

HOMEWORK:

1) Pick a precept, either from the traditional list or the class list, whatever jumps out at you. Focus on it for a few days. Change to a different one every few days, do it as it works best for you.

2) Try to meditate daily. Shorter, more consistent practice will serve you better than longer and infrequent sittings. Notice the following factors of deepening practice as you sit:

- concentration
- clearer seeing
- less identification
- kindness and acceptance.

Come back next class prepared to talk about your experience. We're not looking for dharma success stories. Most meaningful and helpful is seeing all the places where we can't seem to 'change', seeing ourselves saying or doing things that go against our intentions to practice.

PRACTICE TUNE UP

As with learning anything, whether an instrument, or working out in the gym, it's useful to evaluate our practice to know if it is supporting our intentions.

Here are some markers to look for as your practice matures and deepens:

- 1) **with concentration** – as concentration becomes steady, we can move away from the breath as a concentration stabilizer, and go from object to object. Distractions feel lighter.
- 2) with **clearer seeing** – like an onion, as we see and peel back the larger most obvious layer, another layer appears below. We see more and more. Habitual thinking patterns open and the underlying emotional discomforts that drive them appear. Then the beliefs that cause the emotional reactions begin to be visible.
- 3) With **less identification** with conditioned objects - we stop identifying with the objects arising and notice a clear, silent center of awareness that experiences them. Being caught in 'sticky' or triggered places is less intense and more easily releases.

- 4) With **kindness and acceptance** - we allow more and more to happen with loving kindness towards ourselves, seeing the lack of a self in control of our life experience and our reaction patterns. This allows us to see others as caught in conditioned patterns, with kindness and acceptance growing for everyone.
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LIFE AS PRACTICE AS LIFE

Our life is the expression of our practice. We don't meditate to become great meditators, we meditate to find peace, wisdom, and loving kindness in our lives.

It's where the rubber hits the road, the proof of concept, the final result. The most important part of the dharma is how we take these teachings into our living. We started by evaluating what's happening in our sitting, because it's the primer of the pump, so to speak. We also need to evaluate our practice in the quality of our living. As Jack Kornfield asks in "A Path with Heart", does this practice have a heart? Am I kinder, more loving, more accepting and compassionate because I am on this path? If so, it is a path worth following.

We want to make sure the practice we are doing (and formal sitting meditation is only a portion of practice) is supporting this heart.

In the dharma, three levels of deepening realization are important to understand as we approach these teachings:

- 1) **CONCEPTUAL** - when we first hear or read, it is at the level of an idea. We engage it with our minds... does it make sense? Is it consistent with my lived experience? Does it sound right?

- 2) **REFLECTIVE** - the second level, when we start to notice how it is actually occurring for us, the 'aha' moments where we notice something has happened and how it relates to the original idea.

- 3) **DIRECTLY** - This is where the teaching reaches the level of realization: immediate, in the moment itself. At this level it becomes a part of your being, and never leaves you. Sort of like learning to ride a bike. Once we

know how, we no longer have to think about how to do it or lose the ability to do so. It just flows as a natural capability.

Another way to frame this is what is digested, and fully ingrained in our outlook, and undigested, or still something we have to consciously remember and bump up against.

DIGESTED also called the fruits of practice): Some parts may be so much a part of who you are, that you barely notice it in place. It becomes the wallpaper of our living. We might call these parts ‘digested’ understanding. Mindfulness might be an example, as it becomes a habit after a while.

UNDIGESTED (or the edges of practice): Other parts are current challenges, where active cultivation is the edge of our practice. We might refer to these areas as ‘undigested’ understanding. These areas tend to stand out as areas that feel difficult, more integration of the teachings are still needed.

INTRODUCING SILA (right or skillful living)

Life and practice are not separate. What happens in life is what will arise in practice, and how we are present with things in practice sets the model for how we are present with things in life.

From the opening lines from the dhammapada:

Speak or act with an impure mind and trouble will follow you,
as the wheel follows the ox that draws the cart.
Speak or act with a pure mind and happiness will follow you
as your shadow, unshakeable.

At the end of a long description of virtuous behavior, the Buddha talks about the result of virtue being the “bliss of blamelessness”. This phrase captured me. It feels good inside when you are able to live skillfully and without regret. As someone said last night, it’s worth more than money can buy.

CULTIVATING SILA = CULTIVATING HAPPINESS AND JOY

We do this not to become a goody two shoes, or as some kind of self improvement program, or to be 'better' somehow. We cultivate sila for our own benefit, our own happiness.

In the anapanasati sutta, the original set of meditation instructions, right after breath and body centeredness, the next instructions, before starting the insight process, are to connect with happiness and joy. The implication is that we cannot truly find insight and liberation apart from our innate happiness and joy. This is why we support the practice by cultivating sila (skillful living).

It's to cultivate that happiness and joy, both for ourselves and for others. Here we're defining happiness as the personal emotion of well being, and joy as an impersonal characteristic of the ground of being.

When we're in the moment, what opens up in us is a sense of peace and joy, or release and relaxation, that all is well. Many of us do feel a sense of space and release from stress by simply coming back to the breath. This is why we support life by cultivating the practice.

The Egyptian cosmology holds a meaningful clue to all this. When you died, your soul met the goddess Ma'at, who was the keeper of the soul gate. Ma'at held a scale in one hand, and a feather. Your heart was placed on one side of the scale, and the feather in the other. If your heart was heavier than the feather, you needed to come back and learn in another lifetime. We cannot 'progress' to the next world, or to the 'end' of the path, unless our hearts are light and we know joy.

Secondarily, from our own life experience, we know how the mind will not settle into practice and mindfulness when we feel guilt and regret, or are troubled by our words and actions.

From the Vissudhi Maggha, a foundational text in the Theravada Insight tradition, sila is the first work, before formal practice of any kind.

The VM sees the path as seven stages of progressive purifications. Not necessarily linear, but each one must be engaged in to some extent before the next one arises.

A helpful analogy is one of an old children's toy consisting of a board with various knobs on it that we used to put various gears on. Each gear touched the next gear, so that as you added the brightly colored gears, turning the first one would turn all the subsequent ones. However, if an earlier-added gear runs into an obstacle and stops, the entire turning process halts. Until the obstacle in the jammed gear is attended to, no further turning happens. In the same way, each stage has to be active and 'turning' to allow the next level to be added.

The first stage is "Purification of Virtue" (sila). Again, this is foundational and must be engaged.

Two of the main tools we can use: the sila part of the eightfold path (right speech, right action, right livelihood), and the precepts (guidelines for living with non harm).

We will start with the precepts.

PRECEPTS

Like physicians, we start with: **first, do no harm.**

Precepts come from the vinaya, or the code of conduct for the monastic community. Several different translations are around. All the precepts can be summed up into one aim: that of non-harm.

As our daily life must be lived in a way as to not be a barrier for the path of practice, the precepts, or living with non-harm, are understood as the foundation for practice.

In traditional Buddhist societies, taking the precepts happens regularly and is the re-commitment to the path that one does over and over again. The precepts are recited before any teaching gathering, and "taking the precepts" is the formal way one commits to the path of meditation. It is traditional to begin a retreat by reciting the precepts together.

You can find a variety of translations of the Precepts from different sources

on the internet. Most have the “thou shalt not” flavor. Thich Nat Hanh’s are among the most descriptive of the awareness and the mindfulness that keeping the precepts involves. In class you received a basic translation and also the Thich Nat Hanh ones.

The Buddhist teachings have many parts, and can seem a little confusing to keep it all straight. But each part is a hologram, or contains the whole. As we work more deeply with the precepts, we see that to keep even one of them requires a level of awareness and mindfulness, that, if developed, will lead us home.

The traditional ones can seem a bit irrelevant, as most of us are not killing or stealing on a regular basis. But we all experience harm and it’s effects, both the harms done to us by others, and the harms we ourselves commit. We put together a list of things from our lives. Please use these, and others that may appear, as a basis for your homework:

- not following through with commitments or what we say we will do
- speaking negatively about oneself and others
- not paying attention, not attending to the needs of others
- what we eat; either non vegetarian foods or simply eating unhealthily
- judging, being unwilling to forgive or be forgiven, impatience with the shortcomings of ourselves and others
- impulsive consumption, especially with technology and phones
- not allowing ourselves to rest, being overcommitted
- demanding too much, of ourselves and others
- honoring opposition, those who seem to be in competition with us

Enjoy working with this and your meditation over the next two weeks until we meet again. Remember this is about happiness and ease, not something heavy and constrictive.

See you Feb.15,
Susan