

The Five Pillars of Transformation

Familiarity with Meditation

The Complete Path

Now our retreat is underway I will begin by offering you meditation guidance. I would like you all to give this meditation a try if you are not already familiar with it, though I suspect many of you already are. Some of you will have other types of meditation, but if you could just suspend those for a few days and bring yourself to this form and see how it goes, and see how it feels. This meditation should not be seen as just another form of meditation practice to add to your list, because this form of sitting is not a normal dualist practice but rather points instead to the spirit and fulfilment of the path of awakening in an absolute and complete way.

What you are about to experience should not be seen as some sort of fractious meditation, so to speak, as something that points to a particular aspect of the path that you need to develop understanding of and familiarity with. This IS the path. It is by its imminent nature our totality thus introducing you directly to your true nature. By giving yourself to this practice over the next few days it will hopefully become clear to you that what you are becoming familiar with is pointing directly to the very heart and the very spirit of what you are, and realise that is not yet another sort of technique that you have to develop. By learning to become familiar with the directness of what I am about to offer, I hope you will begin to see what you are beginning to wake up to will be everything that you will need for your liberation.

Continuing from the web page...

Posture

When you take yourself to your meditation, whether you sit on a chair, or kneel on the floor with a stool or sit crossed legged in one of the traditional postures, it is very important to first give attention to your posture rather than ignore it because you think that it is something of no great importance. I know many of you have not been instructed or been made aware of how important it is to have a strong, upright balanced posture, somehow thinking it to be a secondary consideration. But from my experience I'd say that it is almost as important as learning how to develop a particular type of meditation. It is very important to have a good balanced posture because a balanced posture will mean that your whole body will be in balance, so if your physical body is balanced then you at least create the possibility of getting your mind in balance. If your body is out of balance then developing a balanced mind is going to become that much more difficult, simply because of the basic Dharmic understanding that mind and body are not two separate things. So if one is out of balance, how can it then help support the other? See this as a very important principle in your meditation life, irrespective of whatever path you are on, whatever technique or tradition you are following.

The basic principle to forming a balanced structure is to develop a tripod like posture whereby the two knees (feet, if you are on a chair) and your backside are creating a three point contact with the ground (or chair). We then put our body and our head in the middle of those three points. The way we achieve this is to lean forward slightly and after putting the shoulders back, and putting our attention on the lower back, return to the upright position, this will have the effect of creating a curve in your lower back. This curve is actually returning the back to its natural condition as our backs aren't actually dead straight. Having your shoulders back is the key to creating this upright position. Now gently pull your chin in. Now you have a balanced and upright form, now you are like a camera sitting on top of a tripod, and you know what it is like if you try to kick or push over a tripod, it's very difficult, isn't it? If you were really determined to topple the tripod you'd have to give it a really good whack, wouldn't you?! So now you know how solid your meditation posture has become. Two further

things you now have to do is first put your hands in a meditation mudra. Again, there are options so find one that you feel comfortable with or one that goes with the tradition you follow. In our group practitioners are encouraged to lay the left hand on top of the right and lay them on the lap with the thumbs lightly pressed together. The second thing is to put in place the eye posture. One option is to simply close them as you would do before you go to sleep, or the superior way is to have them half open and gaze at a point on the floor about a metre in front of you. There is still a further option and that is to have your eyes fully open and looking straight ahead. With all now in place what finally remains is to take a deep breath and slowly and silently exhale. Now you are fully prepared.

If you choose to ignore this preparation and sit with an unskilful posture your shoulders may slump and your head will drop sideways or downwards and your mind will become dull, or you may even fall asleep. What sort of environment is this you're creating if you are aspiring to insight and liberation? There is also the added consideration that because you have an imbalanced posture in time you may damage parts of your body. Your posture is an important consideration so please don't neglect this feature of your spiritual journey.

Preliminary Concentration

When you feel settled, bring your attention to the lower part of your body, just below the navel to what is called the hara, or the emotional seat. Breathe naturally and keep your attention on the rise and fall of your abdomen. It is important to never try to force or control your breathing. If you don't already breathe through your abdomen, rather, as most of us do, breathe through your chest instead, re-train yourself to do so. This is important for two reasons. First, because it is not natural to breathe in this way you will in fact only half fill your lungs with air before exhaling. And second, by breathing the natural way, which is to completely fill the lungs from the bottom up through using the abdomen, you will be bringing the weight of the whole breathing activity into the lower part of the body so helping to anchor yourself still firmer to the ground.

When thoughts and mental pictures continually distract you, catch yourself and bring your awareness back into your body over and over again and into the rise and fall of the abdomen and develop concentration there, thus forming a one-pointed mind. The method we employ is just one of the many methods of anapanasati or mindfulness of breathing, but this is the only stage we employ in our group to develop concentration, although the practice of anapanasati, which is the cornerstone of Buddhist meditation practice, offers many more stages.

We use this technique as a skilful way to settle and quieten the mind. It is not a practice that we develop to the extent we become absorbed, nor do we move on to more subtle subsequent stages. It is used merely as a means to an end, so when you feel pretty much gathered up and concentrated and mentally settled we let it go. Because you use it only as a means to an end there is no time scale for employing this technique. You may only need to use it for a few seconds or maybe a few minutes. If you are feeling pretty much gathered up you may not bother to use it at all. I'm sure in time you will come to the stage when you will never need to make use of it again. But if you are still feeling scattered you could stay with this method for the whole period of meditation, maybe for several periods, or even days or weeks.

It doesn't matter how long you need to employ this method to develop concentration because this acceptance of how it happens to be for you just now points to a very important principle that goes to the very heart of our so called practice. Right here at the start of your meditation you have the opportunity to awaken to the insight found at the heart of this form of practice.

We may go into our meditation thinking "I'll do this concentration exercise for just a little while then move on to the really important stuff just as soon as I can", all in the expectation of finishing something off and then moving on to doing something new and achieving something important, even profound. Falling yet again into the trap that only feeds the very thing we are learning to wake up to and let go of, and that is the conditioning that we are meditating to achieve and become something.

Right here at the beginning of your meditation with the experience of staying with the concentration exercise you can begin to see clearly that all of us are in a constant mode of wanting to do something and to achieve. You know this concentration practice is only an expedient means, so frustration may well up: that makes you want to let it go and get on with the real business of this meditation which is about expansiveness and

stillness. Yet right here before you let go of this preliminary exercise you begin to taste the essence of what characterises the direct path which is that you are not trying to achieve or become but instead learning simply to accept yourself and wake up to what you are, right in this present moment.

So if you are getting all worked up because your mind is all over the place and you think you are failing and having a bad day, stay with it. Remain still and stay with the breathing and the concentration until the concentration gathers and becomes acceptably firm. You don't have to become perfectly concentrated, so please don't imagine you have to reach those lofty heights.

Letting Go

When awareness is established through concentration and you realise that your mind is gathered and one-pointed, it is time to let go of that concentrated state whereby awareness is sharp and present but blinkered. Now relax and allow awareness to let go of its self-imposed one-pointedness and begin to expand and fill out. First begin to become aware of your body. Allow awareness to expand and see thoughts that may flit in and pass away, become aware of your feelings, any discomfort that maybe present in the legs or the posture, any emotion that may be present. Become alive and aware to the totality and sense of being alive and your general wellbeing.

Where there was once just a one-pointed mind largely unaware of anything other than itself, now there is a growing sense of spaciousness. Rest in that spaciousness, become like a mirror that sees all that comes into its field of reference but doesn't get involved with what is there. Allow awareness to free itself even more, to become even more expansive, now begin to allow yourself to awaken to the environment that you are in.

In this particular environment become aware you are not alone and that there are others in this room. Sense the bodies that surround you, smell the incense that burns. Hear the bird singing on the tree outside, hear the wind that blows through its branches. Now there is a car driving past on the nearby road. Even a jet fighter flying overhead. Open to the totality of your awareness, your experience of being alive. Learn to rest peacefully in the complete openness of your totality. This is all, there is nothing else. In time come to realise that this freedom and unsullied experience of pure awareness is not something created but actually discovered.

Creating the World

We will, of course, soon realise that this simplicity of abiding is not easy to awaken to let alone maintain. (Here lies the reason why we need the support and guidance of the Dharma and a Dharma teacher and sangha. This is why Buddhism exists with its myriad skilful ways of bringing us ultimately to the truth and our true nature). There is always the chattering mind that wants to muscle in. We come straight up against our powerfully ingrained conditioning fuelled by the sense of self that always wants a piece of any experience. For example, sitting here now in the quietness of this environment you hear that car approaching from the distance, and with the stillness and openness of your awareness you would like it to simply come into your experience and pass by without any opinions and attachments to it, but as it gets closer you become attracted to it and thoughts begin to arise and take you away from your spacious openness. Thoughts arise "I have come all this way to experience the peace of the Scottish countryside and now we have to put up with the distraction of a noisy motor car, why doesn't it just clear off and leave us alone!"

Sometimes we hear jet fighters flying over, and boy, are they noisy! Far noisier than a car, and we can get very upset with that as well, and so create a world around that experience also, can't we? Maybe not just a world of aversion but possibly one of desire instead and fall into a fantasy whereby you became the pilot of the plane and fly yourself away from the uncomfortable challenge of sitting here and having to be with yourself all day long and take yourself off to an adventure in a far off land! All sorts of thoughts and pictures of aversion and desire may come into your mind. We have an experience and then we build around it all these thoughts and mental pictures until self-identity becomes ever more entrenched. Thoughts of "I like, I don't like, I want, I don't want": the self comes and grabs hold of them and makes them 'mine', all in the name of reaffirming its existence.

Because you are now settled within the brightness of awareness you have a few moments when you can

catch yourself from falling into the familiarity of attachment. You can see the world coming and say to yourself “no, I’m not going to chase and become attached to this” and remain abiding in the clarity and no-thingness of awareness. Now you are not chasing after an object and losing your awareness in the world that has now come into being.

Now you are not caught up in things, not carrying things, not chasing or running away but instead you’re staying in that openness and stillness and learning to stay with just that. With the commitment of coming back into that spaciousness, the firmer and more present your awareness becomes, the more you can stay there. In this peaceful state you may feel happy and may even become bathed in rapturous bliss that fills your whole being. When you experience the freedom of awareness I am sure you will enjoy the peace that comes with it but be careful not to get attached to these states: mara may come and encourage you to take this experience as being your primary motivation to meditate. Become ever more familiar with the mirror like quality of your awareness, awareness that sees and knows everything with ever increasing clarity but never chases or gets caught up in any of it.

True Nature

As I said at the beginning of this talk, your meditation practice is more than just a meditation practice because now you have arrived at a point when there is no practice at all. You’ve arrived where there is nothing to do, nowhere to go and nothing to achieve. You’ve used skilful means to arrive where you now are but have let all those skilful means go. You are now at the threshold of your true nature where any form of doing cannot be.

Of course we are all familiar with our awareness and I’m sure for most of us we regard it as yet another one of my possessions or a part of me and what makes me up. We tend to see awareness in the same way we see my seeing, my hearing, my taste, my touch, my smell, my thoughts and all the experiences that come through these gates. These are all mine, these are all things and bits that go to make me up, these are all the little bits which when gathered together build my self-identity of being a person and of being alive. So we take awareness as being another one of those aggregates, but actually awareness is not one of those parts at all, not one of the five skandhas that we’ve all learned about.

Learning to come into our awareness, to abide in our still natural condition without using a technique is something that isn’t generally done in the more conventional practices of Buddhism, is it? After all if we never employed even one of the many skilful tools of practice found within Buddhism how could we name what we do as being Buddhist? In dualistic Buddhism we are always filling awareness with something or other, so even in meditation we have things that we do, we use awareness but we are not really familiar with its innate unique qualities, not really prepared to just abide in that nakedness, that emptiness, that spaciousness. We must always be filling it up with something or other, and be doing something, mustn’t we? We always want to put something in there so that we feel that we are achieving and feeling in control - “I want to be insightful, I want to be enlightened, I want to achieve, I want to become a different person” - reaching out to ideals. But with our practice we have only one aspiration and that is to awake to what we truly are and be in the present moment and be absorbed in our true nature beyond the world and suffering. So how do we fulfill this? We do nothing.

No Practice

For us there is only awareness. We bring awareness into the centre of our mandala and give it unremitting attention, whether sitting, standing, walking or laying down. The whole of our aspiration to freedom all comes back to awareness, to that emptiness, to that spaciousness, without trying to put something in it, trying to fill it up, trying to create and become something. Aspiring to become ever more familiar with just being aware and learning to trust that openness that often comes with a sense of vulnerability where no self can abide. Through a willingness to catch ourselves wandering in the world and come back over and over again and return to the present moment and abide in our awareness with no desire to fill it up with anything.

Slowly, awareness and the clarity of awareness become ever more present and ever more established and begin to be something far, far more than you have ever thought awareness was. You have always thought awareness was a bit of me, a thing, an object and a part of a bundle but now through familiarity you see your

awareness is far more than an just another object. With the ongoing polishing and maturity it becomes ever more clear that awareness isn't actually a part of me and one of my possessions, it actually doesn't belong to me at all, it is not a part of 'me and mine': it is not a part of my personality.

You will wake up to the truth of awareness by simply learning to abide with it, to accept that awareness is the most important feature of your make-up and to come to awareness, to stay with awareness over and over and allow it to polish itself. Allow it to wake up, become more alive and get to know itself and see that the real you beyond the veil of self is this very awareness. In time and through wholehearted commitment you will discover that awareness and your true nature cannot be different and in any way separate.

Fulfilment

By becoming ever more familiar with the nature of awareness you will see that awareness not only embraces all that is but is revealed as your own true nature as well. With this growing conviction you will accept that to bring awareness not only to the centre of your meditation but also to your daily life is the most important commitment on your spiritual journey. To be ever awakening to the reality of what was once a feature of your being that was often regarded as secondary to some technique or other is now all you need to free yourself from suffering. To taste the spaciousness, peace and freedom that is found at the centre of what you really are will be your guiding light and inspiration from now on. To realise with ever stronger conviction that to be always returning to your alive yet still-like awareness is to alight upon your true nature and the end of the path. So right on this very day, when you begin your training of letting go of dualistic practices and begin to take refuge directly in your ever-present uncluttered awareness, be assured that this is not to start a journey that has a beginning, middle and end but see that this meditation goes beyond those stages and places you at the very gate to your true nature.