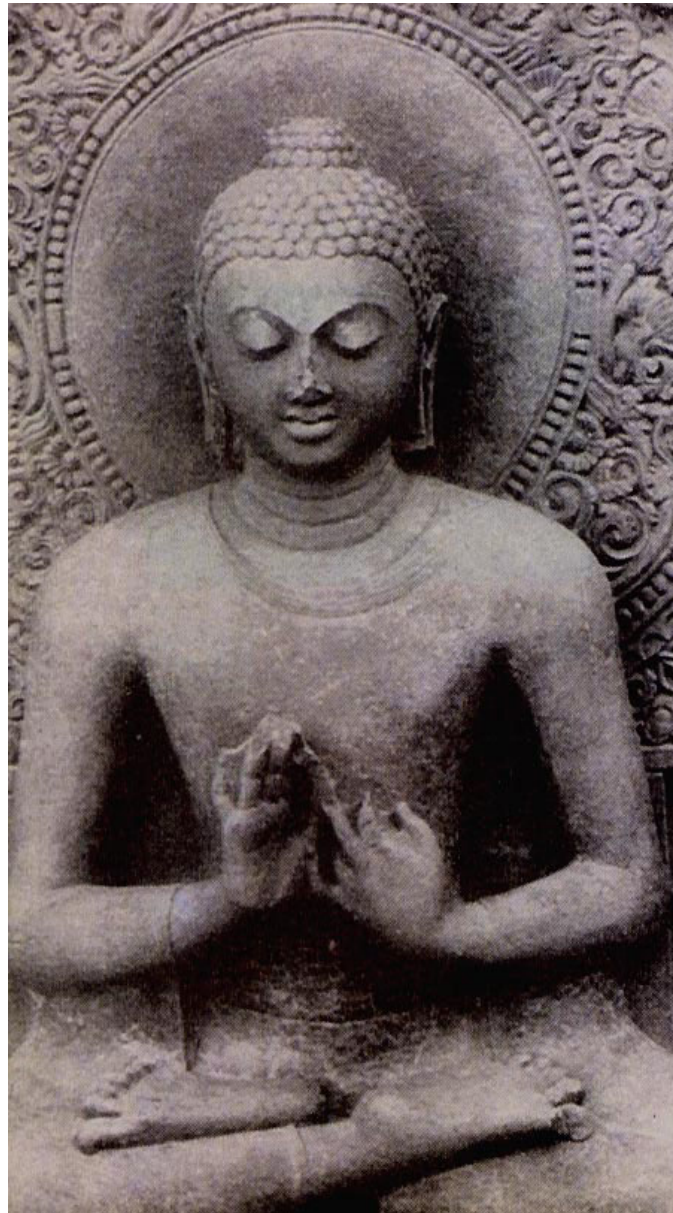


Bodhi



The Annual Magazine of the Manchester
University Buddhist Society, 2007 edition

Editorial

This year, 2006/2007, has been a reasonably successful year for the society. During the first Semester we maintained a weekly talks programme with speakers from many different traditions that was always well attended. We also maintained a meditation class for both Semesters which was kindly led by Chris Westrup. Two separate retreats were also organized, one at Gelli Faia in North Wales and the second one at the Samatha retreat centre in Greenstreete, also in Wales.

Here I wish to thank everyone for all their help over the past year in the society. Also, thanks to all who managed to put the effort in to produce an article! The magazine is a bit shorter this year than before for various reasons but I hope you appreciate it nonetheless as it is still, I believe, a most interesting read.

With Metta,

The Editor

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Please note: The articles in the magazine are the views of the individual contributors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the editors or the society

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Interview With A Ngakpa
By Elliot Cohen



**The Visit of Lopon Orgyan Tanzin Rinpoche
to Khandro Ling Buddhist Centre.**

Saturday 11th & Sunday 12th November 2006

(Photograph very kindly provided by Gordon Ellis of Khandro Ling)

When I say 'Tibet' to you, you may instantly think of snowy mountains, butter tea (which is really much more of a soup), monks and nuns in maroon robes ('the minds Tibet'). Arguably the most famous Tibetan in the world, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, is a monk. The Buddha himself and the majority of his first disciples were renunciates who left their homes and families to take up the begging bowl and live the homeless life.

Today, one may find many contemporary Buddhist monks following this 2,500 year old path (according to the codes and instructions still found in the *Vinaya Pitaka*), celibate, sober and mindful; having renounced the ways and habits of ordinary laypeople.

Yet within Tibet there is the *Vajra* (Tantric) path of the *Ngakpa*; known by few in the West and practiced by very few in the East. These practitioners are not only often highly realised and revered Lamas, but they are also often married (non-celibate), permitted to drink alcohol (often as part of their rites), eat meat and, if the *Dharma* is threatened, even to take life. It may surprise you to learn that one of the *Dalai Lama's* principle teachers and foremost masters of *Vajrayana* was a *Ngakpa*; His Holiness *Dilgo Khyentse*. Another famous

Ngakpa was *Dilgo Khyentse's* student *Sogyal Rinpoche* author of the bestselling 'Tibetan Book of Living and Dying').

Lopon Ogyen Rinpoche (born in Tibet) was a *Ngakpa* that I had the privilege to meet with and interview in November 2006. In two days of talks he would offer refuge, confer the Bodhisattva vows and introduce us all to the little known path of the *Ngakpa*.

Although short of stature *Rinpoche* was solidly built, strong and sturdy. His shape reminded me of many of the pilgrims I'd seen travelling towards Lhasa, the capital city of Tibet; spiritual athletes who perform full body prostrations every three steps for the entire duration of their pilgrimage. You don't meet these pilgrims on the main roads (those are often the conmen, begging tourists and passers-by for money), the real pilgrims travel, often out of sight, on hidden paths.

Meeting and speaking with him felt like meeting someone from a distant time and place; although agreeing to allow some of the attendees to take his photo (see above), he did express concern that capturing his image on film would probably shorten his life; deplete his life-force. This reminded me of the Lakota tribesmen of the American Old West who, at the turn of the 19th Century, feared the cameras of the white man that not only captured their image, but could also capture their souls.

Rinpoche spoke of many different things with a quiet intensity that seemed to demand our full and urgent attention. His eyes shone brightly and enthusiastically, dancing around the room from person to person, from face to face. When he spoke of the legendary lands of *Odiyana* (birthplace of Padmasambhava) and *Shambhala* (the mythical realm of fully enlightened beings) it was as if he had actually travelled to these places personally; as if they were as real as Manchester or Macclesfield.

Following his talk we moved into a side room in the *Khandro Ling* centre for a brief interview:

EC:

What would you say are some of the key differences between the way of the Monastic and the way of the *Ngakpa*?

Rinpoche:

Well... *Ngakpa* or Monk both aim for Buddhahood. Both practice the Vajrayana, the diamond vehicle. *Ngakpa* and Monks both ride within the Great Vehicle, the *Mahayana*. We all begin with renunciation, and then importantly Bodhichitta; developing, cultivating an open heart and feeling compassion for all living beings. But you know one of the last and highest empowerments one receives in our Vajrayana path involves a female consort, a sexual practice.

Now obviously this may not be practiced by monks without them breaking their vows and feeling really guilty. In fact *Atisha*¹ banned the monks from taking this last empowerment. Instead some monks may only practice this without an actual consort but by visualising a consort instead. But the *Ngakpas* have an opportunity to practice the full path.

EC:

You mentioned that the *Ngakpa* may drink alcohol and sleep with women, and I couldn't help but think of student life, which, for many, involves as much sex and alcohol as possible, do you think the way of the *Ngakpa* could help bring a spiritual dimension to this otherwise rather hedonistic lifestyle?

Rinpoche:

I think that's a wonderful question! You know that this is an important, auspicious time for young people to practice the *Vajrayana*. In fact the consort practices are aimed at the younger generations. Everything is still fresh in the body; they have the best opportunity to practice the *Vajrayana*. But it's SO important that you find a qualified teacher! You see *Vajrayana* sex is not ordinary sex; *Vajrayana* drinking is not ordinary drinking! If you love sex then you could transform it into your practice.

EC:

So it seems clear that *Vajrayana* moves beyond or away from the traditional Buddhist models of renunciation. But in this case how does one tell the difference between an ordinary person and a realised master?

Rinpoche:

How to recognise them?

EC:

Yes. What if someone abuses sex or alcohol claiming it is simply part of their practice?

Rinpoche:

Well in my particular sect it is said that if your realisation is high like the sky your behaviour needs to be... down to earth, understand? You mustn't act in ways that confuse ordinary people or cause them to lose confidence in the *Dharma*, this is VERY important! In *Vajrayana* the sex and alcohol is an important fuel, used specifically for a spiritual practice. But *Ngakpas* must be very careful not to go too far, in this way, perhaps because we do not renounce these things, we need to be even more skilful than the monks. We take these powerful desires and transform them!

sigh Unfortunately I know of some cases in America where these teachings have been misunderstood, distorted and sadly abused.

EC:

So how do you go about transforming these desires?

Rinpoche:

Anger, Hatred and Desire these are all fuels, if you are skilful and have a teacher then you can use them to help you. When used with ignorance fire will burn you, disfigure you, it can even kill you! But when used skilfully, with wisdom, you can warm yourself, cook, make light, save life, very useful! With an experienced teacher's help you can take these obstacles and poisons and transform them into vehicles and medicines!

You can consider the different attitudes and approaches within Buddhism. The Theravada monk sees beautiful girls and might hide from them behind his fan or umbrella. He renounces and this involves some kind of turning away. You might know the famous Zen story of the head monk who helps a pretty lady? He carries her across a river, much to the disgust of his younger student who is accompanying him. After a difficult and silent month, getting angrier and angrier the young monk finally shouts out at his master, the head monk, and says 'You should not have done that! We're not supposed to touch women! You carried her across the river right in front of me!' You know the end of the story? The master laughs and says 'My poor, poor student I put that lady down a month ago! Are you still carrying her?' *laughs*

It is all to do with your state of mind, see? These are very advanced practices, secret practices, so this is only a very short summary... if you have sex as a *Vajrayana* practice the woman is no longer perceived as an ordinary woman, and the man is no longer an ordinary man. You visualise one another as deities, as Buddhas! This becomes union of wisdom and emptiness. So you see that it is not ordinary sex, she has become transformed into a deity, you have also become transformed into a deity, these are complex and very powerful visualisations. The act itself becomes an offering to all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

Anger, hatred when looked at closer, they are so powerful, what you might call mirror like wisdom. You see its true nature and it is not hatred it is Vajrasattva.

EC:

So you teach both Westerners and Tibetans, how do they differ as students?

Rinpoche:

Tibetans don't seem to be so interested in the details and Westerners love the details! If I were to give you a visualisation practice, for example visualise the mantra Om Mane Padme Hum on an eight petal lotus.

ॐ ཨོཾ་མ་ཎི་པདྨེ་ཧཱུྃ།

OM MANI PÄDME HUM

The Western student will ask 'What colours are the OM MANE PADME HUM, how big are the letters' and so on and so on. They seem very concrete, always questioning. Sometimes Westerners are too concrete they want to be able to hold these teachings in their hands, but many of these teachings are like a rainbow, you see it, know it, but can't touch it, can't possess it. Many Tibetans just want the blessings, ask them how to meditate they might not know. You Westerners want to study to know things clearly.

EC:

Most Western Buddhists come from Christian or Jewish traditions, the Dalai Lama suggested that people should not leave the faith they were born into. What do you think about this?

Rinpoche:

Well first let me say that everyone has Buddha Nature. If someone is practising excellent Christianity or Judaism, best they stick to it. We respect all *Dharmas* (truths), and recognise suitability. If they want to be Buddhist then let them be Buddhist. There's no need to convert though. If he feels his path is not sufficient then let him join us. *Bodhichitta* is the most important aspect, compassion for all living beings.

For upcoming events at the Khandro Ling Buddhist Centre please visit:

<http://www.diamondheartfoundation.org.uk/>

¹: Atisha was a famous Indian scholar of profound learning. Arrived in Tibet in 1038 and stayed until his death. He entirely reformed the prevailing Buddhism, enforcing celibacy in the existing Order and raised the level of morality. He also founded the Kadampa School ('those bound by ordinance').

When the pig pokes his snout!

By James Conole

In traditional Tibetan houses the farm animals live downstairs whilst the people live upstairs or so I learned from Alan Wallace, a long time Tibetan Buddhist practitioner, in something I read by him. Whether it is completely true or not, I don't know but let's just say that it is. Considering this, it is not hard to imagine that, once in a while, the animals do so happen to stray where they shouldn't: upstairs. Wallace describes the solution:

"What do you do when a pig pokes his snout through the kitchen door looking for stuff to munch? Hit him on the nose before he gets the other 200 pounds through the door! Hit the pig on the nose quick enough and he turns tail. But a pig that is already feeding at the trough is hard to get rid of".

Why am I talking about hitting pigs you may rightly be wondering? This followed by a belief that there's no place for the advocacy of animal cruelty in Bodhi magazine! And right you are on both counts. This, you see, is actually a clever analogy that is also particularly apt whereby the pig symbolises the negative mental habits that lead, invariably, to suffering. Wallace follows:

... As soon as you identify afflictive tendencies of the mind, as soon as their snouts poke through the door of your mind, hit them on the nose... These are not abstract philosophical concepts." (Wallace, Buddhism With An Attitude, Snow Lion, 2001, p.220)"

Now this story is, if anything, most illuminating to me as it corresponds to many insights I have discovered whilst observing my own mind and its associated emotional manifestations. Often a feeling of, say, hatred appears in my mind whereby, without some manner of adroit mental effort to counter it, it can then enlarge and enlarge causing an intense amount of mental anguish. The pig has got in!

This pig is clever however and with feelings that arise, such as depression, one can almost be convinced that it is not worth struggling against as it is all pointless anyhow. This is logically absurd for when depression arises we start to suffer but somehow- due to the unique nature of depression- we manage to convince ourselves that further suffering is not worth fighting against. Somehow we convince ourselves that we *should* suffer; that we deserve to suffer. I believe that we have a responsibility *not* to suffer.

This is not to suggest, as the Victorians may have, that depression is somehow caused by mental frailty or some other such nonsense that they loved espousing. I would hate to suggest such an absurd and callous thing. However, what I do wish to get across is that, through the practice of mindfulness (or *Sati* as it is known in Theravada countries), one can slowly come to realise that there is a possibility, at times, of stopping the negative emotions before they inflame the mind. Also, it stresses the crucial importance

of spotting the arising of negative emotions before they develop. Nipping them in the bud, so to speak.

This observation is not just the preserve of Buddhism as modern psychology and especially the treatment of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) says the same thing in trying to get the patient to look for mental triggers that generate negative views of the self, their current situation or the future. Yet, without proper mindfulness training this can be a futile battle as by the time one realises that an emotion has arisen it can be too late.

Another reason why this analogy is so accurate to me is that the negative emotions must really be hit and hit hard when they are recognised. This requires mental toughness and can often seem like an impossible battle. However, as with all battles there will be defeats and victories; these are irrelevant. The most important aspect is a strong determination not to suffer and not to allow oneself to purposely increase one's own suffering. Mental habits are extremely strong and one cannot expect to overcome mental traits that have been acted on for years in a single evening; that's simply not realistic. What is important is taking the responsibility onto oneself that, where possible, if mental suffering can be avoided or fought against then this must be done.

Now the question must be asked, why do we develop so much fear and negative mental emotions? To this I cannot conclusively answer but I do have some nascent ideas on it. Carl Jung once said that *"neurosis is always a substitute for legitimate suffering."* Most mental afflictions are caused by a desire not to feel certain things and of all these things the main one has to be that of suffering. Yet the truth of life is that we cannot avoid suffering. We, however, do not wish to accept this and in an effort to fight against the reality of suffering we cause ourselves all manner of difficulties. In essence, our fight against the reality of suffering perversely causes ourselves infinitely more suffering than we would have ever experienced had we simply faced the suffering.

There is a Tibetan saying which goes: if you want to look at how your life has been look at your body but if you wish to look at how the future will be then look at your mind. What this strives to explain is that each mental decision we make has an impact and if we make mental decision that challenge negative emotions today then we can be sure that, although we may notice no difference initially, gradually a change will arise. The battle may, at times, feel pointless but as long as a fighting spirit is there we can be sure that we will reap the rewards of our efforts. I would stress to say as that this isn't a matter of faith at all as one can empirically observe the changes to one's habitual thought patterns over time.

As the Buddha says at the beginning of the Dhammapada: *"Mind precedes all mental states. Mind is their chief; they are all mind-wrought. If with a pure mind a person speaks or acts happiness follows him like his never-departing shadow."* This shows the importance of the battle against negative mental

afflictions as, ultimately, our very happiness is at stake. There really is no alternative! Get your stick ready and start whacking!

查面金剛

Poetry Corner

Haikus by By Enrique Galvan-Alvarez

Singing to her doll
Hiroshima, day after
they found her alive

*

Stepping on banana's peel
small mind squeaks
big mind laughs

*

Shapeless thoughts
running through my mind
endless path

Avidly Staring At The Fire

O, how the flames ooze their transient personas!
Some large, handsome but rather wistful,
Others shy, powerful - yet aloof!

And as I delve deeper into their flames
All I see is my mind, all the while
Burning and carefully casting new stories.

Yet as I wander deeper into my mind
All I see are the very same flames;
"Wherein lies this clever moulder", I wonder?

After the collapse

The thread that holds this time together wears thin.
Each farmer buried by the weight of its changing markets;
Each child starved by the plight of economic realities
And each professional lead to medicate for want of
Its false and insipid aspirations, know.

They know that their plights lead to the destruction
Of its might, of its adhesiveness.
Each tragedy it bestows is like a caress
By the Global Blade of Reason along its
Weak point exposing its weak interior-
Slowly unravelling, until...
Snap!

Both Poems by James Conole



Meditation in Buddhism

By Joy Bose

This article is adapted from the Du Shu Hui discussion we had in Fo Guang Shan temple on 29 April. However, it is based mostly on my own beliefs and practices, based partly on what I have studied or heard from others. I apologise for any misunderstandings.

They say that Buddhism is all about meditation, and if you take out the meditation from Buddhism it will be no better than a mass of dogmatic beliefs and rituals. I think meditation is the reason many people come to Buddhism in the first place, and Buddhism can remain relevant in this ever changing world only as long as people continue to derive benefits from their own meditation practice in their own life.

There are lots of questions a beginner can, and perhaps should, ask about meditation such as, what is meditation? Why should one bother to meditate? And, what's the point of Buddhist meditation specifically? In terms of what is meditation, it could be defined by the method or technique itself, or by the state of mind when in meditation. For example, if the method of meditation is watching the breath, one could define meditation as the action of watching and being mindful of the breath. However, another way of looking at it could be the state of mind, so when the mind is in a meditative state, anything one does would become part of the meditation. Simply speaking, meditation may be understood as stabilising the mind by various techniques, so that it becomes peaceful and perhaps can lead to useful insights about reality and the mind.

As for why should one bother meditating, one answer could be the tangible benefits it brings. If you have a hectic life, a few minutes of meditation could calm you down and give you energy to face new challenges. It is certainly much safer and cheaper as a coping mechanism for stress than drugs or violence, although for some people (such as those with psychological problems) it may be unsuitable to try some or all types of meditation. There has been a vast body of medical research proving that meditation, if regularly done, generally leads to better health and well being. However, it is best to find out the benefits for oneself by trying out meditation.

As to why Buddhist meditation in particular, one could argue that Buddhist meditation is a well tried and comprehensive system which has adapted itself well to people of many temperaments and many cultures throughout the last few millennia. In this sense it can be said to be safe and lies within an ethical framework perfected through time. Some people might state that the emphasis on gaining insight on the way one's own mind and body works is what differentiates Buddhist meditation from other types of meditation. Others might say that the compassionate motivation of getting enlightened for the sake of all beings rather than just for oneself is the uniqueness of Mahayana Buddhist meditation. For some, meditation is the way to realise our inner potential and ultimately to become enlightened and

end all suffering, just like the Buddha himself did. Having said that, it is certainly the individual's responsibility to try out or at least read about different kinds of meditation and decide on which one is the most suitable.

There are a vast number of Buddhist meditation techniques suitable for people of different temperaments. This also means that not all kinds of meditation are suitable for all kinds of people. Therefore, it is usually best to take the guidance of a trained teacher when starting meditation. Many people state it is best not to mix different types of meditation, but to choose one and stick to it.

As per the traditional Buddhist classification, meditation is of two kinds: *Samatha* (mindfulness or concentration) and *Vipassana* (insight or analytical meditation), although some people argue that both must go hand in hand and therefore such a distinction is not advisable. *Samatha* is the technique where we take an object, such as the breath and fix the mind upon it. This may lead to a sharpening of concentration of the mind until the point where it reaches a state of one-pointedness on the object of meditation alone and does not distract from it. *Vipassana*, or insight, is what happens when the concentration of the mind becomes sharp enough to perceive the nature of relation between the mind and the body.

There are many kinds of *Samatha* meditation, depending on the object of concentration. In traditional meditation texts like *Visuddhimagga*, there are mentioned 40 different objects of *Samatha* meditation on which we can concentrate on, including the four elements of heat, fluidity, solidity and wind within the body (suitable for those of analytical nature), the various impurities of the body such as nails and hair (suitable for those of lustful nature), the Buddha's qualities (suitable for those of devotional nature), loving kindness for all sentient beings (suitable for those with hateful nature) etc. Mindfulness on the breath is the most common type of *Samatha* meditation practiced, partly because the breath is always present with us in reality; we do not need to visualise or imagine anything to be mindful of the breath.

Common *Vipassana* meditation techniques include simply being mindful of whatever arises in the body and mind, such as pain sensations or thoughts, and observing (noting them consciously) and acknowledging them before letting them pass, without getting involved with them or becoming judgmental. The trick is to observe things "as they are", and not as we want them to be. One can start with observing the rising and falling of the abdomen (in sitting meditation) or the positions of the legs (in walking meditation), and soon the concentration will rise such that one becomes aware of subtler and subtler objects. Mindfulness meditation can be done in all postures and in all activities, for example while having food we can analyse how the sensation of the food feels like on the tongue without labeling it as sweet or sour, what is the nature of it and what effect the food has on the mind and the body, etc. While lying down we can be mindful of the positions of contact of our body and its sensations. While washing dishes we can be mindful of washing the dishes alone rather than getting involved with our thoughts.

Another technique is to sweep the body starting at the top of the head, scanning the different sensations all over the body. In the *Satipatthana sutta* of the Pali canon (the standard scripture collection of the Theravada Buddhist tradition), the Buddha mentioned four things we can be mindful of during meditation, namely the body itself (such as the posture of the body or the points of contact, or the breath body as a whole), the feelings (including positive, negative and neutral sensations and emotions) within the body, the mind itself (mindful of whether we are having an angry mind, or peaceful mind, or lustful mind etc) and the mind objects (such as the memories) we have in our mind.

Some meditation techniques followed specifically in Mahayana Buddhism include analysing the emptiness and interconnectedness of all phenomena, starting from the body and mind. Tibetan Buddhism has a wide array of meditations, some of which require initiation from a Lama or authorised teacher before they are performed. These include very powerful visualisation objects. Compassion is an important subject of Tibetan meditation, and there are a wide array of compassion meditations as well (such as Tonglen, breathing in the suffering of others visualised as black smoke, and transforming it into our inherent goodness and breathing it out as white smoke). Some Tibetan meditations involve chanting on meditation beads to occupy the body, chanting a sutra or an auspicious mantra such as "Om Mani Padme Hum" to occupy the speech, and an object of visualisation such as a specific Buddha's mandala to occupy the mind, thus ensuring that the whole of our being takes part in the meditation.

Some common Tibetan meditations practiced in different traditions are *Lamrim* (a 21-step compilation of the essential points of meditation by the 11th century master Atisha), *Lojong* (verses indicating a practice for training the mind), and *Dzogchen* (meditation on the bare nature of reality or resting in the nature of the mind until it becomes familiar and the mind becomes undistracted). Some lamas state, however, that *Dzogchen* is an advanced meditation and should be practiced only when the preparatory practices (such as the prostrations, *Vajrasattava* meditation, mandala offering, and Guru Yoga) have been mastered through repetition, else one would not be able to derive the best possible benefits from it. An important aspect of the Tibetan meditation system is to establish correct motivation (which is to become a Buddha for the sake of delivering all beings from suffering) before beginning the session, and sharing the merits of the meditation practice with all after the session.

It is important in meditation to have a correct posture, with a straight back and to be as stable and open as possible. In this context, the 7-point *Vairochana* posture is referred to in Tibetan manuals, with the correct positioning of the legs (crossed in half or full lotus), lowered eye gaze, a straight back or spine, even and relaxed shoulders, chin slightly tucked in, mouth slightly open and the tongue resting on the upper palate, and even breathing. A good posture is half of the meditation, and a good stable and balanced posture is the secret of a successful meditation. Some masters say it is important not to move, or to move only when necessary, and if so only

very slowly and mindfully. Sometimes it is beneficial to do some Yoga to improve body flexibility before the meditation. Some people like to position themselves with cushions such that there is no pressure on any part of the body while meditating, so that there are no unnecessary distractions.

One important thing to realise about meditation is that all meditation sessions are not going to be peaceful or good. In my first meditation sessions I found it incredibly hard to face my own mind's thoughts and the pain in the knees, which I still have sometimes. I have heard some masters say that the bad sessions are as important as, or even more important than, the good ones. It is only through the uncomfortable and painful meditation sessions that we can gain the real insights into impermanence and the fact that we cannot control everything in our own body and mind (so it is best to stop treating them as a problem). Having said that, it is true that after regular practice, the meditation sessions do tend to become easier or more peaceful in the long term.

Another important thing to remember is that it is best to meditate without any expectation of what is going to happen. The expectation (which may come from talking with more experienced meditators or reading books, or this article!) usually ends up hindering the meditation rather than doing any benefit. Zen masters speak of sitting in meditation being the method and also the goal, meaning that there is no need to have higher or selfish goals during meditation. If anything arises in the mind it is best to acknowledge it and let it pass. Meditation is not about attaining anything, rather it is to let go of attainments altogether.

Anyway, that's a bit of an overview of meditation in the Buddhist tradition as I understand it. I hope that if you haven't, you will try out a suitable tradition and get the benefits from meditation in your own life.



My Experience of a Vipassana Meditation Retreat

By Hajime Yoji

I completed a 10 day retreat in the Burmese temple in Salford over the Christmas holiday. The temple follows the Mahasi Sayadaw tradition which uses the technique of noting movement of the breath or feet. The daily routine consists of 14 hours of sitting and walking meditation, 6 hours of sleep, one hour of Dhamma talk and 3 hours of daily chores such as eating or keeping oneself clean. We were also encouraged to be deaf, blind and dumb, that is no reading, no talking and no listening to music, etc.

I have never practiced meditation in such an intensive manner. My previous experience consisted of a 6 hour day retreat over a period of two weekends. I had also practiced Samatha meditation, daily, under the instruction of the Stockport Samatha group. But, I was obviously quite apprehensive about throwing myself into the deep end! I prepared myself by reading the main instruction book for this particular tradition entitled: "In this Very Life", by Sayadaw U Pandita. I also warmed myself up by trying to observe the eight precepts¹ a week before going to the temple.

On the first day of the retreat, the senior monk gave us the eight precepts and some basic instructions for the meditation. Once we started to meditate, I realised how lax and relaxed the whole retreat was. We were hardly being supervised at all: the Monks only came to check on us once a day. The rest of the time, we were left on our own. They also spoiled us with food. Breakfast and Lunch was an "all you can eat" Buffet. We are not supposed to eat anything solid after noon but they had this very nutritious liquid drink made from honey which we could drink if we felt hungry, not to mention the variety of fruit drinks and lemonade. The senior monk told me I could go easy on my sitting posture as well.

Nonetheless, the whole reason it was so lax was that we were to meditate fourteen hours a day. Sitting became painful however easy one went on one's meditation posture. Seven hours of walking is quite a lot of exercise no matter how slow you walk. During my high school years in Japan, I, along with other classmates mastered the art of sleeping while sitting. So I simply passed out if the whole thing became too much! In walking meditation, if I got bored of walking, I simply enjoyed the view and the silence of the Burmese temple which is located in a quiet and tranquil neighbourhood in Salford. My knowledge of *Tai chi chuan* helped a bit as well. One common practice of *Tai chi chuan* is to perform the form as humanely slow as possible. This has the effect of raising your energy level. Though I did not wave my hands like in *tai chi chun*, whenever I "pushed" for insight I tried to walk slowly to see if I noticed anything new.

So, for the first two days, I slept a lot, enjoyed excellent Burmese food and enjoyed the walks. Coincidentally, the evening dhamma talk for the second day was "Effort". It repeated that one must make strenuous effort, and that "sloth and torpor" are your closest enemy. This got me thinking that I was wasting my time. After all, if I wanted to sleep or take a walk, I could always do it at my home. So the last sitting meditation session before bed time, I decided not to break my meditation. My legs did start to hurt but I kept telling myself that I was going to bed after this so I shouldn't give up, which I didn't.

This little achievement did give me more confidence to try a little bit harder. I started to meditate a bit more seriously before lunch, before sleep and before the interview at about 5 or 6 in the evening. I also noticed that if you keep your back straight, you can't sleep even if you want to. Martin, who completed the retreat with me, can not bend his back at all. As long as he sits, he can't cheat/sleep which is good and bad. I can take it easy but he can't. But when I started to try and not to break my posture, trying to overcome pain and maintain concentration, my face started to twist in agony. Then the senior monk told me that I'm doing it wrong again. This time, I'm trying too hard. Hmmm, the middle way! I somehow had to find the balance between being too lazy and trying too hard. I tried to imagine the face of Buddha as something to aspire to: that balance between not being lazy, not trying too hard, but just being in the right focus and composure.

Raising and conserving energy became the main issue during the retreat. Most of the time, I was trying not to fall asleep. One trick I used was to open my eyes and focus on a dot on the carpet. Since I'm shortsighted, the dot looked blurred and I tried to get a sharper image of it. This had an effect of slowly raising my energy. After the retreat, I discovered that this is a Samatha technique. I had also given up on trying to maintain an upright posture all the time because I found it to be too tiring. Instead, I started off from as relaxed as I could be, and, as I felt my energy rise, I very slowly raised my posture. Another thing I had to watch out for was the amount of food intake. If I ate too much, I felt drowsy: not only would I lose all the gain I had made during the morning, I could ruin the whole practice for the rest of the day.

In the end, I forgot which day it was and, eventually, the retreat ended. Though I see this as a personal achievement, I do agree that I only meditated half of the time. Here I would like to thank Sayadaw U Nanujjota-bhivamsa, Sayadaw U Pannasami and all the lay Burmese people who supported me during the retreat.

Oh, here is a joke which kept popping up in my mind fairly often during the retreat. It's from "Two and a Half Men".

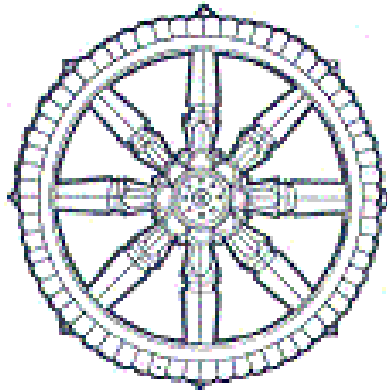
Charlie: "Why is a blond staring at the orange juice in the fridge?"

Jake: "I don't know. Why?"

Charlie: "Because it says "Concentrate"."

Believe it or not, I did get an insight out of it.

¹: *The eight precepts are vows taken by lay people on meditation retreats or other occasions which are said to be most conducive to an efficacious meditation practice. They focus mainly on moral vows as well as some ascetic vows.*



The Letting Go

By James Conole

When I first established an interest in Buddhism I saw it as a novel and beautiful method for getting me somewhere. Its philosophies were so elegant and were also in agreement with most insights that I had made on life. "This is it!" I must have thought. "Follow this and I will have all I want, I can do some practice now and then and, hey presto, I will become a better person!"

Many years of practice (and, of course, weeks/months of non-practice) later I have come to the conclusion that my beginning impressions of Buddhism were rather unrealistic, to say the very least. My view of Buddhism was rather in line with that of adopting a further world view that would correct my previously incorrect world view. It would be the gaining of a supreme worldview that allowed for me to become some manner of Supreme Being; some type of Super James! A fellow that meditates by night and then, by day, saves the world from itself in a Jesus at the Market place kind of way. I was looking for the extraordinary.

Yet, Buddhism is all about the ordinary. It is all about finding simplicity in life for life is, in essence, simple. In fact it is painfully simple. Yet we have, through our habitual thought patterns, made so much complexity out of it. We somehow know that we have done this as well but are just too scared to see this as, perversely, we are deeply afraid of losing our worldviews for we see them not as hindrances to happiness but as means of protecting us from the world. Our worldviews are what Trungpa Rinpoche called our "cocoon": something that we think keeps us safe but, in fact, serve only to isolate ourselves from the world.

I once heard it said, in rather poetic manner, that humans are, essentially, creatures, lying naked, between the Sky and the Earth. We are born, we live for a very short while and then, inevitably, we die. Yet, we attach such significance to all of our activities! We have crafted the most convoluted and delicate ideologies out of this simplicity and it is this, I believe, that accounts for so much of our unhappiness. This is why I now see Buddhism as a letting go, or – to quote the musician Will Oldham's latest album- "The Letting Go".

To me Buddhism is the letting go, ever so slowly, of all the nonsense we have created about reality that not only has no basis in reality but also serves as an affront to us enjoying life. However, it is most difficult to stop deceiving ourselves as, for years, we have done so as an erroneous means of protecting ourselves from reality. It could be said that this is one of the most difficult endeavours to ask of a person. Yet, I believe that it is essential.

So, how do we begin "The Letting Go"? Meditation, I believe, is the way. Yet one must also apply the insights gained in meditation to daily life and then actually challenge their own perceived view of how the world works. This is extremely difficult but it is also extremely gratifying as one slowly learns that

things in life aren't as fixed as they believe and that there is a lot of scope for movement in life. The main obstacle faced in this however is, of course, fear.

Habitually we often succumb to fear by avoiding things that initiate it. However, it is my belief that most forms of fear, save for obviously protective types, spring from a challenge to our world view and the view that everything in our carefully crafted world could collapse. Letting go of our worldviews involves facing a lot of fear. Also, and importantly, it means accepting fear, not avoiding it, when it does arise. A view that we can live without fear is unfounded in reality.

The letting go can also mean challenging universally accepted truths in our society that aren't in accord with reality but that we have learned to accept. These beliefs range from thinking that an economic system based on infinite economic growth in a finite world is anything but insane, or that buying things can make us happy. It means challenging a worldview that puts intangible profits above the planet and its inhabitants. It also means challenging common views on the absolute importance of human beings over other creatures. Often we refuse to see things as they are as we are afraid of the repercussions of this. Yet one cannot peacefully meditate on a cushion whilst the world is falling to pieces!

There is nothing to gain, nothing to do. Simplicity doesn't mean becoming a simpleton though. More so it means letting go of nonsense, of our insanity and then re-connecting to the basic sanity that I believe we all have. However, it cannot be forced. One cannot force one's worldview to change at all. I believe from my own experience that most change comes both slowly and unexpectedly. It is the motivation to see things as they are; to let go of nonsense that is all important.

What I have learned is that rather than searching for the extraordinary we should really be searching for the extra ordinary. However, to finish on another quote by Trungpa Rinpoche: "when you live life in a thoroughly ordinary way, it is extraordinary." It is this apparent dichotomy that I challenge you to investigate.

The Middle Way

Oxana Poberejnaia

Introduction

I am taking an on-line course 'Buddhist Studies' run by Professor Peter Harvey, a Samatha practitioner. Sometimes when answering questions for the course I discover something about my own practice that I had not known before. For example, here is my reply to the question about 'I'.

Question: What range of things do you identify with as 'I', and how might this lead to painful situations?

I personally identify with all things as 'I'. I cannot think of a thing that would not be 'me' in some sense. Starting from my favourite chocolate and finishing with the Universe, I identify with everything. And this fact causes all my suffering. For example, I already go about mourning the end of the Sun and solar system together with earth, because I just cannot imagine it all disappear. I love earth; it is beautiful with all its living things. And it will have to come to an end. Like Arthur Dent pondering the destruction of earth, I review all the things that I care about here.

And after this cycle of Universe is over, it will all be gone! Even if humanity escapes to a different planet before the end of solar system, some day the Universe is going to end as well. And then – in the next cycle – there is not going to be another 'Godfather'. And no one will be able to see Godfather dancing with his daughter at her wedding! (Unless, because of my attachment to all of this, I am reborn as Francis Ford Coppola of the new Universe).

This breaks my heart, and this is suffering. Transformation and passing of people and things that I identify myself with in the past, present and future causes me pain. And it will go on for as long as I keep clinging to things.

'Sticky Venom' of 'I'

I was trying to think of an image to describe this situation. It is like 'I' is a huge sticky thing with millions of tentacles, sort of like 'Venom' from 'Spiderman-3'. It covers as much as it can and holds on to things with its tentacles. As I said, my 'I' covers the whole Universe – or everything that I know and can know about it. Some things I like, some things I hate, and some I am indifferent to. But each such attitude means a tentacle attached. This 'I' hangs over the Universe and interacts with it through its tentacles: it feels pleasure, pain, or neutral feeling, and this is basically what it does and what it is there for.

Tentacles can be different. They can be as elevated and sophisticated as love for your Motherland and enjoying a Beethoven's symphony, or as petty and stupid as getting annoyed at someone's sneezing. However, essentially they are the same. This is something I realized a while ago through my practice. Since then, it has been only confirmed.

People are no different. I can look down at people less educated than myself, for example, and wonder how they can be so addicted to drinking or going to football matches, for example. At the same time, I realize that my own additions to Japanese food and visiting art exhibitions in London are the same. Mine is less harmful for society, perhaps (perhaps not), but essentially satisfying my addictions makes me happy in the same way that theirs make them happy. The issue here is that happiness, satisfaction and calm in both cases DEPEND on something external: beer or sushi, and are not present in the person's mind independently of the conditional world around us.

Pain

Throughout my practice, I have had a following problem: no one seemed to be able to provide me with support on the subject of pain. No one talked about it much; pain was not much discussed in the scriptures. What meditation teachers most often told me was something along the lines of 'Stick to it, pain will pass'. That did not quite satisfy me.

In the beginning of my practice, physical discomfort during meditation was the main problem. As the practice progressed, however, emotional pain entered the scene as well. It seemed the more intense the practice, the harder pain hit me. I could not see why it should have been this way, since Buddhism is supposed to be a Path to liberation from suffering. Pali Suttas as well and Mahayana sutras are full of promises of well-being, beauty, health, happiness, joy and all sorts of goodies in return for following the Buddha's teaching.

Nevertheless, what I have been experiencing was quite the contrary: pain, distress, and depression. Then our Buddhist Chaplain, Ven Piyatissa, gave me something of a really important insight. He said that what stands on the way of my progress is my 'I'. This is funny. So, basically, my 'I' is so strong that it would do anything in order to stay around, to not let me weaken it by my practice. At the same time, it is 'I' who chose to follow the Buddhist path and who sits down every day for meditation. It seems like a paradox, but it is happening right before my eyes and I would better believe it. My very strong 'I' with all these marvellous tentacles that cling to all the beautiful things in Universe, drags me along the Buddhist Path and at the same time does not want to let go.

The tentacles are strong, the links are strong. Therefore, every time when by the virtue of mediation I manage to sever one or two links to things – any things – eating meat, shouting at the buses, demanding attention from my

friends – it HURTS. A lot. This is 'I's way of saying that it is not happy. It wants the links; it feeds off pleasure, pain and neutral feelings.

Look at this in a different way. When 'I' in the form of 'Venom' has all its tentacles on a billion of things, it is balanced. It knows how to function, it is used to itself. However, each meditation practice disturbs this balance. If one or two tentacles are cut off, the centre of balance would be shifted, the whole 'I' would find itself in a new position, and it would take time for it to get used to the new situation. Moreover, there is never enough time. Because the next day is another meditation and another shift of balance. Furthermore, if one is truly mindful, one is mindful every waking moment – meaning every moment one is working on sawing one or two or all of the tentacles. The centre of balance moves all around 'I', putting pressure on the areas that are not used to it, causing pain...

**'Happiness is... equilibrium. Shift your weight'
(Tom Stoppard)**

This image helped me explain to myself experiences I have been going through. This misbalance I described have manifested even on the physical level: when I would get dizzy, when the way my face looked in the mirror would change from day to day, and so on.

Eventually, I came to think that my case is similar to the case of Ven Sona, the Buddha's disciple.¹ Ven Sona was trying too hard, so to speak. The Buddha reminded him of tuning strings on a musical instrument: it will not play if the strings are too loose or too taut. It is the same with effort in the Buddhist practice, apparently. "In the same way, Sona, over-aroused persistence leads to restlessness, overly slack persistence leads to laziness. Thus you should determine the right pitch for your persistence, attune the pitch of the [five] faculties [to that], and there pick up your theme."

'Pick up your theme' – this is beautiful.

The basic difference between the 'Venom' from 'Spiderman-3' and 'I' is that one can just tear the black 'Venom' costume off oneself and return to one's true identity as Spiderman. However, first, in Buddhism there is no true identity to return to, for this goal there are many other religions on offer. And second, 'I' cannot be dealt with in such a violent way, because one of the paradoxes of the Buddhist teaching is that it is exactly this 'I' that delivers one to the threshold of Enlightenment. 'I' then is left at the doorstep and does not 'nirvana'.²

Consequently, 'I', including all its qualities, must be kept in a workable condition. Body must be able to sit; mind must be able to concentrate, for

¹ *Sona Sutta, Anguttara Nikaya, Book of the Sixes, AN 6.55 or A iii 374, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an06/an06.055.than.html>.*

² *Professor Peter Harvey proposes to translate 'nirvana' into English as a verb, as 'nirvana' really is not 'something'.*

example. If you are starved, as Siddhartha was as a result of years of ascetic practices, you cannot succeed in meditation. If you are depressed, as I usually am, you cannot meditate properly either.

Thus, it is unwise just to tear off all tentacles in the hope that if one kills 'I', Enlightenment will ensue like a magic trick. Unfortunately, it does not work this way. No one will clean up your severed tentacles after you. Each and every little bit of the black sticky matter must be carefully looked at, investigated, neutralized and let go of. All of this must be done in the spirit of love, not hatred; understanding, not aversion. 'Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world. By non-hatred alone is hatred appeased. This is a law eternal.'³

This is where the Middle Way comes in. Funny enough, it was the first thing the Buddha shared with his former fellow ascetics as he emerged from his post-Enlightenment meditation.

Disturb the 'I', scare it a bit, make it uneasy, but do not wound it, and certainly do not kill it. If you do, there will be no one left to recycle the dark sticky matter of the 'Venom' – it will be just left lying around in bits for someone else to stumble over it and become its 'host'.

Another danger other than killing 'I' or wounding it mortally so that it cannot really do anything, is to have an unbalanced 'I'. Sometimes the unbalanced 'I' is just painful, as I described before. Sometimes it finds a new balance that is difficult to let go of. For example, imagine you managed to get rid of 'bad' tentacles, so to speak. So, you do not drink, do not smoke, and do not gamble. You are supported by your 'good' tentacles, i.e., you volunteer, give to charity, you are kind to everyone around you.

However, if you are still using these activities as substitutes for inner peace and extracting a pleasant sense of 'I' from them, they are still tentacles. What is more, they are as difficult to sever or maybe even more difficult to sever than the 'bad' ones, due to the simple reason that they are 'good' for everyone. You cling to them, you find a new self-righteous Self in them, and so Enlightenment, as something that threatens all attachments, does not look desirable any more.

So, as Henry from Tom Stoppard's play 'The real thing' said: 'Happiness is... equilibrium. Shift your weight'. Establishing the correct pitch, balance our whole life according to that pitch, and picking our tune. It may take time, but there is no hurry.

³ *Dhammapada, The Pairs, Heedfulness, Dhp1, 5.*
<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/dhp/dhp.01.budd.html>.

