

Berkeley Buddhist Priory Newsletter

January – February 2002

MEDITATION

by Rev. Master Daizui MacPhillamy

(excerpt from pamphlets on the Eightfold Path)

Meditation is the most profound and least understood aspect of the Eightfold Path. Exactly what meditation is, what it does, and how it does it, are not fully known. But there is no doubt that the practice of meditation is critical to living the life of Buddha. It can be likened to the “locomotive” that powers the “train” of Zen training. With it, all the rest goes forward; without it, nothing moves much, unless perhaps to roll down hill.

Different schools of Buddhism practice meditation of different types, but most of them have two aspects: concentration or one-pointedness of mind, and awareness or insight into things-as-they-are. The form of meditation practiced in our Order is that of the Soto Zen tradition. It is called “serene reflection meditation”, which is a translation of the Japanese terms “zazen” and “shikan-taza”. In this meditation, the concentration and insight elements are harmoniously balanced, resulting in one unified form of meditation which can be practiced throughout one’s life, by beginner and expert alike.

The Posture of Meditation

Some Zen lineages place great emphasis on a particular proper posture for meditation. Ours places more emphasis on the mind of meditation, leaving the physical aspects to be tailored to the body and constitution of each individual. This, of course, requires the instruction of an experienced meditation teacher, and you would be well advised to keep in consultation with a priest or lay minister of our Order if you choose to practice serene reflection meditation. They can help you find the best meditation postures for you, answer ongoing questions about both the physical and mental aspects of the practice, and refer you to a master when needed. Booklets devoted to our type of meditation are available at all meditation groups and temples, and books can be suggested.

The Mind of Meditation

The founder of our Order, Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett, who studied meditation under some of the greatest meditation masters of Japan, translated the classic Zen texts on the mind of meditation as saying that the critical element is, “Do not try to think, and do not try not to think”. She likened the mind of meditation to a person sitting under a bridge beneath a busy road. The “traffic” on the road is our thoughts, feelings, perceptions, emotions, etc. To try to mentally stop the traffic is to “try not to think”. The same is true of dulling the mind to the point where no traffic is noticed at all. These approaches would seriously unbalance the harmony of meditation: the first one by increasing concentration to the point of excluding awareness, the second by decreasing awareness to the point that only concentration is left. On the other hand, to leave one’s sitting place, get up and accept a ride in one of the cars is to “try to think”. One’s mind is literally “captured” and “carried away” by a particular thought or feeling, so that what was simply a passing thought turns into a ten minute chain of thinking. Here, the concentration has been insufficient, and awareness has lost touch entirely with the basic fact of things-as-they-are: the fact that we are just sitting there. Whenever we find that we are doing something other than just sit there, we gently bring our mind back. This is done over and over again, and is the work of meditation practice.

Another useful observation which Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett made about meditation was the distinction between natural and deliberate thought. Suppose, for instance, that a dog barks while we are meditating. We naturally hear the sound, and perhaps the thought occurs to us that a dog is barking. These are examples of natural thought; they are part of things-as-they-are, part of simple, aware sitting. This is meditation, and nothing needs to be done about it. But suppose that we continue the chain of thought: we next think that the barking disturbs our meditation, that our neighbor should control their dog better, that something really should be done about this lack of consideration..., and the next thing we are aware of is that we “wake up”, realizing that we have spent the last five minutes giving our neighbor a lecture. This is deliberate thought and is inconsistent with serene reflection meditation. We need to bring our

mind back to the awareness of simply sitting there.

Common Questions

How do I know if I am doing it right?

You don't. In fact, you can't. That is because meditation is one with you, so there can be no separation of a "doer" and an "observer" who knows that it's right. But you can know if you aren't doing it, and that is all you need to know, because then you can bring yourself back to simply sitting.

Nothing seems to be happening during meditation; what is wrong?

The problem is more likely to be with your expectations of what should "happen" than with the meditation. Meditation has profound effects over time, but the whole process is much larger than we can know and judge. Try letting go of the expectations and just sit. The same holds true if a lot is "happening". It may help to remember that this is the practice of a lifetime: let it do its work.

How can I stop from constantly wandering off?

Don't try to stop yourself from wandering off, because then you will be trying to add something to pure meditation. But each time you are aware of having wandered off, do not waste time in coming back.

I seem to "float" from one thought to another; I don't often get caught by any one thought in particular, but I am sort of "elsewhere", rarely being aware of actually sitting there.

This happens. Try putting a bit more energy or concentration into what you are doing: an alive, aware, gently focused mind is best. But don't take this too far, or it becomes "trying" rather than meditating. See the next question.

*I find that if I concentrate hard on just being aware of sitting,
if I sort of “bore in” to this, then I get caught a lot less often.
Is this OK, or am I trying not to think?*

Sometimes this seems good, as a response to the “floating” mentioned above, for instance. But don’t make a general practice of it, as this, too, is adding something to pure meditation. Trust that “just sitting” really is enough.

How can I stop from falling asleep?

There can be many causes for this. Perhaps the posture is not quite right or the room is too warm; perhaps you are not putting enough energy into the sitting; maybe some part of you is fighting the meditation; or maybe you are simply too tired and need to go to bed!

Please feel free to ask for advise about these, or any other questions about meditation which may arise.

* * *

The Third Refuge Committee

by Michael Lara

An important issue has been recently raised by some Priory members and it revolves around the idea of how we can better take care of each other in times of serious need, especially as we get older and our health becomes compromised, or even if we are facing a terminal illness.

In Buddhism, the third refuge is the Sangha Treasure. The Priory has had a Third Refuge Committee in place for several years. It was established to provide a way for Priory Sangha to take refuge in each other, in particular to lend a hand to members who had situations that required some assistance, for example, helping with house moves; shopping for a member who was sick and possibly bed bound; taking care of a pet if the member was ill or relieving someone who was caring for a family member. Help has been given to Sangha members sorting through parents’ estates, house moves, help with finding a new apartment, lifts to and from doctor’s

appointments, helping with dealing with a family crisis, assistance with a sick animal, help with finding employment, etc. While the above describes what the Third Refuge Committee was established to do, recently there hasn't been a call for our assistance. This may be because it seems so much easier for us to stay in our shells and not speak up when we are faced with a need of some sort. It seems that one of the most difficult things for us to do, not just at the Priory, but in this society, is to ask for help. We tend to think that other people are too busy to be bothered with "my problems" or we feel that we should be able to deal with whatever difficult situations we are confronted with, despite the fact it can be difficult or even overwhelming.

On the other hand, we all do seem to have a full load on our plates. And sometimes our first reaction to a request for assistance is to think that we have no "free" time or "what can I offer?" The demands on our lives can sometimes run us ragged. Between work, family and our own personal agendas, there seems to be hardly any time left for anything else. So that between these two scenarios, a person requiring assistance who fails to ask for help and on the other side a potential helper who believes they don't have enough time or personal resources to share, there is a gulf that hopefully we can begin to bridge in some small measure among the Priory Sangha through the Third Refuge Committee. Recently, a hospice component has been mentioned as a possible addition to the Committee's service role.

One of the grounds of spiritual life is realizing that none of us is really separate from each other and we all need all sorts of help in our lives. We must all learn to look at what is arising in our lives and be willing to ask for help when there is a real need. And we all have to open our hearts to the needs of others and be willing to offer help when it is good. An essential aspect of the Sangha is we are learning to develop trust, willingness and compassion. Sometime the willingness is to see that others need help and sometimes the willingness is for us to open our hearts to our own difficulties and realize we need to trust the Sangha and ask for help.

Because few of us have had in-depth experience caring for the elderly or the dying, the Committee is looking into providing some professional training to interested Priory members. We are fortunate that some excellent resources have become available to us at what we believe will be a modest cost. More specific information will be forthcoming in the coming months.

We will be having a Third Refuge meeting on Saturday, February 9 from 10 am - 11:30 am. We plan to both introduce the newer Priory members to the activities of the Third Refuge Committee and to explore the many ways we can help each other. Any suggestions or questions would be most welcome.

*Do not chase after entanglements as
though they were real things.*

*Do not try to drive away pain by
pretending it is not real.*

*Pain, if you seek serenity in Oneness,
will vanish of its own accord.*

*from On Trust in the Heart
by Chien-chih Seng-ts'an*

* * *

Priory News

Rev. Teigan Stevens moves back to Shasta Abbey

Rev. Teigan who has been at the Priory for more than 2 1/2 years, has returned to his longtime home, Shasta Abbey, on November 12. The day before his departure, on November 11, after the usual Sunday Dharma talk, we had a potluck lunch at Mike and Judy Lara's house and it gave the Priory Sangha an opportunity to express their gratitude for all that Rev. Teigan has given us and to wish him well. The retirement committee that Rev. Teigan has organized is still very active and Rev. Teigan will remain involved in the exploration of various retirement possibilities for members of the Sangha. Rev. Teigan was back at the Priory for the weekend of December 14-16, visiting a hospice program and meeting with the retirement committee. Hopefully, this winter or spring, Rev. Teigan will visit Throssel Hole Abbey in England and have the opportunity to visit with the various European temples and Sanghas. There is deep gratitude for all Rev. Teigan gave us and he will be missed.

Dedication of the New Priory Avalokiteswara Altar

On December 16, the Priory held a service to offer our reverence and gratitude to the new altar and statue of Avalokiteswara which now dwells in the Priory meditation hall to the right of the main altar. A Sangha member made a beautiful maple altar, and a lovely, hand-carved wooden statue now lives in the Priory meditation hall, inspiring the Sangha to find the real heart of compassion, that is the real longing of all beings. During the dedication ceremony, everyone offered incense at the new altar and expressed their wish that the heart of compassion may always be seen in this Hall and that we all may experience and exhibit the heart of Avalokiteswara Bodhisattva.