

The decision we make when confronted with situations like finding money, needing a paper clip and taking it without asking, have a significant impact on the development of our character and our ability to perfect virtue.

HONOR THE BODY – ABSTAIN FROM SEXUAL MISCONDUCT

Sexual misconduct includes rape, adultery, and other obviously inappropriate sexual encounters. On a more subtle level, we may need to avoid any activities in which people are related to as objects of sexual desire such as pornography, talking about our physical attraction to others and making sexual innuendoes.

Less obvious forms of sexual misbehavior may occur within personal relationships. For example, if one person is not inclined toward sexual intimacy, his/her partner needs to respect those wishes and act accordingly.

MANIFEST TRUTH – ABSTAIN FROM FALSE SPEECH

This precept means to relate what is true while remaining sensitive to the potential impact of all communication. We need to avoid telling what we consider harmless lies, to make sure that what we say is consistent with what we do and to immediately communicate changes in circumstances that prevent us from keeping commitments.

The Buddha offers guidelines on four categories of communication; saying something that is untrue and displeasing to hear should be avoided, saying something that is untrue but pleasing to hear should be withheld, saying something that is true but displeasing to hear should be offered only if the person is receptive and saying something that is true and pleasing to hear should be said only at the right time.

PROCEED CLEARLY – ABSTAIN FROM INTOXICANTS

This precept means avoiding the consumption of alcohol and drugs. It also means avoiding the abuse of other types of sensory stimulation such as food, caffeine, TV, video games, etc. These substances and behaviors confuse the mind and cause heedless behavior and ultimately lead to unskillful actions. Moreover, it is impossible to clarify a mind whose perceptions are distorted beyond its normal level of delusion by the effects of intoxicants.

The principles embodied in the precepts are identical to the moral aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path. This indicates that moral behavior is more than a social convention. It is a primary fact in the path leading to Nibbana. Thus the precepts encourage us to practice the principles of the Noble Eightfold Path in every aspect of our lives.

The act of taking refuge and undertaking the Five Precepts is usually a formal affirmation for new practitioners of Buddhism. This is done in a ceremony in which a teacher or elder monk recites the precepts and asks if the person agrees to honor them. When the person agrees, he/she is recognized as a follower of the Buddha and as a member of the Sangha, the community that practices the teachings of the Buddha.

MEDITATION

In its simplest terms, meditation is the calming or stilling of the mind through concentration. The Buddha meditated when he obtained Nibbana and then taught what he learned so others could relieve their suffering. He told his followers to use their own experience with meditation to determine the truth. As a Buddhist practice, meditation is intended to purify the mind. It cleanses the thought process of what can be called psychic irritants like greed, hatred, and delusion. These thoughts and feelings keep us snarled up in emotional bondage. Meditation brings the mind to a state of tranquil awareness.

We might say that meditation is like sharpening a pencil. We sharpen a pencil for a purpose, in order to write. Similarly, by means of meditation we sharpen the mind for a definite purpose. In Buddhism that purpose is to gain insight and concentration.

Most of us are preoccupied with thoughts. We are constantly carrying on an internal dialogue. As long as we are involved in that conversation, we tend to miss the moment-to-moment awareness of our life. We look but we do not see, we listen but we do not hear, we eat but we do not taste, we love but we do not feel. Meditation brings us back to the present moment, which is where our life is taking place. If we miss this moment, we miss our life.

The process of meditation develops what is called the observer level of mind. This means that by meditating we learn to step back from our mental and emotional processes and gain a bit of detachment from our shifting moods and thoughts. In other words, we learn to notice our states of mind, such as racing thoughts or upset and anxious feelings. Observing and accepting these shifting states allows us to gain a great deal of psychological insight. We are freed, in a sense, from being caught inside the mood or frustration of scattered thoughts.

MEDITATION BASICS

Meditation can be done individually or in a group. Meditating in a group provides support and energy that can assist in developing the practice. It is also helpful to have a teacher but it is not necessary. A good teacher will not tell one what to believe or what to think, just how to practice so that one can discover the truths within individual experience.

Meditation is not a complicated practice but that does not mean it is easy. It requires effort, commitment, concentration and alertness. While it is possible to meditate in any situation, no matter how noisy or distracting, it is easier to practice at a time when it is quiet. Many people prefer to meditate in the morning before breakfast or before bedtime. Try to find a routine, at the same time each day to begin the meditation practice. Start with a 20 – 30 minute meditation and once a routine is established increase the length of time to 40 minutes. Decide on the length of the session prior to starting, have a timer to guide the meditation session and then sit.

Meditation is not sedation or trance. It should be a combination of relaxation and alertness. Alertness is needed to keep the back straight and to avoid falling asleep. This is a practice and therefore it is something you repeat.

MEDITATION POSTURE

The position during meditation is important. How the body is positioned influences what happens with the mind and the breath. Meditation is about sitting still in order to calm the mind and body. To physically accomplish this stillness, you must sit in a stable position. Sitting on the floor is recommended because it is very stable.

There are specific mats, cushions and benches used in meditation. If sitting on the floor, a small pillow or zafu is used to raise the behind a bit so that the knees are below the level of the hips and touching the floor. A square mat called a zabuton is placed beneath the body to soften the contact with the floor. With the buttocks on the pillow and knees touching the mat on the floor, a tripod base forms that gives stability. Placing the knees lower than the hips also helps to keep the back straight without straining.

Another tool used for meditating is a small wooden bench. If using a bench, sit on the bench with the knees placed under it in a kneeling position. The bench is also placed on a zabuton to soften the contact of the floor. Zafus can also be used for kneeling if desired.

There are several leg positions when using a zafu. Possible leg positions include:

- ❖ Cross-legged – the legs are crossed at the ankles and both feet rest on the floor. The knees should also rest on the floor, though sometimes it takes a bit of stretching to get the legs to drop that far. If the knees cannot rest on the floor, place a small pillow under them.
- ❖ Burmese – the legs are folded on the floor with the shins flat on the floor one in front of the other.
- ❖ Half-lotus – both knees touch the floor with one calf and one foot laying flat along the calf of the other leg.
- ❖ Full-lotus – both knees touch the floor with the legs crossed at the calf. The left foot is placed on the right thigh; right foot is on the left thigh with both soles turned upward. This is perfectly symmetrical and solid.

Meditation can also be done by sitting in a chair. Sit so the back does not rest against the chair but keeps the spine straight and lower back curved. Place the legs side-by-side, feet flat on the floor. A folded blanket may be placed under the feet so they have firm contact with the floor and to raise the back of the knees off the edge of the chair so circulation is not restricted. Place a blanket or small cushion under the buttocks to raise them higher than the knees.

Stability is the import reason sitting cross-legged on the floor works well. Experiment with the different position until one feels the most comfortable. Most people cannot manage a full-lotus position without a lot of time devoted to stretching exercises. What is most important is finding a position that raises the buttocks and leaves the knees pointed downward at about a 30-degree angle with the back straight. The importance of keeping the back straight is to allow the diaphragm to move freely.

Getting into a stable position may be difficult in the beginning but with time and practice it become more comfortable.

Once the position of the body is determined, there are a few other aspects of posture to consider:

- ❖ Keep the mouth gently closed. Unless there is nasal blockage, breath through the nose.
- ❖ Press the tongue lightly against the roof of the mouth. This reduces the need to salivate and swallow.
- ❖ The eyes can be open or closed. If they are open, cast them on a spot about three feet in front and allow them to go out of focus.
- ❖ When sitting, keep the ears in line with the shoulders and the nose in line with the navel.
- ❖ Breathe through the nose from the middle of the body, from the belly not the chest.
- ❖ The top of the head should seem as if a string were holding from above.
- ❖ The shoulders should remain relaxed but should not sag.
- ❖ The spine should be slightly curved at its base, in order to point the buttocks more behind than in line with your backbone.
- ❖ Place the dominant hand on the non-dominant hand, palms upward with the tips of the thumbs slightly raised and gently touching.
- ❖ After meditation, do not try to stand up in a hurry if the legs have fallen asleep. Take time and make sure circulation is back in the legs and feet.

MEDITATION OBJECT

There are many objects of meditation but for beginners, it is usually suggested to begin by focusing on the breath. The breath is used as our mental focal point. It serves as a vital reference point as the mind wanders from it and is directed back to it.

First find the breath. Look for the point where there is a physical sensation of air flowing in and out of the nostrils. This is usually just inside the tip of the nose. But the exact spot varies from person to person. To find the focal point, take a deep breath and notice where the most distinct sensation of passing air is felt. Now exhale and note the sensation at the same point. Focus the attention on this physical sensation of air passing at this point. During meditation, do not attempt to control the breathing. Allow the breath to go along at its natural pace. If the mind wanders from the focal point, gently but firmly redirect it back to this point.

Mindfulness is the English translation for the Pali word Sati. Sati is an activity. When we first become aware of something there is a fleeting instant of pure awareness just before we conceptualize the phenomenon, before we identify or label it. That is a state of mindfulness. Usually, that original instant of mindfulness is rapidly passed over.

Mindfulness is nonjudgmental observation. It is the ability of the mind to observe without criticism. It is psychologically impossible for us to objectively observe what is going on within us if we do not accept the occurrence of our various mind states. This is especially true with unpleasant or unwholesome state of mind. We cannot examine something fully if we deny its existence.

There are two basic types of meditation, concentration or Samadhi and insight or Vipassana practice. Both are important to develop during meditation. Samadhi is often called one-pointedness and consists of focusing only on one static point. Effort and

alertness are required to sustain one-pointedness. Concentration assists in making the mind stable to gain insight.

Vipassana practice uses concentration and mindfulness to gain awareness into the true nature of reality. Applying concentration and mindfulness may initially seem impossible because our minds are constantly running on, jumping from thought to thought with no apparent sense of order. Do not despair; this is normal. Moreover, this constant flow of thoughts is the fodder for Vipassana meditation. The object is not to force these thoughts from the mind but to observe them. The task is to watch with detachment as the thoughts come and go. Observe how they affect the state of mind. Do not judge or label them good or bad, just observe.

Difficulties may occur when mediating, especially when starting to practice. The mind may wander off constantly. When it happens just note what the mind is doing such as thinking, daydreaming, or worrying. Keep returning to the physical sensation of the breath. Then do it again and again and again and again.....

The following attitudes can assist in meditation practice:

- ❖ Let go of expectations - expectations can distract the mind by making placing a judgment of good and bad
- ❖ Relax- the body should be stable and straight without strain or tension
- ❖ Accept experiences – accept the thoughts and feelings that arise, do not regard them as positive or negative, simply observe them
- ❖ Let it be – do not try to force thoughts out of the mind because that only feeds energy into them
- ❖ Be gentle with yourself – do not become impatient when the mind wanders, tell yourself nicely to return to your object of meditation

The Mindful Heart Buddha Sangha offers instruction for beginning meditators through classes. Intermediate study is also presented throughout the year. Additionally, discussing practice questions one-on-one with a teacher can benefit the practice and is encouraged. Please feel free to direct questions either about meditation, Buddhism or any information presented in this booklet.

RESOURCES & SUGGESTED READING LIST

A Gradual Awakening, Stephen Levine
A Path With Heart, Jack Kornfield
A Still Forest Pool – The Wisdom of Ajahn Chah, Jack Kornfield
Buddhism Without Beliefs, Stephen Batchelor
Buddhism Plain and Simple, Steve Hagan
Dhammapada, A Translation, Thanissaro Bhikkhu
Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness, Bhante Gunaratana
It's Easier Than You Think, Sylvia Boorstein
Living Dhamma, Ajahn Chah
Meditator's Atlas, Matthew Flickstein
Mindfulness in Plain English, Bhante Gunaratana
Start Where You Are, Pema Chodron
The Miracle of Mindfulness, Thich Nhat Hahn

Introduction to Buddhism & Meditation Class

