practice of meditation is for therapeutic reasons. They have a serious psychological problem. They're suffering from clinical depression or have a great deal of anxiety or perhaps even schizophrenia or something like this and they think that meditation is going to cure them. They think that meditation is going to restore them to normality.

Now, once again, meditation, given certain circumstances, has been shown to be able to assist people with some of these serious personality or psychological problems. So there would be second reason why people take up meditation. And the third reason people would take up meditation would be, what I would call for transcendental reasons. They want to attain union with God or they want to attain Nirvana or they want to attain the first stage of Enlightenment. And again, this is the whole purpose of meditation from the Buddhist perspective. The last two steps on the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path, *sammā-sati*, *sammā-samādhi* these are two of the practices that orientate us towards and help us to attain a transcendental state, called Enlightenment. So, this would be the third reason why somebody takes up meditation.

Now, my feeling is that the second and the third reasons for taking up meditation which I just talked about are problematic. While meditation could be very helpful, to helping somebody in a therapeutic sense, the reality is that most meditation teachers are not experienced at guiding somebody who has psychological problems and therefore meditation may actually aggravate their problem rather than sort it out. So, if you are taking up or if you want to take up meditation

for therapeutic reasons, I would encourage you not to - I would encourage you to go to your psychoanalyst or your therapist or psychiatrist or whoever it is, to sort out that problem. And when you're back to your normal state, then take up meditation. I would discourage anybody taking up meditation for therapeutic reasons, unless their therapist is the one who is teaching them the meditation.

Then, for those who want to meditate for transcendental reasons, I would say that this is a problem too. Because the reality is that the majority of people who really don't know, what they talking about, when they talk about the First stage of Enlightenment or Nirvana. So in actual fact, they're taking up meditation out of very idealistic, perhaps even of romantic ideas. The basis, the desire for meditation is really not based on reality. And my experience is that people who take up meditation for these reasons, once again sometimes get themselves into problems. The main problem being: they become obsessed with circle steps or stages that they suppose to have attained or they hope to attain. They get very caught up in this sort of theoretical steps or stages. Or the other one: they became very frustrated. They have been meditating for three years and they are still not enlightened - they become very frustrated. So, my feeling is that the best reason to take up meditation is for purely practical reasons to psychologically sort yourself out. To attain a degree of mental clarity and calm. So that you can function in the world better. And the reality is of course, that even if you take up meditation for transcendental reasons, you would have to pass through this stage anyway. So, today and in a future, I'm going to talk about meditation purely from a practical point of view.

So, let us consider, that our goal in practising meditation for the time being, is purely practical, to help me function in the world better, to become a more relaxed, a more happy, a more tranquil person. Somebody, who can deal with knocks and blows of ordinary life.

Now the second thing we have to, the second issue we have to look at, when we're talking about meditation, and specifically buddhist meditation, is this, that meditation, a buddhist meditation - is a part of a whole system. It is a part of the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path. The Buddha didn't teach the Noble Onefold Path - right meditation, He taught the Noble Eightfold Path of which things pertaining to meditation are in two of these stages. So, for example: a battery or a spark-plug or something like that gets a car moving. But, if you only have the battery or the spark-plug in a car, it will not move. It's an essential part of getting a car to move, but in actual fact, all the other parts are essential too. So, anybody who is taking up meditation needs to consider following the Five Precepts: practising right speech, avoiding drugs, alcohol, another drugs and thinks like these. Meditation "divorced" from the other steps on the Noble Eightfold Path is unlikely to be as helpfull as it would be otherwise. In other words, practising meditation while making absolutely no other changes or modifications to your life, to your behaviour, your attitude - is unlikely to be helpful.

So, first of all we have to be clear about: why we want to meditate? Secondly, we have to be clear, that meditation is a part of a whole. It can't be taken out of that whole and be expected to produce results. So, having said that or having considered that: how do we start?

It's really very simple. The Buddha talked about several, primary steps in the practice of meditation.

Four of them in fact, in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta and several other Suttas. He talked, first of all, about place where we should meditate, the posture you should adopt for meditating, the actual practise itself. So, let us have look at these: let's say, you want to take up meditation. The first think, you have to consider is: where I'm going to do it? And in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta the Buddha sais: "go to the forest, the root of tree, or an empty house : „araññagato rukkhamūlagato suññāgāragato ". So, we mean not go to forest nowadays, but what we need is, what the Sutta makes it clear is: a place of solitude and relative silence. So, this could be your room or could be your whole house or could be your flat, or indeed it could be the forest, or the garden.

First of all you find a place where you are unlikely to be disturbed. If it's in your room or in your house, you disconnect the phone, you turn off the television, the radio, it can be good to make arrangements so to be unlikely to be disturbed during the time you're doing the meditation. The next one is your posture. Go to an empty place: forest, root of a tree and then you sit down with your legs crossed. "nisīdati pallaṅkaṃ ābhujitvā" So, you put a pillow under your buttocks, put folded blanket on the floor, with a pillow on it, put your buttocks on the pillow, cross or fold your legs. You put your hands in your lap, nestle your hands in your lap, you put them on your knees, and important thing is -as you start and through the whole practice, in the beginning of your practice and years later- the most important thing is that the posture be comfortable, that you be comfortable in that state. Many people seem to think, that the sign that your meditation is going well is that you don't move. People became obsessed with moving. In reality, it is quite OK to move. The reality is that if you are comfortable, if your body is relaxed, there is no tension or anxiety or cramped muscles, chances are that you will be still not because you are trying to be, but you're naturally comfortable and so you're still. Through out your practice, make sure that your body is comfortable and relaxed.

And then He says: "and keep your body straight" - "ujuṃ kāyaṃ" which means "to keep your back straight". Keep your back straight without beeing rigid and of course, you don't have to sit on the floor, you could sit on a chair, either way make sure your back is straight. And the third step is "parimukhaṃ satiṃ upaṭṭhapetvā." arouse or evoke your mindfulness in front of you. "Pari" as in English "perimeter", "mukhaṃ" face or mouth, "upaṭṭhapetvā." - bring up, establish. Establish your mindfulness in front of you. And this is usually interpreted to mean (I believe that it does): that you put your attention somewhere in front of your face. And because it is called: mindfulness of breathing "Ānāpānasati" it must mean "below your nose".

Now, people can get really quite obsessed with the actual technique of meditation. Some teachers give exact and precise details, and say: it must be done this way. Other say, that you must put you attention "here", somebody's view can say that you must put your attention on a rise and fall of your abdomen, some say that you must "here", same say "here", some say that you must count it and so on. And people can get extremely obsessed about these techniques.

Now, the reality is that nowhere in the Buddhist discourses does he give anything other than these - general but clear enough instructions "parimukhaṃ satiṃ upaṭṭhapetvā"

So, the reality is that it really doesn't matter where you put your attention: "here" or "here". The purpose is, will it help you to develop your mindfulness of the process of breathing. So, I advise people to do this: sit in a comfortable posture, nestle your hand on your lap, close your eyes and

become aware of your breathing. Now, maybe that quite naturally your attention goes here or maybe quite naturally that your attention goes to the rise and fall of your abdomen, or you might find that counting seems to be easier for you. Whichever way seems best for you - do that. And, I would even suggest that for the first perhaps week that you're meditating, do it in several different ways - explore and find out: which way is most comfortable, most convenient and most useful for you. And having decided upon that particular way, stick to that.

So, you may count for breath from one to ten, or you may feel your breath - the warm air as you breath out, the cool air as you breath in. You may observe rise and fall of your abdomen - it doesn't matter which way helps you to develop your mindfulness is best.

And that's what the Buddha said: "parimukhaṃ satiṃ upaṭṭhapetvā" "having establish to your mindfulness in front of you" "So sato va assasati, sato va passasati." "mindfully in breath in, mindfully in breath out" and this is very important. People think, that the purpose of this practice is to concentrate, to develop concentration (samādhi). But in actual fact, neither in the name of this Sutta The Ānāpānasati Sutta nor in a phrase ""parimukhaṃ satiṃ upaṭṭhapetvā" does the Buddha talked about samādhi- He is talking about sati: the ability to be present with what is happening, or the ability to be mindfull of what is happening or the ability to be aware of what is happening.

Now, when we sit comfortably and we become naturally still, when we put our hands on our lap and we close our eyes, there will only be limited number things happening. There will be some sensations on the body, although not many, there won't be many sounds because you are in a fairly quite place. The most noticeable thing that will be happening is that you are breathing. You are breathing all of the time; since the moment you were born - you are breathing, but we're hardly ever, are aware of this wonderful, rythmic, gentle behaviour. Here what we do is we put aside all of clutter , concerns of ordinary life, we sit down quietly and start to become aware of ourselves. Perhaps, for the first time! With the eyes closed, sitting in a quite room, you become aware of the fact that you are breathing. Now, inevitably we will start to become aware of other things.

Thoughts will arise, probably lots of them. Our attention may be taken away by noises outside, it is inevitable there will be some physical discomfort, tickling feelings on the body, some discomfort. None of this matters, none of these should be seen as a hindrance, none of that should be labelled "a distraction". Simply, note those experiences, notice that you are no longer aware of your breath, simply reassert your presence on your breath. Be here now. And in this "now" I have chosen to be aware of the gentle in and out movement of my breath. And that is what you do. Don't see the sounds, the thoughts or the feelings, as enemies, because they're not. So, each time you noticed that your attention has gone away to sound or thought or feeling, simply know that it is happening and return to your breath, reassert or re-establish your attention on your breath.

Now, the next question is: how long should I meditate for? How long should I do this for? How long should I sit on a chair or with my legs crossed or folded on the floor and meditate?

I recommend you to do this: for the first week, at least once a day, do this practice for 15

minutes. Today most clocks or watches have got some sort of alarm on them, set your alarm for 15 minutes and put it behind you (so that you're not looking at it all the time), and in that time, say for next 15 minutes it doesn't matter what happens, I'm simply giving myself to be aware of my breathing, and just do that. So, for first week we do it for 15 minutes. Next week we will extend it by 5 minutes, the week after that you extend this by 5 minutes, until you've got up to 45 minutes and then you leave it at that. So, starting with 15 minutes gradually each week adding 5 minutes to the time you meditate, until you get up to 45 minutes.

Another question that people ask is: what do I do if there is some irritating feeling or my legs are aching or my buttocks had become numb? As we said, you cannot judge the success of meditation by how still you are, you judge the success of your meditation by how mindful you are. Meditation is not a sit-still competition. So, if it happens that you are meditating and then you notice cramp in your knees, whatever, once again, you simply note that and return to breathing mindfully. If you find that your attention keeps on going to that feeling, it's becoming quite uncomfortable, then what you do is - you move. It's no problem, you haven't been defeated, you simply move and then return to being aware. However, there are several different ways to move: one way is to move the way we always do, which is without any awareness at all - it's just an automatic, even a mechanical reaction to an experience. But because the purpose of our practice is to become mindful, now what you do is -when you've decided that that irritating feeling, or that cramped feeling needs to be responded to- then you make a note "I intend to respond to that feeling". Fully aware you move your hand. Fully aware you scratch it or you itch it, or you re-adjust your posture, you return your hand aware and then you switch your attention, your awareness to your breath again. So, in actual fact, if you do that, if you move, with mindfulness, if you move fully aware, you have not really interrupted your practice, you've just shifted the object of your practice for few moments. So, there is a continuum, and this is no problem. Don't turn your meditation into sit-still competition; how you judge the success or otherwise if you practice is not by how still you sit or how long you still sit, but how much, how mindful or aware you were - and if you do that, your meditation will be fruitful and it will help you.

So, next week we will start talking about the second stage in a practice of meditation. This week we've talked about first of all: why you should meditate - for purely practical reasons. Then, we talked about the four stages: 1. finding a suitable place, 2. putting your body in a suitable posture, 3. the actual practice you do, and 4. how to deal with problems. So, that the place you meditate, the posture you are meditating, the actual practice you use, and how you deal with specific problems.

Next week we will continue the next stage you need to go through to practice your meditation.

Source: <http://www.youtube.com/user/sasanaPL>