



THE ALAMEDA CENTER FOR BUDDHIST MEDITATION

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A FEW THOUGHTS ABOUT MEDITATION PRACTICE DURING THE PANDEMIC

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Dear all,

In these difficult times, we are challenged to be mindful of impermanence. All beings and things are by nature transient. In our world of constantly changing conditions and events, there is no “thing” that can be grasped and held onto forever, no final security or lasting refuge to be found.

Our only true refuge lies not in the world of things and events, or in thoughts and ideas, but in the heart-values of loving-kindness and compassion (we are all in the same boat) combined with clear-eyed, open-hearted acceptance of the reality of change and a deepening awareness that the ultimate cause of our grief and distress is the grasping tendency of the mind.

Seeing this, we become less fearful and more willing to accept and deal calmly with whatever comes, knowing that at some point, whether pleasant or unpleasant, it will change. With this comes a growing confidence that our pathway through life—between birth and death—has the potential to lead us, *if we so choose*, in the direction of contentment, peace and freedom. In our practice, we should try to appreciate each breath as a step forward on that journey.

Under present circumstances, when we sit to meditate, we can hardly expect that our minds will be undisturbed by feelings of anxiety, perhaps even anger, and stress. The advice is sometimes given that we should let such feelings go. This is good advice but, in my experience, we have to let them come first. Trying to fight or resist those feelings only reinforces our attachment to them, and so makes them even stronger than before.

I suggest that a better way of dealing with this turmoil is to practice “letting come” and “letting go” in association with the breath. When feelings of confusion and distress arise, we allow them to wash over and pass through us like a giant wave. The key is to practice non-resistance and non-clinging. On the in-breath, we let the feelings come; on the out-breath, we let them go; on the next in-breath, we let (not make!) them come again; and then again we let them go.

We don't expect them to go away forever, of course. At least, not for a long time yet. But if we pay close attention, we begin to see that deep within this process—in the very middle of the in- and out-breath—there is a point or place of quiet, peace and stillness. Here, the wave is neither coming nor going; the turbulent rip-tide is neither flowing in, nor running out.

In the early stages of our practice, we are able to perceive that still place only fleetingly, and at a far distance. And so we persevere by returning our attention, again and again, to the breath. And as our practice gradually settles, a more direct contact with that still place in the middle may begin to occur. Now we are able to give our attention more fully to that stillness and, perhaps, even rest there for a while.

Of course, we are unable to stay there forever, or even very long. So again, we have to practice non-grasping. We can't hold onto, or try to "own," that stillness. It is not ours to possess. But it will make a big difference if, in the midst of our day-to-day activities, we do our best to remember that it is there. One way of renewing our connection with that inner stillness is to regularly return our attention to the breath, even for just a few moments at a time.

During the present health emergency, we have no choice but to close the Meditation Center for a while. We are giving thought to alternative ways of maintaining the support of practice-fellowship (sangha), even at a distance, during that time.

In the meantime, I hope these thoughts may be helpful.

With metta to you all,

Chris

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