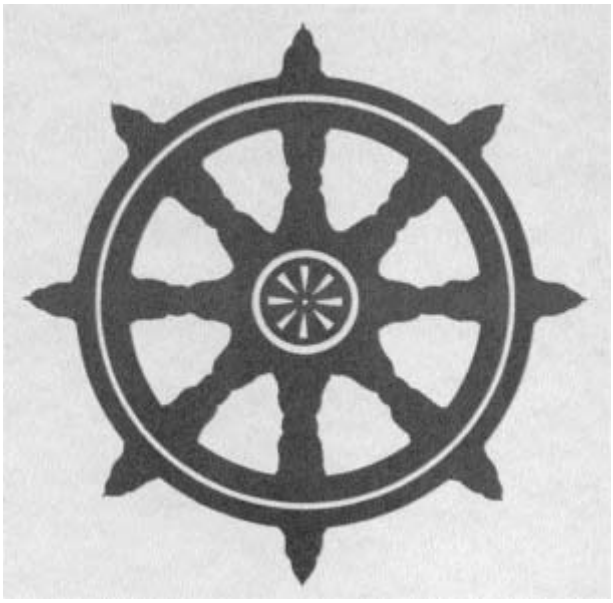
The Eightfold Path of Buddhism



by Rev. Daizui MacPhillamy

1. Understanding
2. Thought

A certain amount of understanding of things-as-they-are is the beginning of the Buddha's Eightfold Path. Indeed, unless there is some degree of awareness of how things really are in this world, there is no reason for a person to seek truth generally, nor to undertake the remainder of the Path of Buddhist training in particular. There are actually only a few basic things which need to be understood in order to get started.

The Four Noble Truths

The first of these is that life as we normally live it doesn't really make us very happy or peaceful in the long run. First of all, we're never satisfied: if we don't have something, we want it; if we have some, we want more; and if we have lots we're both afraid of losing it and we also see that there is something even more that we could get, which we then want. This is true not only of material things but also of relationships, reputation, ... most everything. This pull of greed and push of fear leave little room for lasting contentment. Secondly, we actually do lose things, and that hurts: we get sick, we have misfortunes, we are separated from those we love, we die.

The second Noble Truth is that there is a cause for the frustration and suffering: the fact that we hold onto things, grasp after them, are attached to them. What actually hurts is not that we don't have something; it is that we don't have it *and we want it*. What causes grief is not that we lose something; it is that we are *unable to accept the fact and let go*.

These observations lead directly to the fact that there is something we can do about all this. We can't stop the way the world works (although much of what we do seems to be an attempt at just this), but we *can* change how we relate to it. If we could just find a way to give up our grabbing onto things, find a way to accept life as it actually is, then peace, contentment, and real happiness would naturally be there. This is the third of the Noble Truths, and the fact that there is a way of actually doing this is the fourth. That Way is the Eightfold Path itself. These Four Noble Truths are the core and essence of Buddhism, the very observations which led Shakyamuni Buddha all the way to enlightenment.

The Truth of Change

It is easier to discern these Noble Truths if we understand a few other things about the world. One of these is that everything is always changing. It is easy to see that some things change: the weather, politics, what we want for supper. These changes can be seen because they are neither too fast nor too slow for us to observe conveniently. But *everything* changes. Atoms and molecules whiz around inside the ink on this page, but they're so small and fast that we'll have to take a physicist's word on that. The same goes for stars and galaxies: too big and too slow for us to notice without help. Our bodies are never the same for a moment: part of the food on our breakfast plate is now "us", and with our next breath some of what was "us" is now the air. Our minds change, too: we can never go back to the past thought-moment, let alone return to how we were in days gone by. Realising all of this helps one to appreciate the Noble Truths. It makes clear that our never-ending desires to make the world "behave itself" in the way we wish cannot possibly lead to anything other than frustration. And it leads to a glimpse of a whole other way of being: we could accept what is, and become at home with the flow of change itself.

The Truth of No Self

All of this leads to some very basic and useful questions. For instance, if everything is in flux, *what am I*? Our sense of "me" is that of something stable which goes through life doing things and having things happen to it. That is good: it allows us to cross streets without getting hit by a bus! But at the level we are speaking of here, it isn't entirely accurate. If both body and mind are always changing, where is this stable thing we call "me"? If you consider this for a while, you will see that "me" is simply an idea. As ideas go, it's a very useful one, because it simplifies how we see life and makes it easy to get the basics done. But as a statement of how things really are, it just doesn't happen to be true. The only thing that is "really there" is an awareness of the flow of change itself. Realising this makes it much easier to give up clinging and grasping after things, because "I" am the one that wants them for "myself".

Understanding and Acceptance

Understanding of things this fundamental does not come quickly. They can make sense as thoughts, and that is a good place to start, but a full comprehension of them goes much further. Gradually, through the practice of the rest of the Eightfold Path, we come to a direct experiencing of the truth of these basic observations. And the more deeply they are experienced, the more easy it is to let go of our habits of attachment, and with this, acceptance arises naturally. Acceptance is not something which one has to "find" or "make happen": it is simply the natural consequence of understanding. Acceptance is essential to the Buddhist life. If we cannot take things as they really are, what chance do we have of actually doing something about our lives?

"All-acceptance is the key to the Gateless Gate."
Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett

The Place of Thought

While thought can be an entrance to understanding, it needs to be clear and honest for it to do any good. Indeed, much of what holds us back from progress in the Buddhist Way (and life in general) are the little lies, fantasies, and deceptions we repeat to ourselves inside our heads all day long. There are two ways of approaching these untrue thoughts. One is to break the habit of chattering to ourselves all the time. That is one of the benefits of practicing mindfulness and meditation, two other aspects of the Eightfold Path. The other is to honestly question the things we tell ourselves. This is the role of "constructive doubt" in Buddhist training. One of the unique aspects of Buddhism as a religion is its willingness, even insistence, upon allowing honest questions to arise regarding everything it teaches. There is a role for faith, to be sure, but it is what Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett called "true faith", rather than the "blind faith" of forced belief. True faith is a trust and conviction borne of experience and the willingness to be open to all possibilities.

When we stop filling our minds with our habitual, delusive thoughts, an interesting thing happens: other thoughts which have always been present but have rarely had a chance to be heard come to the forefront: thoughts of selfless generosity, compassion, love, and empathy. And these are aspects of enlightenment itself.

3. Speech
4. Action
5. Livelihood

The three aspects of the Eightfold Path which are concerned with speech, action, and livelihood form a group, known as *Sila*. They form a guide to how to live one's life so as to make every action accord with enlightenment. When we practice *sila*, we train from our outward actions towards inward peace, just as when we practice meditation and mindfulness we train from our inward acts of mind toward outward harmony with the universe. These two approaches complement each other and lead towards a unified Buddhist life. Over the centuries, Zen has taken the various elements originally assigned to the ancient path factors of speech, action, and livelihood, and has developed and reorganised them into sets of precepts. There are a number of ways of expressing these precepts; what follows is but one. While at first glance precepts can appear to be rigid rules of conventional morality, in fact they are guides to liberation. Taken as *descriptions* of enlightened behaviour rather than simply as *proscriptions* against evil acts, they lead to the signs of wisdom -- charity, tenderness, benevolence, and empathy -- rather than to guilt, shame, or self-blame. Those who make a life of right speech, action, and livelihood find that they become more aware of their own spiritual heart; those who ignore them find that a coarsening and closing off occurs, both in their spiritual life and in relationships to other people.

The Three Treasures Precept

The Three Refuges, shared by all Buddhists, are the first and most general precept of all.

- *I take refuge in the Buddha.* I entrust my life to the guidance of both the Buddhas who have appeared in this world and the Buddha Nature within.
- *I take refuge in the Dharma.* I go for direction to the teachings of all those who have walked this Way before me.
- *I take refuge in the Sangha.* I seek the advice and wise counsel of those who share the love of truth and commitment to the Eightfold Path.

When taken together as one ongoing precept, as one unified way of life, the Three Refuges will guide and harmonise our understanding of all of the other precepts. If any one of them is left out, our training is like a stool with only two legs: unstable and sure to fall flat.

The Three Pure Precepts

These offer a means of interpretation for the specific precepts to follow and guidance in situations where no specific precept seems to apply, or where precepts seem to conflict.

- *I will cease from evil.* First and foremost, it is my wish to harm no living thing. I will ask in the innermost place of my heart, "Is what I am about to do a harmful thing, a thing which places any separation between a being and the Unborn? Is it a thing which is to be abstained from, a wrongful thing, an unwise thing?" In one sense, "evil" does not exist: there are only unwise actions, done in ignorance and confusion. I pray that I may not do any such thing, whether to myself, others, or the world.
- *I will do only good.* It is my sincere wish to do only that which accords with the truth. I will ask in the innermost place of my heart, "Is what I am about to do fitting, suitable, a thing to be done? Does it tend towards liberation?" This is the good that goes beyond the opposites of "good" and "evil".
- *I will do good for others.* I pray that my every act will be of true benefit and that I may never inadvertently create conditions which may lead others to do harm. I will ask in the innermost place of my heart, "Is what I am about to do truly of use? Is it a fit offering? Does it accord with the purification of my heart?"

If we can honestly say that in any matter of importance we have considered carefully these Three Pure Precepts, then we can rest in the knowledge that we have done our best. And that is all which Buddhism ever asks of us. Mistakes will still be made, of course, for we are human. But they will have been made with a pure heart, and in the big perspective, that matters. There are many ways to consult the quiet, still, innermost place of the heart. Each of us must do this honestly, as best we can. There are no formulas, no easy answers. Never trivialise the Three Pure Precepts.

The Ten Great Precepts

These ten are specific guidelines for the Buddhist life, as undertaken by the Zen trainee. When they become our blood and bones, we are a true child of Buddha. When we deliberately ignore any of them, we create a separation between ourselves and the family of Buddha.

- *I will refrain from killing.* Since all beings are one within the Buddha Mind, how could I willingly cut off the life of any creature?
- *I will refrain from stealing.* Since it is my true wish to give up all attachments, how could I willingly grasp after anything which is not freely given?
- *I will refrain from abusing sexuality.* Since physical affection is a deep expression of love, and love is an aspect of the Unborn, how could I willingly debase this sacred love by merely gratifying my desires in a way which uses, harms, betrays, or abuses anyone?
- *I will refrain from speaking untruthfully.* Since my heart's desire is to be one with truth, how could I willingly deceive anyone by any means whatsoever?
- *I will refrain from selling the wine of delusion.* Since clear awareness is the door to enlightenment, how could I willingly hinder the Way for anyone by enticing them into partaking of substances, ideologies, false beliefs, or anything whatsoever which befuddles or intoxicates?
- *I will refrain from speaking against others.* Since it is my wish to live by the compassion within my heart, how could I willingly speak hurtfully or disparagingly about anyone?
- *I will refrain from being proud of myself and belittling others.* Since the false notion of self is the very thing I seek to abandon, how could I willingly inflate it with pride, much less do so through seeking to denigrate others?
- *I will refrain from holding back in giving either Dharma or wealth.* Since charity is the first sign of enlightened action, how could I practice stinginess in any form whatsoever?
- *I will refrain from indulging anger.* Since it is my heart's wish to let the love within it flow forth unboundedly, how could I hold onto and nourish angers and resentments which may arise, much less act openly upon them to cause harm?
- *I will refrain from defaming the Three Treasures.* Since these are my true refuge and the very Way, how could I turn from them myself, much less cause doubt about them to arise in others?

The 48 Less Grave Precepts

Together with the Ten Great Precepts, these form a detailed description of the Bodhisattva's way of life. The complete set of fifty-eight precepts is thus known as the "Bodhisattva Precepts". A full description of these can be found in the book *Buddhist Writings* (available from Shasta Abbey Press). Among them are included guides to practicing respect and gratitude, to abstaining from becoming drunk or using drugs, to undertaking a vegetarian diet, to encouraging others in their practice, to finding energy within one's own practice, to caring for others who are ill or in need, to abstaining from possessing or dealing in lethal weapons, to refraining from profiting at the expense of the suffering of other beings, to avoiding negligence with respect to the world and its creatures, to refraining from abuses of power and position, to avoiding unsuitable livelihoods, and to not becoming caught up in distractions.

6. Effort

The right application of effort to Buddhist training is a bit of a paradox. If we do not try to make some changes in our lives, what is the point of undertaking training in the first place? But letting go of things such as "trying" is itself one of the changes that we need to make! What are we to do?

Effortless Effort

We read in Zen texts about "effortless effort" or the "goal of goalessness", and sometimes that sounds like all we need to do is "what comes naturally". And in a sense that is true, but what is needed is not the "what comes naturally" to our self, for this would simply be to indulge impulsiveness. Instead, we need to do what comes naturally to our Unborn Buddha Nature. And finding that is what training is all about. This situation is actually not as much of a paradox as it seems, because there are different sorts of effort. The one which we are used to is one in which "we" are in control: we have a goal or ideal and direct our behaviour in ways which we think will achieve it. There are difficulties with this in several places. There's really no "me" in the first place; secondly, goals and ideals may be nice thoughts, but they are lousy descriptions of how the world really works; the same is true for my ideas about what will achieve change; and finally, whatever "we" may be, we don't seem to be wise enough to direct or control a life. With all of these difficulties, is it any wonder that our attempts to "reform ourselves" generally end up somewhere other than where we hoped they would?

But there is another type of effort entirely. It is more "willingness" than "will". It is the willingness to let go of things moment-by-moment: ideas, opinions, wants, fears, ideals, judgments, ... *everything*. It is the willingness at all times to learn, to be open to seeing new ways, as Dogen Zenji put it "to be disturbed by the Truth". And it is the willingness to do whatever comes next. "Doing what comes next" is more a matter of honesty and courage than of will. The honesty is that of looking straight at what lies before us, at what is shown to us simply and clearly by the Unborn at all times. And this involves trust: trust that a wise and compassionate Buddha Nature really does exist, trust that It can do Its work without us having to control or direct anything, and trust that we can perceive Its teachings directly from the experience of our senses without analysing, fearing, judging, or worrying about what we perceive. The courage is that of doing what is obviously to be done and of abstaining from what is obviously to be abstained from. This, then, is the "effortless effort". No "I" is involved, no ideals, no thinking or planning of how, no control, no direction. The work is that of the Unborn; the direction is that of the Unborn; the trust is placed in the Unborn. *And*, simply there are things which are to be done, and things which are to be abstained from.

The Role of Refuge

People being human, we all have "blind spots" which can get in the way of this process. Thus, our own hidden wants and fears can sometimes get in the way of seeing clearly the simple fact of "what comes next". Recognising this, Buddhism provides guidelines to make it safe to actually exercise the courage to do what must be done. These are the various precepts, which were outlined earlier. Since the Source of all of these precepts is the same Buddha Nature which we are trusting to show us what is next to be done, it follows that what we are shown cannot be in conflict with the precepts. And since the very first precept is that of taking refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, it also follows that what we are shown cannot be in conflict with the basic Buddhist principles set forth in the scriptures, nor with the wise and compassionate advice of the Sangha.

If we trust that there simply cannot be true conflicts between these things, this means that apparent conflicts, when they arise, cannot be what they seem. And generally, such *apparent* conflicts mean that there is a "piece of the puzzle" which has yet to be seen. In such cases, it is generally wise to wait and take more refuge before acting, in the faith that things will become clear. For example, when what we perceive appears to be in conflict with what another trusted Sangha member perceives, a thing to be abstained from is our habitual tendency to assume that one of us has to be right, the other wrong. Occasionally, of course, that may be true, but time and training will make this clear, and arguing

about it (whether inside one's own head or with the other person) is not the way to clarify it. More likely, it is a case of what may be called the "pussycat problem". One of you sees a whisker, and it is actually there; the other sees an ear, and it is actually there, too. Argument as to whether it is "really" a whisker or an ear is not what is needed. Instead, further refuge-taking and on-going training reveal a paw and a nose; it becomes apparent that what you were dealing with was not just an ear or a whisker: it was a pussycat. Of course, it might also be a skunk! Maybe it would be wise to wait for a tail to appear before we reach out and start stroking that ear! Then again, there are times when we cannot wait to act: we have to take up our courage and do the best we can, and be willing to take the consequences.

The Wisdom of Not Knowing

All of the above implies having a tolerance for not knowing many things. Even when the next step is simple and clear in our perception, it isn't really *known*. Seen, perhaps; or heard, or felt; but not *known* in the way our mind would like. This seems to be characteristic of Zen training. Indeed, the farther into it we get, the less we seem to know, even as there is greater certainty about the simple things we perceive right in front of us. This "not knowing" is actually an aspect of wisdom, and strange as it may seem, is far more useful than the knowing which we tend to want. Indeed, it is usually "knowing" which causes problems in the practice of right effort. When we "know" what our training should be, we then judge ourselves by that standard, and try to use willpower to force ourselves to measure up. The standard, the judging, the forcing, and the measuring are all problematic and inevitably lead to more suffering instead of to liberation. If, however, one can simply go onward in unknowing, all of that is avoided.

Why, then, do we even have an Eightfold Path? Isn't its purpose to make known to us how to train effectively? At one level of meaning, of course it is: there is no better guide to peace and true understanding known to humanity. And at another level, that is not its purpose at all. It is not a list of things to be known and done, not a standard by which to measure ourselves or others, not a set of tools with which to fix ourselves. It is, instead, a *doorway*. It is to be walked through daily, with honesty and courage, in unknowing. Its true place is in our innermost heart, not in our knowing mind. It does its work by showing us the simple next step. Our task is to take that step as best we honestly can at each moment. As Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett said, that is all that Buddhism ever requires of us. *And it is enough*.

7. Mindfulness

Meditation is not something which has to be limited to the times each day we spend in formal sitting. We can bring the mind of meditation into our daily life through the practice known as "mindfulness", "working meditation", or "every-minute Zen". Different schools of Buddhism have various ways of doing this; what follows is the way of our tradition. The method is incredibly simple and requires nothing more than the willingness to do it with some persistence, yet it forms a powerful aspect of the Eightfold Path. It can be summarised in five steps:

1. Do one thing at a time.
2. Pay full attention to what you are doing.
3. When your mind wanders to something else, bring it back.
4. Repeat step number three a few hundred thousand times.
5. And, when your mind keeps wandering to the same thing over and over, stop for a minute and pay attention to the "distraction": maybe it is trying to tell you something.

Doing One Thing at a Time

The reason for the first two steps is not hard to see: if we accept that truth is one and undivided, then it can only be realised by a mind which is itself unified and aware. Such one-pointedness and mindfulness are impossible when you are doing two things at once. Thus, when you practice mindfulness you refrain from eating breakfast, talking to your spouse, and watching the morning news at the same time. Planning your ten o'clock meeting while you drive to work is out; so is thinking about your vacation while you wash the dishes, worrying about your finances while you plant the garden, and even reading a magazine while you're on the toilet.

For most people there are many things which we *could* (or worse yet, *should*) be doing at any given time, and the temptation to do more than one is great. A person in this situation might find it helpful to add a "step zero" before the first of the five steps. Step zero is to decide what is the single most important thing to be doing at *this* moment. Then, do it.

Giving Full Attention Repeatedly

Not only must we do one thing at a time, but also we must pay attention to what we are doing. This attention is the same as that used in formal sitting meditation. One does not exclude anything from mind: thoughts, perceptions, emotions, intuitions, etc. Yet whenever one becomes aware of having become enmeshed in, or engaged by, any of these things, one brings one's mind back to focus on the activity at hand. It is very important to understand this step. Mindfulness training is *not* the focusing of the concentration upon one object to the *exclusion* of all other things. That would be to create a duality, to divide up the world. It would also be dangerous: people who exclude things from awareness tend to have accidents. So, exclude nothing from awareness, but when you realise that you have become distracted, then return your attention gently to the present activity. This is repeated hundreds, perhaps thousands, of times a day. In the beginning, it is quite normal for the mind to wander off again almost immediately, and there is a certain amount of trial and error involved in learning how to bring back the attention with gentleness and persistence.

Taking Distractions Seriously

The first four steps are not really hard to understand; with them it is mostly a matter of whether one chooses to practice mindfulness or not. Step five, however, requires more exploration. Occasionally a thought, feeling, etc. will just not leave you alone. No matter how many times you bring your mind back to the matter at hand, this particular thought keeps insisting itself upon your consciousness. Sometimes there is a good reason for this: the thought or feeling is trying to tell you something. In this circumstance, try to stop what you are doing and take that "distraction" seriously for a moment. In other words, make thinking about that topic the "one thing you are doing". The most common causes for persistent thoughts or feelings are that there is something else that you could be doing which is more urgent than what you were working on at the time, that there is something left unfinished or wrong or dangerous in what you are doing, or that there is a nice ripe insight waiting to come into your awareness if given the chance. If none of these things seem to be the case, and there does not appear to be anything further to be learned from examining the persistent thought, then it may well be simply a distraction, an old habit of mind that is hard to change, and the thing to do is to resume what you were doing before and again give it your full attention.

If the "distraction" is indeed telling you something, then this often means that it is necessary to put aside the first activity and start doing the more important thing which has been pointed out to you. This can also occur without a "distraction": it simply becomes obvious at some point that something else is what needs to be done. This ability to switch one's attention from one activity to another readily and without attachment does not come easily for most of us. With practice, it can be cultivated, and it is an important aspect of mindfulness. This aspect of the Eightfold Path can be likened to driving a car on an icy road: keep a gentle hand on the wheel, keep your eyes on the road (but don't ignore your peripheral vision), and when you see another car skidding towards you, change course smoothly and don't insist on the right of way!

Problems in the Practice

There are two common difficulties with mindfulness training. The first is the fear that "I'll never get my work done if I only do one thing at a time." This is a reasonable concern; fortunately however, it is unfounded. What actually happens for most people (after the first few days of awkwardness) is that they find that they can actually do more and better work by doing one thing at a time, attentively. This may be because the advantage in time saved when one does several things at once is more than compensated for by the increased efficiency (and decreased tension) that results from the mindful approach.

The second problem is that practicing mindfulness is a lot of work and it interferes with customary social interactions. This is true, and it is for these reasons that one may not wish to attempt to do it *all* the time. Even in Zen monasteries a certain rest from this practice is built into the schedule, and the monks sometimes enjoy social conversation *while* drinking tea or eating an informal meal. So perhaps sometimes you may want to eat breakfast and talk to your spouse after all. Go ahead, and enjoy the meal together, but you'll probably enjoy it more if you don't *also* watch television at the same time.

A useful approach to mindfulness training, therefore, is to do one thing at a time -- and pay attention to it -- as much as it seems wise to do so, bring your mind back gently each time it wanders, but don't be so strict with yourself that you make the practice unpalatable. Done in this way, the exercise of mindfulness is refreshing, liberating, and energising. It acts to deepen meditation, increase awareness, promote all-acceptance, and reduce attachment. It tends towards

right understanding and makes the reasons for practicing right action, speech, and livelihood more obvious. Together with formal sitting meditation, it can make a significant contribution to one's training within the Eightfold Path.

"Those who are foolish and ignorant are careless and never mindful; but those who live in mindfulness consider it their greatest treasure."
The Dhammapada

8. Meditation

Meditation is the most profound and least understood aspect of the Eightfold Path. Exactly what meditation is, what it does, and how it does it, are not fully known. But there is no doubt that the practice of meditation is critical to living the life of Buddha. It can be likened to the "locomotive" that powers the "train" of Zen training. With it, all the rest goes forward; without it, nothing moves much, unless perhaps to roll downhill.

Different schools of Buddhism practice meditation of different types, but most of them have two aspects: concentration or one-pointedness of mind, and awareness or insight into things-as-they-are. The form of meditation practiced in our Order is that of the Soto Zen tradition. It is called "serene reflection meditation", which is a translation of the Japanese terms "zazen" and "shikan-taza". In this meditation, the concentration and insight elements are harmoniously balanced, resulting in one unified form of meditation which can be practiced throughout one's life, by beginner and expert alike.

Some Zen lineages place great emphasis on a particular proper posture for meditation. Ours places more emphasis on the mind of meditation, leaving the physical aspects to be tailored to the body and constitution of each individual. This, of course, requires the instruction of an experienced meditation teacher, and you would be well advised to keep in consultation with a priest or lay minister of our Order if you choose to practice serene reflection meditation. They can help you find the best meditation postures for you, answer ongoing questions about both the physical and mental aspects of the practice, and refer you to a master when needed. Booklets devoted to our type of meditation are available at all meditation groups and temples, and books can be suggested.

The Mind of Meditation

The founder of our Order, Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett, who studied meditation under some of the greatest meditation masters of Japan, translated the classic Zen texts on the mind of meditation as saying that the critical element is, "Do not try to think, and do not try not to think". She likened the mind of meditation to a person sitting under a bridge beneath a busy road. The "traffic" on the road is our thoughts, feelings, perceptions, emotions, etc. To try to mentally stop the traffic is to "try not to think". The same is true of dulling the mind to the point where no traffic is noticed at all. These approaches would seriously unbalance the harmony of meditation: the first one by increasing concentration to the point of excluding awareness, the second by decreasing awareness to the point that only concentration is left. On the other hand, to leave one's sitting place, get up and accept a ride in one of the cars is to "try to think". One's mind is literally "captured" and "carried away" by a particular thought or feeling, so that what was simply a passing thought turns into a ten minute chain of thinking. Here, the concentration has been insufficient, and awareness has lost touch entirely with the basic fact of things-as-they-are: the fact that we are *just sitting there*. Whenever we find that we are doing something other than just sit there, we gently bring our mind back. This is done over and over again, and is the work of meditation practice.

Another useful observation which Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett made about meditation was the distinction between natural and deliberate thought. Suppose, for instance, that a dog barks while we are meditating. We naturally hear the sound, and perhaps the thought occurs to us that a dog is barking. These are examples of natural thought; they are part of things-as-they-are, part of simple, aware sitting. This is meditation, and nothing needs to be done about it. But suppose that we continue the chain of thought: we next think that the barking disturbs our meditation, that our neighbour should control their dog better, that something really should be done about this lack of consideration..., and the next thing we are aware of is that we "wake up", realising that we have spent the last five minutes giving our neighbour a lecture. This is deliberate thought and is inconsistent with serene reflection meditation. We need to bring our mind back to the awareness of simply sitting there.

"The means of training are thousand-fold but pure meditation must be done."
Eihei Dogen, Zenji

Common Questions

- **How do I know if I am doing it right?**

You don't. In fact, you can't. That is because meditation is one with you, so there can be no separation of a "doer" and an "observer" who knows that it's right. But you can know if you aren't doing it, and that is all you need to know, because then you can bring yourself back to simply sitting.

- **Nothing seems to be happening during meditation; what is wrong?**

The problem is more likely to be with your expectations of what should "happen" than with the meditation. Meditation has profound effects over time, but the whole process is much larger than we can know and judge. Try letting go of the expectations and just sit. The same holds true if a lot is "happening". It may help to remember that this is the practice of a lifetime: let it do its work.

- **How can I stop from constantly wandering off?**

Don't try to stop yourself from wandering off, because then you will be trying to add something to pure meditation. But each time you are aware of having wandered off, do not waste time in coming back.

- **I seem to "float" from one thought to another; I don't often get caught by any one thought in particular, but I am sort of "elsewhere", rarely being aware of actually sitting there.**

This happens. Try putting a bit more energy or concentration into what you are doing: an alive, aware, gently focused mind is best. But don't take this too far, or it becomes "trying" rather than meditating. See the next question.

- **I find that if I concentrate hard on just being aware of sitting, if I sort of "bore in" to this, then I get caught a lot less often. Is this OK, or am I trying not to think?**

Sometimes this seems good, as a response to the "floating" mentioned above, for instance. But don't make a general practice of it, as this, too, is adding something to pure meditation. Trust that "just sitting" really is enough.

- **How can I stop from falling asleep?**

There can be many causes for this. Perhaps the posture is not quite right or the room is too warm; perhaps you are not putting enough energy into the sitting; maybe some part of you is fighting the meditation; or maybe you are simply too tired and need to go to bed!

Please feel free to ask for advice about these, or any other questions about meditation which may arise.

The author

Rev. Master Daizui MacPhillamy was a Buddhist monk for thirty years and a teacher in the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives, a Western monastic order within the Soto Zen tradition. He was the Head of the Order following Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett (below) and is the author of *Buddhism from Within: An Intuitive Introduction to Buddhism*, Shasta Abbey Press 2003. He died on 4th April 2003.

The Order of Buddhist Contemplatives

The Order of Buddhist Contemplatives (website http://www.obcon.org) is dedicated to the practice of the Serene Reflection Meditation tradition, known as Ts'ao-Tung Ch'an in China and Soto Zen in Japan. The Order was incorporated in 1983 by Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett to serve as the international umbrella organisation for temples led by priests of our lineage in Britain, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, the United States, and the West Indies, and affiliated meditation groups. A British-born Buddhist master trained in Malaysia and Japan, Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett came to the United States in 1969. A year later, Shasta Abbey, a Buddhist seminary and training monastery, was founded in northern California. In 1972 she founded Throssel Hole Priory, now Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey, in the UK. Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett served as the first Abbess of Shasta Abbey and Head of the Order until her death in 1996.

The practice of the Order emphasises serene reflection meditation, mindfulness in daily life, and adherence to the Buddhist Precepts. The Order provides opportunities for Buddhist practice at introductory and advanced levels.

Contacts

Temples and affiliated meditation groups of the O.B.C. are located in Europe and North America. The European Office of the Order is at Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey, Carrshield, Nr. Hexham, Northumberland, NE47 8AL, UK, Telephone +44 (0) 1434 345204 & the North American Office is at Shasta Abbey, 3724 Summit Drive, Mt. Shasta, CA 96067-9102, USA Telephone +1 (530) 926-4208. The current Head of the Order is Rev. Master Haryo Young.

Local contact