

Making Life Your Meditation

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When we first come along to a meditation centre like this, we are often filled with excitement: the teachers here seem to know what they are talking about and the underlying philosophy makes a great deal of sense. We are told that the one and only purpose of the Buddha's teaching is to take us from point A – a state of suffering – to point B – realization of a mind that is completely beyond suffering, indeed, beyond any form of duality whatsoever. We resolve ourselves to try the teaching out and discover that it does, indeed, seem to work. Our suffering lessens. But after a while we start to run into difficulties. The initial enthusiasm may wear a little thin and the insights we desire just don't seem to materialise – at least not in the time frame that we expected. So, what are the sources of the problems we encounter on the path? In short, they are many and varied, but tonight I'd like to focus on one set of issues that can arise if we harbour wrong ideas about what insight meditation is. I'm going to explore two common wrong views about meditation and then look at ways that they can be corrected by developing mindfulness in the round and approaching the whole of life with a meditative attitude. To start with, I'd like to begin by sharing a personal anecdote to illustrate my main point. When I first started on the path of Buddhist training - some time ago now – I read a discourse by the Buddha in which he stated that anyone applying themselves *correctly* to meditation could come to full Enlightenment in just seven days. I'll never forget my first ever six-day meditation retreat in which I took this prospect to heart and, to put it bluntly, went for it. 'Enlightenment or bust', was my one and only thought. The consequences were predictable, as more experienced meditators will know. Six days of more or less unremitting pain, tension and mental torment during the seated hours, with periods of respite and calm in the breaks as – through exhaustion as much as anything else – I dropped the goal orientation for a while.

The meditative difficulties were all self-imposed, of course. Alan, my teacher at the time, expressed great compassion and tried to haul me out of the deep mire I'd got

myself into. He emphasized the need for patience and urged me to adopt a softly-softly approach instead of attempting to, as he put it, 'storm the gates of heaven'. I *heard* what he said but, if I'm honest, didn't really *listen*. In fact, it took quite a lot more experience and meditative trial-and-error before I was capable of understanding this most fundamental lesson about the correct application of energy. So what went wrong? Well, several things, but all of them stemming from a set of wrong views about meditation and how the training actually works in practice. The primary wrong view in operation was that Enlightenment can come about as the result of seated meditation practice *alone*. What I'd missed in the Buddha's discourse was that he was referring to *correct* meditation. Of course, I had little idea at that time what this actually meant. We all get things wrong and although I certainly suffered during that first six-day retreat, I did inch forward a little in terms of seeing – through direct experience – that maybe, just maybe, I was approaching the practice in an ineffective way. In the same discourse, the Buddha also says that if not achievable in seven days, then Enlightenment can arise from correct meditation for seven weeks, or seven months, or seven years. After the retreat I resigned myself to the fact that it was going to take a little more time than at first I'd anticipated. Alan has pointed out on many occasions that meditation is the art of learning *what not to do*. In other words, we have to learn how not to interfere with bare attention. In an important sense, this summarizes the whole of the path. It's a simple point but, like many simple things, it can be - and often is - very difficult to put into practice. Finding out how not to interfere, how to pay bare attention to experience, takes a lot of determination and patient application – with the emphasis on *patient application*.

So let's take a closer look at the wrong view that seated meditation is all we have to do to make progress. It's easy to reach this conclusion since seated practice is, at least nominally, something we can all do from the outset. Of course, the discipline of regular seated practice is essential. It acts as a kind of mental laboratory within which we can develop mental faculties, such as, mindfulness, concentration and *experiential* investigation of the teaching. This greatly assists our attempts to discover how the mind really works at the ultimate level. But it is a discipline that cannot be taken in isolation. Someone could meditate for five hours a day, eight hours a day, or even spend every available hour outside tending to bodily needs in seated practice and, in the absence of balanced faculties and informed instruction, would not get a single step further toward the goal of Enlightenment. Seated practice

has to be complemented by meditating on, and learning lessons from, life in the round. It also has to be accompanied by work on other necessary qualities, such as, striving to lead an ethically wholesome life, cultivating unselfishness through the practice of generosity and learning to become even-minded. Many years ago I knew a person – a fellow student - who was attempting to practice Buddhist concentration meditation (known as *samatha* practice). He had found a qualified teacher and was following instructions as best as he could, but after weeks and months of effort, the meditation was going nowhere fast. He just wasn't able to concentrate. As it happens, this friend was partial to a regular pint or two of beer and also enjoyed a very active social life – out with friends every night after a full day of study. Taking this into account, it's easy to see why he was unsuccessful in his efforts. For a start, he wasn't keeping the precept that counsels against indulging in drink and drugs that confuse the mind. Furthermore, he was leading far too a busy social life to stand any chance of attaining the calm necessary to make progress with *samatha* meditation. In other words, the supporting *life conditions* were not in place and, consequently, he was destined to fail unless he was willing to change those supporting conditions.

The wrong view that seated practice in isolation will yield results on the *vipassana* path can sometimes be accompanied by a related wrong view, namely, that one has to be a monk or a nun to stand any hope of making progress on the path. There is no question that, if one's life circumstances permit, dedicating oneself to full-time training can be of enormous benefit. The facilities here at Aukana, for example, are ideal in terms of the quality of instruction available and a routine perfectly designed to assist with insight meditation practice. Indeed, it's probably unparalleled in the UK, so anyone who has the opportunity to spend time as a resident really ought to take advantage of it. But if full-time training is not a feasible option, it certainly does *not* preclude making progress with insight meditation. It is perfectly possible to take the training all the way to its conclusion *as a lay meditator*. There are numerous documented cases of this happening in the Buddha's day, and examples of lay people today who have completed the training. Yet the myth persists. Of course, this wrong view can be a convenient excuse for some lay meditators. It makes the goal of Enlightenment something unattainable and can be taken as sufficient justification not to become committed to the task or have to work terribly hard in this lifetime. Not everyone can take up full-time training. Their life circumstances do not permit it:

maybe they are married and have children, or are committed to a long-term relationship, or have to care for ailing or elderly relatives. In these cases, the next best thing is to try to make time to come in as a day student on a regular basis. The advantages of this option are manifold and include: mixing with full time residents, being able to practice mindfulness in the round and engaging in profitable talk about the teaching with like-minded meditators and teachers. If part-time training is not possible, then assisting the lay committee from time-to-time by coming in to help with specific projects – whether decorating, transcribing talks, preparing uniforms, selling books and such like – offers the same kind of exposure to the teaching and provides a chance to cultivate generosity. But however much time you are able to spend at the Centre as a lay follower, it will still be essential to learn to meditate in the daily round, whether this be at work or in the home. If one is approaching the meditative training with *sincere intent*, then life will be looking after you and will offer the perfect conditions within which to make progress. It may not seem so; it may not be obvious, and faith is certainly required to trust that this is the case. The life of the lay meditator - if this is what you are given to work with - offers very many opportunities to develop the skills needed to progress on the path *if* it is approached in the right way. To quote the Rolling Stones lyric, 'You can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes, you might find, you get what you need'. Let's consider, then, a few of the ways in which the experience of lay life can be turned to meditative advantage.

I'm sure everyone here has heard that developing the faculty of mindfulness is crucial to insight practice. Concentration alone will not do the job. We *must* develop mindfulness to make headway with the training. The Buddha's discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (*Middle Length Sayings*, volume 1, number 10) offers detailed instruction on how to do this. We start to develop mindfulness by paying close attention to the body: becoming aware of the four postures – walking, standing, sitting and lying – and noting changes from one posture to another throughout the day. The beauty of this practice is that it can be done anytime and in any place. During the day we all have to get up, walk around, spend time sitting, attending to the calls of nature, and lying down – it's unavoidable. It can be helpful to set up mindfulness routines in order to remember to pay attention to the body. The trick is to break activities down into chunks and put in a volition – an intention - to be mindful of the activity in question. Try starting on a small-scale and gradually extend the

practice to other daily activities. For example, perhaps begin by putting in a volition to be mindful while washing in the morning. Try placing the mind in the body from the time you enter the bathroom until the time you leave. Notice when the mind gets pulled off from the sensation of brushing teeth to planning what one has to do – ‘Oh, I must remember to make a packed lunch today as the children have choir practice’. Notice the thought arising. Once noticed, return the attention to brushing teeth. When you get that routine working, however patchily, extend the practice to being mindful while eating breakfast. Again, note any movement of the mind away from bodily movements and the sensations and tastes that go along with eating. Once you get a little more mindful at breakfast time, take the practice on to the next routine. When walking to work, try to stay with the walking – get to know the body in the body. Keep the mind in the feet and practice sense restraint by focussing the eyes a few metres ahead on the ground. Note thoughts that arise or distractions such as sight being drawn of by passing traffic or attention getting caught by an enticing shop window or an advertising poster.

Depending on the nature of your job, there may be more or less opportunities to practice body mindfulness. If you have a desk job and work at a computer terminal you may lose body mindfulness for quite long periods. That’s not necessarily a problem. As mindfulness strengthens, there are other aspects of experience that you can include. Simply pick up body mindfulness again whenever you remember. Maybe you have to make your way, say, to the photocopier. Note beginnings and endings of postures; beginnings and endings of activities. By putting in repeated intentions to be mindful of body in five or ten minute chunks and periodically checking to see whether or not you were mindful, your ability to the practice *will* improve. Mindfulness is a conditioned faculty of mind. If you practice working on it, it will get stronger – just as a muscle will get stronger if you spend time lifting weights in a gym every day. As you get better at trying to stay mindful of the body it will throw into sharp relief the other foundations of mindfulness. You will become more aware of feelings (pleasant, painful or neutral), of your state of mind – are you in a grumpy mood, even-minded or joyful, for instance? – and of the content of mind. The hindrances to seated meditation practice are also hindrances to life itself. It’s possible to get better at spotting whether you’re indulging in worry about a job interview, or fantasising about a promotion, or doubting your ability to give a

presentation at work, or counting down the hours and minutes before you can make your weary way home. Again, it's important to keep noting how the content of mind is utterly transient. None of it lasts for very long at all before the mind moves onto to some other preoccupation. Developing body mindfulness whenever you remember to do it will open up a whole new and fascinating world of experience. It's one that's always been there for the noticing but was consistently ignored before you decided to start paying mindful attention to it. If you are in a long-term relationship, and/or have children, then you will be presented with a continuous flow of opportunities to develop skills that will take you along the meditative path. Anyone who has children will know how demanding being a parent is. It requires a level of self-sacrifice – literally putting their interests before your own – that cannot be properly communicated to anyone who has not had the experience. I remember Jacqui and Alan saying that, short of full-time training, the next best learning conditions for an insight meditator comes from being a parent. Never were truer words spoken! Not only does parenthood involve you in a stream of self-sacrifices which, if seen through meditative eyes, erode your own self-importance like nothing else, it also opens up a direct channel to loving acceptance. The love of a parent for a child is unconditional. This is why the *metta sutta* – the discourse on loving kindness – includes the following lines, 'just as a mother watches over and protects her only child at the risk of her own life, so with boundless heart of compassion I cherish all living beings'. When you love another being unconditionally, you put their wellbeing before your own in very practical ways. When you feel genuine love for your child, or any other being for that matter, it carries something of the flavour of Enlightenment itself. It is not Enlightenment, of course, but it certainly has the taste of non-duality and compassion that characterizes the end of the path. Relationships - whether with partners or friends or work colleagues - offer another invaluable source for meditative learning. There are many aspects of relating that one can look at meditatively, but I'll focus on just one this evening – developing equanimity toward praise and blame. Equanimity is one of the seven factors of Enlightenment – the seventh, in fact – so this should give you some clue as to its importance. It is also one of the so called *parami* or perfections that need to be developed if one is to reach the end of the path. So how can mindfulness of relationships help us cultivate equanimity? Say you're taken up with some domestic task – doing the laundry or ironing, perhaps, hoovering the house, or washing up. You are trying to pay careful

attention to the body, staying with the task in hand with an open mind. You notice that the mind is drawn off into a thought: 'I do far more than my fair share of the housework – so and so doesn't appreciate quite how hard I work and how much I contribute'. If you're being properly mindful, you'll note the thought, label it as 'desire for praise', then return the attention to the body. Everyone, at some point or other, feels under-appreciated but each time such thoughts are noted and dropped it slowly but steadily strengthens the faculty of equanimity. The same is true of mindful attention to blame. Say your boss asks you to produce a financial spreadsheet for a project you're working on. You submit the report and rather than thanking you warmly as you expected, the boss not only questions your calculations but gives you a ticking off and tells you to spend more care in future when preparing such statements. This reprimand you find really hurtful. If you're approaching the episode mindfully, however, you'll note all the stages involved: the blame, the painful mental feeling caused by the boss's words, your passionate response – 'I'm going to leave this job and then the boss will really be sorry – he doesn't know just what an asset I am to this company'. You'll see all these processes as conditioned and transient.

If you're not mindful in the settings I've just described, then the passionate response can easily take over and this will invariably result in suffering. In the case of doing the housework, for instance, the passionate thoughts about being undervalued can build in the mind. A head of steam gathers, fuelled by mounting anger and indignation. When your partner walks through the door, you immediately blast them with how inconsiderate they are and how they need to take more responsibility for the housework and do their fair share. This, in turn, prompts a very angry response from your partner about how they earn most of the money and, anyway, it's your job to look after the children and take care of house and home. The emotional tone between you can remain quite dark for some considerable time after such a conflagration. By taking the passionate response seriously, you've contributed to what one of my former colleagues used to describe, euphemistically, as a full-blown 'domestic'. Indeed, if the passionate response is repeatedly indulged in domestic situations, things can escalate to the point where the relationship is no longer tenable and breaks down completely. Love is replaced by mutual animosity which, in turn, can eventually lead to separation. Much better, then, to be mindful and restrained. Mindfulness, coupled with regular *metta* practice can really help nurture

and sustain healthy relationships between couples, other family members, friends and work colleagues.

Similarly, in the case of the problem with one's boss, *lack of mindfulness* can have quite serious consequences. When you receive an email reprimand, say, it's easy to be tempted to fire back an angry response giving the boss a piece of your mind, letting him know just how you feel and what he can do with his precious job. But, obviously, to do so will sour the relationship for quite some time. Again, if the passionate response is indulged and it becomes a repeated pattern then there might be more dire consequences. You might get fired, for example, or have to resign. As the American poet Maya Angelou once remarked, 'I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel'.

Incidentally, for residents under full-time training there is a rule which requires that they never answer back or justify themselves when reprimanded or blamed, even if they know for certain that they're entirely blameless. This rule is in place specifically to help full-time trainees develop equanimity toward praise and blame. To resist the passionate urge to say, 'it wasn't my fault', or 'I didn't do it', or 'so and so told me to', demands that one be self possessed and have the *courage* simply to accept the mental discomfort. Why not try it out for yourself in everyday life and see what happens? You have little to lose. It is only an unpleasant mental feeling after all. Now, I'm not suggesting for one moment that you should become a doormat in any relationship whether within the family, with friends or work colleagues. It's quite right to stand up to bullies and not allow yourself to be subjected to mental or physical abuse. Wise judgement is needed to find the middle path between extremes in every aspect of insight training. But the circumstances I described above fall far short of abuse, and the general point I want to make is that paying close attention to the passionate response – in this case to praise and blame – will produce enormous dividends in meditative terms. It is through looking carefully at the detail of seemingly mundane, work-a-day processes that insight deepens. The more one works at developing mindfulness in the round, the better one gets at seated practice. A virtuous cycle begins to form: seated meditation improves - you become more skilful at noting and dealing with hindrances when sitting still with your eyes closed – and this then carries over into mindfulness of daily life which, in turn, feeds back into

seated practice. I hope you can see, from what I've said, that it really is a matter of *making the whole of life your meditation*.

Many years ago, before coming to this centre, I experimented with several different spiritual paths. On this journey, several apparently 'spiritual' people told me that, for them, there was no difference between meditation and life. Although I'm sure they meant well, I was sceptical about their claims. It wasn't until I had the great good fortune to come here that I met individuals for whom life and meditation are *actually* one and the same thing. It requires a great deal of determination, patience, faith, and above all *practice* to get to that point, but the benefits are truly immeasurable. The mind that has discarded all its wrong views and has finally balanced the faculties becomes an unstoppable force as far as developing insight is concerned. Anything that life presents to such a mind, in whatever context - as lay person or full-time trainee - will be turned into the stuff of *vipassana* meditation. All experience is seen through the dispassionate lens of bare attention and known directly to be *anicca*, *dhukha* and *anatta* - transient, unsatisfactory and totally interdependent. Moreover, once this insight practice is perfected then Enlightenment knowledge is destined to arise in due course. If and when Enlightenment visits 'you', in a certain sense you will no longer be there to know it. *You* will have '*thus gone*', as the Buddha put it, and the resulting experience of profound freedom, peace and tranquility will quite literally leave you lost for words.