



Bowerchalke

Buddhist Meditation

Handbook

Version 2

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Buddhist Meditation
at
Bowerchalke Village Hall

Postcode: SP5 5BB

OS: SU 01862 23091

10 – 11 am each Wednesday

6 – 7 pm each Tuesday

Tuition and support for
a regular practice of
calming the mind and
attending to the world

(No charge; donations welcome)

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1. Introduction

What is meditation?

‘Mental development (*bhāvanā*), ‘Meditation’ and ‘Mindfulness’ all refer to the same sort of activity: ways of paying closer-than-usual attention to what is actually happening to consciousness. What happens can *only* consist of the so-called ‘internal’ mental features of feeling, emotion, intention, imagination and rational thought, plus the so-called ‘external’ sensory features of contact with embodiment in a world. These days, the traditional Buddhist list of six senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch and mind (awareness of internal mental features) can be extended to include the sense of proprioception (awareness of bodily condition and orientation). Close attention can be concentrated on one mental feature or another, to the partial exclusion of the rest, or one can sit in awareness of them all, if and when they happen. This handbook describes some of these methods of attention.

Traditionally, Buddhism divides the purpose of meditation into ‘calming’ (*samatha*) and ‘insight’ (*vipassanā*). The first is an attempt to stop mental agitation by anchoring attention on a mental object such as breathing; a form of awareness that is easy to return to again and again, precisely because it advertises itself through periodic change. The second is an attempt to develop intuitive understanding of ‘the way things really are’ when the mind is undisturbed by ‘greed, hatred and delusion’.

As an indirect way to calm the mind, meditation usually begins with observation of the body, of the process of breathing and of subliminal feelings. By this direction of attention, the mind’s continual stream of imaginative scenarios tends to diminish. Roughly speaking, that’s *samatha*.

Any reduction in the activity of consciousness allows room for greater awareness of the way the mind is working, and for closer observation of appearances within the field of consciousness, such as ‘external’, sensory feedback about embodiment in a physical world. Roughly speaking, that’s *vipassanā*.

After some experience of meditation, it becomes apparent that *samatha* and *vipassanā* are simultaneous and mutually reinforcing. The act of closely observing any mental event tends to exert a calming effect; and one can always return to a calming technique whenever it becomes apparent that the mind has slipped back into thinking, imagining or worrying.

Why bother?

When done regularly, meditation becomes a habitual *practice*: a form of ritual activity designed to short-circuit the tendency for consciousness to drift along in the activity of the internal mental faculties, thereby losing contact with the passage of time and awareness of the physicality of embodied being in an external world. The problem with our random internal mental chatter is that, by virtue of our chequered evolutionary history, the task-free mind tends to fall into disordered rumination, overpowering awareness rather than aiding effective conscious activity. Buddhist meditation is not aimed at altogether eliminating randomness, for it is not an attempt to exert absolute control over consciousness by consciousness itself, as if by a supreme act of willpower.

In all meditation, the preferred attitude is that of effortless effort, or trying without deliberately trying. Having understood the method and the object of any particular meditation technique, as much as possible the mind should be left to its own devices, just being non-judgmentally returned to the job-in-hand whenever it strays. The job-in-hand is the concentration of awareness on the object of meditation, even though concentration without trying to concentrate sounds paradoxical. The more careful the attention, the more it seems that, whether the object of meditation includes many things (is consciousness as a whole) or excludes most things (is consciousness of one type of mental faculty), attention can only be directed towards one happening at a time. Even attention on that happening (one-pointed attention) is elusive: it tends to be brief. But does experience really feel like that? When walking mindfully, does the mind only notice the lifting, pushing and placing of one foot or the other, or is there simultaneous awareness of both feet, of the rest of the body, of a certain feeling-tone, of contact with the ground, of other people, and of surrounding space? Without pre-judging the issue, it may turn out that even when attention is primarily directed towards only one 'thing' at a time, there is some subliminal awareness of many other events, things or processes.

However wide or narrow the focus of attention, and however much effort of willpower, the claim being made here is that the establishment of habitual meditation practice, in which consciousness is observed but largely left to its own devices, is conducive to more orderly, less discontented states of mind. Having learnt some meditation techniques it is, of course, a personal decision as to whether to continue, depending on whether or not any initial changes of mind feel beneficial. Either way, a new skill has been learnt, like swimming or riding a bike, which is capable of recall whenever the need arises.

For modern westerners, meditation can seem like a form of psychotherapy, and

with the development of Jon Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness-based stress-reduction programme, it has become just that. But Buddhist meditation has a wider *insight* perspective: to be fully alive to the world, just as we are and just as it turns out to be, and by doing so, to recollect existence here and now, as a means of reflection on the 'great matter of birth and death'. Perhaps the difference between these two attitudes towards meditation, as a therapy and as a way of living, is no more than a matter of scope. As psychotherapy, mindfulness is primarily a short-term intervention for those who are having difficulty coping with life, usually after some form of traumatic circumstance. Buddhist meditation is a more open-ended practice that is, in theory, suitable for anyone on the basis that anyone can benefit from some reduction in mental disorder, whether they lead a charmed life or whether they have been buffeted by misfortune, and whatever their underlying religious or secular beliefs. One does not have to be Buddhist to meditate, for ritual forms similar to meditation are also found in Christianity, Hinduism, Sufi Islam and most other religious social systems.

What to do?

In order to meditate effectively it is necessary to adopt a comfortable physical position. The most stable posture is the lotus or half-lotus position, seated on a cushion with the legs crossed and feet facing or resting upon the opposite thighs. But for many people, this position proves excessively uncomfortable. The most common alternative is a modified form of the (Jp.) *seiza* position, kneeling with the support of a round cushion (Jp. *zafu*) or a meditation stool. After all, meditation is about the alleviation, not the application, of suffering, so if aches and pains make even this position uncomfortable it is reasonable to meditate sitting upright on a chair. In order to achieve the most erect and comfortable position, try placing a cushion or foam block under the feet, on the chair, at the back, or on the lap as support for the hands.

Whatever the sitting position adopted, the upper body should be erect, as if supported by a string attached to the top of the head, yet with the back muscles slightly relaxed. The eyes should be directed towards the ground or two metres away. It is a matter of preference whether the eyes are open, half-open or closed, but if closed, care should be taken to remain awake and alert. The palms of both hands should face upwards with the fingers of one hand resting on the fingers of the other. The tips of the thumbs should gently touch each other. When sitting over extended time in cold weather, try wrapping the lower half of the body in a blanket.

During meditation, some temporary suspension of judgement is helpful in order to

more fully attend to the world, because judgements and beliefs may be mis-guided by our habitual intentional attitudes. The preferred attitude towards what happens (the intentional stance) should just be a background state of care for oneself, for others and for the world.

With this sort of ethical yet fairly indeterminate attitude, not being bothered about 'what's it all about' and 'what's in it for me', it is easier to pay closer attention to what is actually happening, when it actually happens, both 'in' consciousness and apparently 'out there' in the world.

At Bowerchalke, a bell is rung three times at the beginning and end of meditation. It is also rung once at ten minute intervals, as a reminder to return attention to the meditation technique, or to turn attention to another technique. Occasionally, the facilitator may quietly utter a reminder of how to proceed. However, although our minds are open to suggestion from outside, they are our only arena of complete freedom: it is up to you what happens therein, including whether to follow the advice on offer.

The style of meditation practice and the attitude towards Buddhist ideas at Bowerchalke is thoroughly liberal: what feels useful is promoted, while what appears to be superfluous or superstitious is neglected. Even so, the practices described in this handbook are not modern innovations; they are derived from the earliest Buddhist texts (the Pāli *suttas*) or from the East-Asian Chan/Zen/Sōn tradition.

One caveat

For some people, very rarely, meditation may generate overwhelming feelings or sensory disturbances. It is better to seek advice than to suffer such disturbances without help. If empathetic listening, (available from the facilitator, fellow meditators, or friends) proves insufficient, it would be sensible to consult a qualified psychotherapist. Persons on psychoactive medication, or with existing concerns about their mental health, ought to consult their G.P. and inform the group facilitator before undertaking meditation.

2. Observation of bodily sensations

At the beginning of any meditation, spend some time paying attention to bodily sensations. These sensations will usually be of muscular origin, such as existing aches, pains and tensions, or reactions to the maintenance of one position. After initial stabilisation, concentrate briefly on each muscle group, moving attention from head to toe, observing if muscles, joints and ligaments are relaxed, tense or painful. Make adjustments if that is helpful, before moving attention onto the next muscle group.

The method: Sit as upright as possible, *as if* the top of the head were supported by a string from above, so that the head tilts slightly forwards, directing the gaze to the ground about a metre and a half to the front, then very slightly relax the muscles supporting the spine. Re-establish this stance again and again as the meditation proceeds. Observe and relax the muscles that descend over the back of the scalp, so that head floats freely on the neck. Notice sensation around the ears, then move on to the forehead, removing any frowning by allowing the eyebrows to descend over the eyes. Relax the muscles round the eyes, so that they float freely in their sockets, then follow the relaxation of tension as it seems to flow over the cheekbones and past the lower jaw, allowing it to fall slightly so that the teeth are unclenched. Allow the tongue to loosen onto the floor of the mouth. As all tension falls from the face, notice a complete absence of activity, other than the inward and outward movement of breath at the nostrils.

Relax any tension in the shoulders, allowing the shoulder-blades to lapse onto the ribcage. Feel how weight descends the upper arms and articulates into the forearms at the elbows, finally meeting support where the wrists and hands rest on the lap. Whenever tension creeps back into the arms during the meditation, alleviate by swinging the elbows slightly forwards and back, before lifting the hands and letting them fall back on the lap, rearranging the fingers and retouching the tips of the thumbs.

Turn attention to the spine, observing along its length, noticing that the curve at the neck reverses over the shoulders, reversing again at the lumbar region. Be aware of any spinal discomfort and do what you can to alleviate it by alterations of posture, such as rocking the hips forward and back to find the ideal position for transferring upper-body weight down into the seat.

If sitting on a chair, observe the equal work done by each leg: thighs, knees, ankles, feet and toes, in the maintenance of a balanced posture. The muscles of the buttocks and thighs may gradually tense up over the course of meditation, particularly if sitting on a chair, so wriggle if necessary, or try to allow adjacent muscle groups to take their share of the strain. Feel the different angles either side of the knees, and alleviate tension in the ankles, feet and toes by making small adjustments. If kneeling with a stool, observe the tension in the thigh muscles, the extension of ligaments around the knees and ankles, the compressive weight on the calves, and the triangular limb position that helps balance the upper body. It may take some rearrangement to find the ideal position. To be clear: at Bowerchalke it is perfectly acceptable, at any time, to make whatever movements, large or small, quiet or noisy, as are necessary to re-establish a comfortable posture.

If there is time, repeat this sequence of observations, making any adjustments that

feel helpful, but mainly noticing what it is like to be embodied: a host of sensations, pleasant, neutral or unpleasant, some providing information about the internal state of the body, some relaying external information about temperature, texture, pressure and orientation in space.

The practice of carefully observing bodily sensations can be an end in itself, particularly after a stressful day. By calming the mind, this practice begins to make room for equable observation of feelings, of sensory information about the world and of the fleeting passage of thoughts. 'Make room' here implies that insight is less obscured by an over-active or discontented mind. 'Equable observation' implies that the reception of each experience is less warped by underlying, unsatisfactory bodily sensations.

3. Mindfulness of breathing

Meditation on breathing is *the* foundational meditation technique, incorporating aspects of both *samatha* and *vipassanā*. It can be sufficient in itself, especially when life is too busy for a more comprehensive practice. Whatever has happened in life, is happening or is about to happen, being aware of the vital process of breathing is inherently calming, as one-pointed attention on breathing calls the mind back to the warm tangibility of human embodiment. This meditation is also insightful, clearly revealing the precious, tenuous, yet certain nature of human existence.

The method: once the body is thoroughly stabilised, move on to the practice of 'mindfulness of in- and out-breathing' (*ānāpānasati*). Just pay attention to the quality each in-breath, each out-breath, and to the brief pause between. Concentrate on awareness of the inflation and deflation of the lungs, beginning from and returning to the region of the navel. Adopt a natural breathing pattern, not too shallow with only partial lung inflation, nor too deep with excessive pauses between in- and out-breaths. As concentration becomes more focussed, turn attention to the slight difference in temperature as the breath enters and exits the nostrils.

It can sometimes be a useful aid to concentration to count towards ten, either before or after each in-and-out breath. But counting can prove counter-productive, for it tends to build disappointment about the continual interruption of stray thoughts before a count of ten is ever achieved. Meditation should have no preconceived destination, for it is not about setting and achieving goals. Therefore, regular counting is not recommended.

Whenever the mind wanders, return attention to the area of the chest, and to breathing. If the digestive system is not complaining; if balance has been achieved

between the relaxation of tension and the adjustment of muscle tone required for stability, then the body should be sufficiently in harmony (homeostasis) for a background emotion of care and concern (for oneself and for others) to become manifest as a subliminal feeling-tone in the chest area, somewhere between the throat and the navel, as if in the region of its traditional association with the heart. Anchor the meditation on this emotional feeling. If and when it is eclipsed by pain or tension anywhere in the body, briefly repeat the observation of bodily sensations, then return to mindfulness of breathing, and to the feeling-tone of care.

If you wish to establish a daily meditation practice, try placing attention on in-breathing and out-breathing for at least ten minutes every day, extending the time if that is convenient, feels comfortable, and is effective in calming the stream of consciousness. Don't worry or be judgmental of yourself if the calming process doesn't happen immediately or is not always effective. Because consciousness renews itself over brief moments of time, and because it tends to run along habitual trains of thought, progress will not necessarily be easy. Paradoxically, improvement is more likely when it is neither expected nor intended.

4. Meditation on feeling-tone

Meditation on feeling-tone is a way of gaining insight (*vipassanā*) into the range and quality of emotional reactions to whatever appears to consciousness. In traditional Buddhist terms, feeling is one of five categories that make up a person: form (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), sensation (*sañña*), mental formations (*sankhāra*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*) and one of four factors of enlightenment (body, feeling, consciousness, plus things / the truth about things (*dhamma*)¹

The practice that follows meditation on feeling-tone: meditation on loving-kindness (*mettā-bhāvanā*) should prove a much more effective technique for behavioural change, if and when it is combined with greater awareness of the subtle alterations that continually happen to our underlying emotional reactions. Feeling-tones, not all of which are as strong as emotions, are so fundamental to our way of responding to the world that in most cases we become aware of a feeling about something at the same time as, *or even before*, we are fully aware that the related event or thing is happening. That feelings often arise in advance of awareness of their cause is one reason why our emotional reactions

¹ *Dhamma* (Pali)/*Dharma* (Sanskrit) tends to be left untranslated, by virtue of its range of context-dependent meanings.

can turn out to be so wayward, invasive and overpowering.

It is because feeling-tones are automatic and hard to control, that meditation upon them is both difficult and worthwhile. Full awareness of feeling-tone is a method of *creative engagement* with an underlying type of mental activity, which otherwise tends to motivate reactions that lead on to random unintended consequences and suffering, without any clear awareness of the cause.

The method: After generating calm through mindfulness of bodily sensations and mindfulness of breathing, pay attention to any underlying states of mind that have been brought into the meditation. If these are subliminal, such states may only be detected by the manner in which they influence other thoughts, attitudes and perceptions. Whatever is identified, try to classify these feelings into one of three modes: pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, then accept that they are part of what is happening, then let them go. Move on to *identify, classify, accept and let go*, whatever feeling-tones arise in tandem with whatever else comes to mind during the meditation.

In the case of unpleasant feelings, identifying, classifying, accepting and letting go, amounts to *being with* the experience of that feeling for no longer than its duration: not avoiding it, not being overcome by it, not exaggerating it and not aiding its proliferation.

Identification is just about noticing what is actually happening.

Classifying into the three modes of pleasant, unpleasant and neutral could be taken to distract from the reality of feelings, if one did not also take care to notice and accept their changeability. Notice that all feelings change in continual dependence on other feelings and subsequent events. Rather than becoming fixed, they are inherently impermanent (*anicca*).

When a feeling, or its cause, drops out of mind, it can conveniently be let go, rather than grasped at to the detriment of subsequent experience. But while feelings are changeable, some unpleasant feelings (such as grief, depression and physical pain) may be rather prolonged. Meditation does not necessarily provide a cure for such feelings, but close attention can reveal that they are not inevitably part of one's personality. With the realisation that emotional and physical pain are not integral to the person, and therefore can be 'let go', there is more chance of understanding that something can be done to bring relief in cases where feelings do not subside of their own accord. That may motivate a decision to seek outside help.

Meditation is about creative engagement with whatever appears in consciousness, for better or for worse, not hedonistic immersion in a bath of entirely pleasant feelings. There is a strong tendency to want, to grasp at or to artificially try to perpetuate pleasant

feelings. But the world is never quite the same from one moment to the next, therefore, the task of perpetuating pleasant feelings risks becoming calculating, addictive, self-defeating, quite cunning and eventually unpleasant.

Similarly, to grasp after an imaginary feeling-tone, *as if* the world were as one wants it to be, risks eclipsing whatever is happening here and now, thereby down-grading reality into second-rate experience. Of course, the aspiration to make a better world is a useful motivation, but to imagine that the world is entirely pleasant, or expect that it will be, may prove unhelpful in view of our manifest lack of control over cause and effect, over 'unknown unknowns' and their unintended consequences.

Residing in a state of neutral feeling sounds boring, as if emotional dullness is the inevitable consequence of doing nothing whatsoever. Hence the view that meditation is just 'navel-gazing', whereas the proper role for humanity is heroic activity against a fateful world, in the Grecian style. Meditation, therefore, may be denigrated as risking loss of the critical 'edge' that sometimes seems vital to the personality of western individuals. On the contrary, boredom, dullness, and negativity are not neutral; they are unpleasant states in restless minds that cry out for continual entertainment. Neutrality of feeling is more like being at ease, at rest from the habitual requirement to react instantaneously, selfishly and judgmentally to everything that appears to consciousness.

Naturally, neutral feelings will be superseded over time by pleasant and unpleasant feeling-tones, as the mind reacts to new sensations, perceptions and thoughts. But calming meditation, plus increasing experience of emotional neutrality, opens increasing opportunities to creatively engage with feelings, rather than reacting according to habitual emotionally-led behaviour-patterns. At the anger end of the scale, most of these behaviours may be immediate and destructive, whereas *some* subtle, long-term emotional habits may be functional and beneficial. For example, meditation makes it easier to observe the way in which everyday social life is governed by habitual emotional interactions that equalise individual attitudes with group attitudes. In other words, people can be seen to associate with each other by subtle changes in feeling-tone, in advance of any shared statements of belief. For those who are self-centred, the process of equalising feelings within social groups may be difficult.

So, meditation on feeling-tone is about rescuing the mind from the continual buffeting of unexamined emotional reactions, be they pleasant or unpleasant, sudden or gradual, overwhelming or habitual. Meditation on feeling-tone encourages the gradual development of emotionally-neutral states of mind, with beneficial effects on ethical behaviour and social engagement.

5. Walking meditation

Walking meditation has at least three purposes: it counteracts the drowsiness that overtakes the mind after extended periods of sitting meditation; it pays close attention to the bipedal mode of human embodiment; and it helps in the development of concentration on *processes* (such as walking), rather than *things* (such as distracting objects nearby). Observing processes, rather than things, resonates with one of the principal themes of Buddhist philosophy (*abidhamma*), which argues that things are never independent entities because they all depend upon a procession of causally-interrelated, momentary events.

When sitting upright, the brainstem has sufficient work to do in maintaining balance, to support wakeful attention for at least 30-45 minutes of meditation. After that, attention may become difficult as drowsiness takes hold. Occasionally the struggle to maintain balance and wakefulness can jolt the mind into an improved level of awareness, but when that does not happen, it makes sense to stop meditating for a while or to alternate sitting meditation with some form of exercise. Walking meditation is an appropriate form of exercise, reactivating the brainstem, restoring muscle-tone, continuing the meditative focus on attention rather than distraction, and so facilitating the return to effective sitting meditation.

The method: Raise the hands to chest level. Make a loose fist with one hand, enclosing the thumb. Loosely grasp that hand with the other, with its thumb on top. Stand straight, look a metre or so ahead with the eyes open or half-closed, and slowly begin to walk. As you lift your left foot, silently say: 'lifting'. As you push forward with your right foot, silently say: 'pushing'. As your left foot makes contact with the ground, silently say: 'placing'. As you lift your right foot, silently say: 'lifting'. As your push forward with your left foot, silently say: 'pushing'. As your right foot makes contact with the ground, silently say: 'placing'. And so on.

A slow pace should naturally evolve in order to achieve the surprisingly difficult task of rhythmically coordinating the appropriate word with the correct movement. Walking involves more than just these three movements, so you may wish to use a different set of terms to describe your own experience. As well as coordinating words with movements, the pace should be slow enough to allow sufficient time to observe the movement of the upper body as, in the interest of balance, it sways diagonally across the direction of travel while you push with one foot and place with the other. You should pay

particular attention to the repeating sensations of contact between various parts of the feet and the ground.

Once the walking process is stabilised, give up the silent commentary in order to be more mindful of all the movements that enable walking to take place. As with other forms of meditation, be accepting of what happens without being self-judgmental about lapses in attention. It may be useful to resume the silent commentary whenever attention does distract away from the process of walking.

Ideally, walking forwards, turning and returning, should take place over about 12 metres of level outside ground in a quiet location. Firstly, this is because the object of meditation is just the process of walking, rather than the whole range of sensory information that may be available in a more spectacular location or over more variable terrain. Secondly, the turn at each end provides a natural opportunity to recall the mind to the object of meditation. Thirdly, an outside location can be refreshing after time spent indoors. But in practice, social and weather constraints often mean that walking meditation takes place indoors, following other people as they equalise their pace around a room. Even then, careful placement of the feet, especially when navigating corners, can help to call attention back to walking as the object of meditation.

For another explanation of walking meditation, try Gil Fronsdal's article at: <http://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/books-articles/articles/instructions-for-walking-meditation/>

6. Loving kindness

It would be nice if our background emotional state of care for the world was always positive, but that would be a naïve assumption. In Buddhist terms, our attitude towards the world is often contaminated by greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) or confusion (*moha*). In effect, care for the world tends towards the rather self-centred form of desire or craving (*taṇhā*) for those people, things or events that satisfy our exaggerated sense of ourselves. Actual experience of these objects of desire transmutes craving into greed (we want more), hatred (we want no more) or confusion (we don't know what we want). Most animal behaviours, from worms up to humans, can be located within these three primitive psychological categories

Loving-kindness meditation (*mettā-bhāvanā*) is designed to de-contaminate our habitual attitudes, such that our care for the world becomes less self-centred. This practice is a behavioural technique for changing one's mind with the aid of the imagination, rather

than by simply affirming that one will change one's behaviour, or by losing oneself in analysing the multitude of causes for greed, hatred and confusion.

The method: Before beginning loving-kindness meditation, spend sufficient time observing bodily sensations and in mindfulness of breathing. If you find it helpful, begin by silently making a brief ritual statement of forgiveness:

‘If I have done wrong, may all forgive me.
I freely forgive anyone who may have injured me.
I freely forgive myself.’

Then continue by saying to oneself: ‘May all beings be happy and well.’ Sit with the meaning of this statement for a while, then say to oneself: ‘May I be happy and well.’ Again, sit for a while with this statement, observing the feeling of what it is like to actually mean what one says. Then, calling a friend to mind, say: ‘May [my friend] be happy and well’. Sit with that feeling of reciprocal good wishes. After a while, call to mind a neutral person – someone with whom one has transactional rather than friendly relations – saying: ‘May [that neutral person] be happy and well’. Sit for a while with what it is like to develop empathy for someone who is peripheral to one's usual concerns. Then, call an enemy to mind – someone with whom one has been in conflict – saying: ‘May [my enemy] be happy and well’. Observe and accept the emotional tone that underlies such a counter-intuitive remark, and sit for a while with whatever feelings arise. Finally, repeat the two sayings: ‘May I be happy and well. May all beings be happy and well’. Sit for a while with the feelings and thoughts that arise.

Try not to have expectations about loving-kindness meditation, for expectation is itself a form of craving. If there are to be any beneficial effects, they are likely to emerge over the medium-to-long term. And rather than wasting effort on being self-judgmental, concentrate on the imaginative recall of friends, neutral persons and enemies. The better they (and their difficulties) are pictured in the imagination, the more they are likely invoke genuine feelings of empathy.

Loving-kindness differs from other forms of meditation by being as much about developing relationships over time as about ‘just being here now’. This is because acts of the imagination are a hidden, 'internal' part of the world, yet the recollection of particular persons would be impossible without a thoroughly external back-story of social life over extended time. Furthermore, this is not just a practice, but an *ethical* practice: the *cultivation* of better behaviours under an *aspiration* to be a better person.

7. Meditation on sensory experience: ambient sound

In both western and eastern philosophy, there is doubt as to whether there can ever be direct contact with a world that is external to consciousness. After all, information from the five senses only appears to consciousness in the form of mental events: for example, the colour blue is a quality that only appears to be blueness ‘in’ consciousness, in correspondence with a form of electro-magnetic radiation in the external world.

What matters is not the reality of sensory objects but the way people *react* to contact: to things seen, heard, smelled, tasted, touched, (or imagined). If motivated by desire, the reaction tends to be craving (*taṇhā*). The problem, then, is not the reality or unreality of the world, but the habitual tendency to neglect what is not wanted, while excessively craving or clinging (*upādanā*) to what is wanted.

Meditation on sensory information is an indirect antidote to clinging. It is a way of closely observing what happens when we react habitually to the world. After mind and body have been prepared by calming meditation (*samatha*), we tend to notice much more of the information that is available to our senses, as well as noticing the habitual way in which the mind feels about, and reacts to, that information.

By grasping after a habitual version of sensory experience, we treat the world as separate from ourselves, with a tension between the two: *I am me, experience of the world is just a collection of things; some of those things are mine*. By this way of thinking, we identify ourselves, solidify the fluidity of experience into fixed things, and magnify the significance of ourselves, our doings and our stuff. Meanwhile, we so diminish the importance of other sensory objects that we hardly bother to call them to mind. Sensory perceptions that are peripheral to our intentions tend to be obliterated at the threshold to consciousness.

For the everyday purposes of survival, this sifting and sorting of sensory information is very useful, but it relies on the contamination of sensory information by abstractions such as ‘selfhood’ and ‘otherness’, with the corresponding exaggeration of events that relate to ourselves. For fear that our lives will become tedious, wished-for experiences tend to be frequently replicated and elaborated; such grasping after significant experience is normal, but it is counter-productive whenever it causes sensory contact with the world to become divorced from the rest of experience. At such times, there is more of a *disconnection away* from the world than a sensory connection *with* the world.

Of all the sensory faculties, hearing is the best candidate for meditation on sensory

experience, because it generates less in the way of craving, grasping and clinging. The sense of smell is too weak in humans, while taste and touch are too implicated in sensual gratification. Because sight is the primary sensory faculty in humans, it is too often implicated in the generation of our intentions. Therefore, of all the senses, it is most useful to meditate on ambient sound.

The method: Choose a place where there is not too much noise, but not a complete absence of sound. Observe each sound that arises, observe any reaction (any attitude towards the sound) that arises, then let sound and feeling disappear. ‘Natural’ sounds: birdsong, wind, falling rain, etc. may seem preferable to engineered sound: cars, planes, chainsaws, unsolicited music, etc. If so, note the preference, but let it go. Meditation is not the time to confirm preferences or draw conclusions. As with other forms of meditation, the line of sight will tend to be slightly downcast as a result of sitting erect. The eyes may be open, half-closed or closed, but whatever is seen is not the primary object of meditation: try to remain attentive and receptive to each sound as it appears, continues, and disappears. The only effort required is to non-judgmentally call the mind’s attention back to sound, if and when it wanders into the other sensory modalities – including the modality of thought. For some time during the meditation, you may lose yourself in the arising and ceasing of sounds, uniting so-called internal and external worlds upon the neutral plane of experience.

8. 'Silent Illumination' (Ch. *Mo Chao*), or 'Just Sitting' (Jp. *Shikantaza*)

Just Sitting (the Zen Buddhist term) *The method:* is precisely ‘just sitting’ without any particular, preconceived intentional mental object (such as the breath), paying attention to whatever comes to mind, whether it be bodily sensation, emotional feeling, sensory perception, or more cognitive forms such as memory, reasoning, or daydream. ‘Paying attention’ means noticing when something appears to consciousness, for so long as it appears, then letting it go (not clinging), in order to be ready for whatever will happen next.

Silent Illumination (the Chan Buddhist term) is a more metaphorical description of the same meditative technique. ‘Silence’ refers to the calming of consciousness (*samatha*); ‘illumination’ means paying careful attention to all that is actually appearing to consciousness (*vipassanā*).

With the preceding six meditation techniques, there were always objects in mind, namely paying attention to bodily feelings, to the breath, to feeling-tone, to walking, to feelings for persons (including oneself) and to ambient sound. The hope is that, when moving on to ‘just sitting/silent illumination’, these previous practices will provide sufficient experience of calming and insight for both processes to take place without the aid of any preconceived object. Without that previous experience of meditation on a particular object, it might prove impossible to calm the scattergun activity of random and habitual thoughts.

Although there is no intended type of object on which to meditate, in ‘just sitting’ meditation there is a preconceived objective: ‘to see things as they really are’ (*yathā-bhūtam*). This sort of ‘seeing’ relies upon the achievement of a state of equanimity (*upekkhā*), in other words, that one is able to accept reality *just as it is*, rather than as one wants it to be.

Buddhist philosophy suggests that *yathā-bhūtam* is *direct* perception of reality. Actually, that is impossible, for sensory experience is always a partially-imaginary mental construction on the habitual basis of the past experience of the individual and the species. But it is possible to alter what is problematic in one’s relationship with reality, by reducing the contamination of experience by self-interest:

The main problem is wandering thoughts...maybe virtually all of them bound up with self-reference and associated feelings. It is this self-referencing mind that is the prime target for calming. It follows that the practice of illuminating...is one of looking into a mind progressively relieved of thoughts of self. (Crook 2002: 93)²

Thinking about the self in relation to the world’s dangers is an important task for the mind, as it places the imaginary self in imaginative scenarios, in preparation for sudden threats to the embodied individual. But, within the relative security of post-hunter-gatherer civilization, the primal urgency of these instinctive thought-processes can become pathological, as repetitive thoughts about the self evolve into intense dramas, Walter Mitty-esque daydreams, or ruminations over past failures and future triumphs.

Without these abnormal variations on normal thought-processes, our perception of reality still remains indirect, but comes with greater clarity, carries less fear of threat,

² John Crook, 2002, *Illuminating Silence: the practice of Chinese Zen*, (London: Watkins).

and enables the embodied self to find a more balanced, stable location within the world, rather than over against the world:

...awareness of bodily horizons fade[s], leading to a sense of luminous spaciousness and timelessness...concerns of self have lost their prominence...a sense of stability is acknowledged. The deliberate, intentional practice of silence with illumination leads...to an experience of unification as simple presence within a flow of universal being. Such unification, with self-concern laid aside, is blissful. (Crook 2002: 93).

The experience John Crook describes is peaceful, therapeutic and almost beyond words. It should be achievable by most people who practise meditation with regularity and consistency.

9. The *hwadu*: what is this?

In the 6-8th centuries, Chinese Buddhists of the Chan (Jp. *Zen*, Korean *Sōn*) school developed a method of circumventing the all-pervasive influence exerted on consciousness by language and rational thought. In ‘public cases’ (Ch. *kong-an*) of actual (and fictional) meetings between prominent teachers and their followers, questions were asked that were devoid of a meaningful answer. Some of these Q. and A. sessions were gathered into collections such as the *Blue Cliff Record*, the *Gateless Gate*, and the *Book of Equanimity*. Shortened versions of some of these *kong-an*, known as *huatou* (Ch.), *watō* (Jp.) or *hwadu* (Korean), can be useful in meditation. For a beginner, it is better to choose and remain with the practice of one *hwadu*, rather than dithering between many.

The method: The following text, by Martine Batchelor, describes the approach for one *hwadu*: ‘What is this?’ If you do decide to incorporate this *hwadu* into regular meditation practice, try to persevere until ‘body and mind become a question’. That can be quite an exasperating state of affairs, but it opens the possibility that, beyond words, the answer reveals itself.

In Korea one often practices asking the *hwadu* “What is this?”. “What is this?” comes from an encounter between the Sixth Patriarch Huineng and a young monk who became one of his foremost disciples, Huaijang.

Huaijang entered the room and bowed to Huineng. Huineng asked: "Where do you come from?". "I came from Mount Sung", replied Huaijang. "What is this and how did it get here?" demanded Huineng. Huaijang could not answer and remained speechless. He practised for many years until he understood. He went to see Huineng to tell him about his breakthrough. Huineng asked: "What is this?" Huaijang replied: "To say it is like something is not to the point. But still it can be cultivated".

The whole story is considered the *gongan* and the question itself "What is this?" is the *hwadu*. One sits in meditation and asks again and again "What is this? What is this?". What is it that moves, thinks, or speaks? Even more, before we think, move, or speak, what is this? We are not asking about external object: what is the carpet, the cup of tea, the sound of a bird? We turn the light back onto ourselves: what is this in this moment?

We have to be very careful because this is not an intellectual enquiry. We are not speculating with our mind. We are trying to become one with the question. The most important part of the question is not the meaning of the words themselves but the question mark '?'. We are asking unconditionally "What is this?" without looking for an answer, without expecting an answer. We are questioning for its own sake.

We are trying to develop a sensation of openness or wonderment. As we throw out the question "What is this?", we are opening ourselves to the mysterious nature of this moment. We are letting go of our need for knowledge and security. There is no place where we can rest. Our body and mind become a question.

At the level of concentration, we are returning to the question again and again. The question anchors us and brings us back to this moment. But we are not repeating the question like a mantra. These are not sacred words and it does not matter how many times we repeat them. What is important is that the questioning is alive, that the question is fresh each time we ask "What is this?" We are asking because we do not know. It is similar to when we lose some keys. We look and look and look and we have no idea where they are. We think 'keys' and we don't know and are left with this sensation of questioning.

There are several ways to ask the question. At the beginning especially we can connect the question with the breath. We breathe in, as we breathe out, we ask “What is this?”. Otherwise we can try to make the questioning like a circle, we ask gently but steadily, as soon as one “What is this?” stops another “What is this?” starts. Once our concentration is firmer, we can just ask the question from time to time and stay with the sensation of questioning it evokes. As soon as the sensation of questioning dissipates we raise the question using the words vividly again.

<http://stephenbatchelor.org/index.php/en/what-is-this>

10. Meditation in everyday life

Formal meditation practice is not fundamentally different from the practice of everyday life. At every waking moment, whether sitting, walking, running, dancing, cycling or driving, whether at work or at play, consciousness is a neutral plane in time, open to a combination of apparently internal or mental processes, and apparently external or worldly events. Over lifetimes, that inherent neutrality or *openness* has been girded about by habitual reactions, some of which are pleasant or useful, some of which are unpleasant or harmful. Minds can indeed be altered by regular formal meditation, but much more so if the meditative 'flavour' of paying closer attention to what's appearing to consciousness is allowed to seep out into everyday life.

That transfer, from cushion to street, is never easy because everyday life is full of projects, social interactions, choices and activities, all of which call for mental responses that are urgent and thoroughly *intentional*. When the neutral plane of consciousness is over-occupied by this sort of deliberate busy-ness, there is less time to pay attention to the full range of what's going on, both in the 'external' world and amongst 'internal' feelings, emotions, thoughts and imaginations.

So, just like setting aside time for formal meditation, it is initially useful to set aside time to meditate in everyday life. That could be at moments of relative stillness, such as moving from A to B by regular means, or it could be when engaged in a repetitive task. Both these situations mainly engage the unconscious, performative parts of the brain, placing less demand on consciousness, so allowing time and mental space for bare attention. Such repetitive tasks then become the object of meditation.

In theory, it should to be possible to adopt a meditative attitude while in conversation with other people. In practice that is difficult: there is usually more verbal

and non-verbal interaction than conscious attention can process effectively, and the ensuing conversation is likely to lack spontaneity. But if and when conscious attention during conversation can be achieved, it is likely to improve the ability to listen properly to what other people have to say.

The aspiration should be, as the weeks, months and years go by, that the intentional choice to adopt an attentional attitude, formally or fleetingly, will eventually stop requiring a decision, having turned into a habitual and spontaneous attitude: meditation will have become part of everyday life.

11. Meditation in the wild

The earliest followers of the historical Buddha were followers *literally*: they accompanied his progress as a peripatetic teacher, travelling between the villages and city-states of northern India, and followed him in withdrawing to the forest, 'to the roots of trees', during the rainy season (*vassa*), in order to meditate more intensively. During the Buddha's lifetime, parkland was donated near towns, so that he and his followers could remain accessible to offers of food while on retreat. At these quasi-rural locations accommodation was constructed, with the unfortunate outcome that the monastic order became urban, domesticated owners of property, in effect if not in title. This turn from wild places towards urbanisation was probably inevitable, in view of the difficulties encountered by small groups of forest monks: there was a longer supply chain for the necessities of life; and occasionally, 'those who go down to the woods...can be sure of a big surprise'; furthermore, humans are inherently social beings: it can get terribly lonely out there. But the ideal of going on meditation retreat to wild places retained its appeal, resurrected across the centuries, particularly when the urbanised *sangha* became tainted by corruption of all the usual kinds. Reforms in favour of forest practice occurred in the East Asian Chan/Zen/Sōn tradition, and the South Asian Theravada, particularly in Thailand, but like most religious upheavals, what begins optimistically and charismatically tended to subside into a routine that fell short of the original motivation.

Nonetheless, there remains merit in the idea of taking time out from the pleasures and stresses of everyday urban social life by retreating for solace into the natural world. There are several ways of doing this: by going to a rural retreat centre, by going on pilgrimage, or by making meditation in the wild into a regular practice.

Most UK Buddhist retreat centres are located in fairly idyllic rural locations. They usually offer simple accommodation, some shared housework, vegetarian food, and fairly long periods of formal meditation, yet there is free time to explore the nearby countryside.

It is usually expected that some, or even all, of the time will be spent in silence. Costs are usually low, although donations are encouraged. This is not quite wild meditation, yet incorporates some of the features of the traditional rains retreat. I recommend the autonomously-run Gaia House Retreat Centre: <http://giahouse.co.uk/>. I have yet to attend Maenllwyd, the retreat centre maintained by the Western Chan Fellowship, which looks suitably isolated and challenging:

<http://www.westernchanfellowship.org/events-and-retreats/venues-chan-and-zen-retreats/maenllwyd-retreat-centre-in-wales/>

Opportunities for Buddhist pilgrimage are completely undeveloped in the UK, but it is possible to design one's own route, using long-distance footpaths, terminating at Gaia House or Meanllwyd (having wisely pre-booked) or at any of the retreat centres maintained by other Buddhist (or indeed Christian) traditions.

Apart from the level of one's own motivation, there are very few impediments or dangers to meditation in the UK's wild places. Apart from falls, insect bites, intimidating livestock, lightning strikes, tree-falls and the outside chance of being bitten by an adder, risk stems mainly from other people, just as in urban environments, and can largely be guarded against by not going alone. Paying due attention to lawful rights of way and rights of access, there are innumerable places in which to meditate, particularly in the National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, such as Cranborne Chase AONB around Bowerchalke. For forest meditation, some parts of Vernditch Chase, Stonedown Wood, Garston and Chase Woods are virtually un-visited. For locations with more open aspects, there is the under-used resource of the public-access downland, with magnificent views from Marleycombe, Chiselbury, Buxbury Hill, Winkelbury, Whin Green or across Martin Down from above Grim's Ditch. Wiltshire is not mountain country, but some of the woodland is ancient and the skies are majestic. The shape of the downland valleys is unchanged - other than the shallow traces of Iron Age and Saxon settlement - since the last glaciation: while not quite geological, these timescales throw human aspiration into perspective.

Having discovered a favoured wild location, it remains to decide on a form of meditation. Walking meditation can be undertaken on level ground almost anywhere. Sitting meditation might require a handy bank or tree stump, although in anything other than dry weather one might need a waterproof mat or some sort of folding seat. Given the sublime qualities of wild locations, it makes sense to widen the focus of attention to

encompass the full range of sensory information: the view, birdsong, and the sounds, scents and light touch carried by the wind.

Meditation in the wild, therefore, may feel very different from indoor practice: less of a battle to let go of unpleasant feelings and emotions, more of an expansive and calming (*samatha*) observation of fairly pleasant sensory input from the external world. With respect to insight (*vipassanā*) into the way things really are (*yātha-bhūtam*), it is worth remembering that Buddhist meditation is about attention to whatever is appearing on a *neutral* plane of consciousness. By that, I mean that the external world, and how we respond to that world internally, are both received in the form of *mental* processes. To make this difficult point as clear as possible: because there is no absolutely direct access to reality, what is metaphorically described as internal to the mind and what is metaphorically described as external to the mind are, at bottom, both mental processes, causally-conditioned by other mental processes. That is not to say that the natural, wild world isn't really out there, just that certainty about the reality of the external world as it is reported by our senses remains a metaphysical belief, albeit a belief that is almost universally held because since there is precious little to be gained from doubt.

After the manner of the 19th century American Transcendentalists, meditation in wild places may have a beneficial effect on our state of mind. In the 21st century we can now surmise that this effect results from the utterly dependent relationship between brains, bodies and the world in which they are nurtured, yet in the hothouse of our urgent intentions, we can become so wrapped up in our individual selves as to be little more than brains-in-a-vat, neglecting our bodies while ignoring both friends and environment. Opening up to our dependency on other people and the natural world might encourage us to do less harm. As with the direction of loving-kindness meditation towards other people, the ethical consequences that flow from meditation practice may become more obvious in (relatively) wild places.

12. Further reading

These texts (plus many more) can be borrowed at the Bowerchalke Village Hall meditation sessions.

Batchelor, Stephen, 1997, *Buddhism without beliefs*, (London: Bloomsbury).

----- 2010, *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*, (New York, Spiegl & Grau).

----- 1994, *The Awakening of the West: the encounter of Buddhism and western*

culture, (London, Aquarian).

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Faure, Bernard, 2009, *Unmasking Buddhism*, (Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell).

Fisher, Charles S., 2013, *Meditation in the Wild*, (Winchester, Change Makers).

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Suzuki, Shunryu, 1970, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind: informal talks on meditation and practice*, (New York, Weatherhill).

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14. Meditation groups nearby

Associated with Gaia House: <http://gaihhouse.co.uk/>

Colehill, Nr. Winborne, Dorset
Contact: Steve Wilkins 01202 880661
steve.w@metronet.co.uk

Blandford Forum, Dorset
(meetings most Monday mornings in member's houses)
Contact: Andrew Lewis-Smith
a.lewissmith@btinternet.com

Other groups:

Christian meditation
Contact Janet Roe, Lodge Farmhouse, Hut and Lodge Farm, Broadchalke:
mj.roe@virgin.net

Mindfulness-based stress reduction courses in Salisbury
www.mindfulnessinwiltshire.co.uk

Wyle Valley Meditation (in the Karma Kagyu tradition)
(at the Manor House, Ash Walk, Warminster, BA12)
Contact: Hilary: 01985 850875
<https://wylevalleymeditation.wordpress.com>

Jamyang Salisbury (Gelug-pa tradition)
Contact: Ian 07748636720
salisburyjamyangbuddhistgroup@outlook.com