



Mode of Practice

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for Lay Buddhist Students
at The House of
Inner Tranquillity

by Paul Harris

AUKANA
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Overview

The purpose of this booklet is to offer an overview for all those who attend this Meditation Centre of the training given at the House of Inner Tranquillity. It explains what needs to be done by students in order that they may progressively attain to the happiness and peace of mind that the Buddha designed his teaching to bring about.

The Buddha summed up what he taught in the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. Briefly stated these are:

“There is suffering”

Life is inherently painful and unsatisfactory.

“There is an origin of all suffering”

Namely, craving—the passionate wish for life to be different than it is.

“There is a cessation to all suffering”

Nibbāna—what the Buddha called “the highest happiness” that is arrived at through the elimination of craving.

“There is a way to the cessation of all suffering”

This is what the Buddha called the “Noble Eightfold Path” consisting of Right View, Right Aspiration, Right Action, Right Speech, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

These eight factors can be condensed into a three-fold training in ethical conduct, meditation and wisdom that are to

be developed in parallel. Each discipline helps to support the other two, much like the three legs of a tripod.

The training as presented at the Centre has been stripped of religious and cultural accretions that have accumulated through the ages in favour of what the Buddha originally taught, as enshrined in the Pali Canon, the oldest extant record of his words. It is a complete system of mental development in and of itself. It is neither excessive nor deficient in what it offers and is not therefore mixed with any other philosophies, therapies, spiritual ways or paths.

To gain genuine benefit from the training it is necessary that students keep an open mind with regard to the constituents of the Buddha's teaching. Newcomers are often attracted to this way precisely because so much of what the Buddha taught rings true for them. However, given our western cultural conditioning, it is not surprising that some aspects of what he had to say may give rise to some uncertainty.

The Buddha always urged those interested in following his way to undertake Buddhist views and practices in good faith, in order to find out *for themselves* whether or not they work. This philosophy of earnest inquiry and comprehension through direct, personal experience lies at the heart of the training offered at the House of Inner Tranquillity.

Teachers

The teachers at the Centre are fully qualified to guide others in following the Buddhist way, having themselves been full-time students for many years and acquiring a wealth of experience in that time. Requesting the training offered at the House of Inner Tranquillity tacitly implies that the student does not currently know what or where freedom from suffering is, or how to reach it. It also implies recognition of the fact that there are others who know more about the subject and who can steer the student in the right direction.

So it makes perfect sense that from the very outset the student adopts an appropriate attitude towards the teachers and the training. In practice this means placing faith in the teachers and treating them with proper respect, listening carefully to what they have to say, accepting the guidance that is offered and being prepared to put instructions into effect to find out experientially whether they work.

To facilitate development further it is recommended that students arrange meditation interviews on a regular basis, perhaps once every three months as a guideline. The willingness to report openly about what has been happening with the practice means that the teacher is in a position to offer the most appropriate guidance. In this way progress will be as quick as it can be and over time a very positive and friendly rapport develops between teacher and student.

Precepts

It is incumbent upon all those following the Buddha's teaching to abide by the five Buddhist precepts. These are:

To undertake the rule of training to refrain from...

- killing or harming living creatures
- taking that which is not given
- sexual misconduct
- all forms of wrong speech
- indulging in mind altering drink and drugs

It needs to be born in mind that the precepts are not commandments of the form 'thou shalt not' but rather training guidelines designed to aid the meditative endeavour. By abiding diligently by the precepts students are choosing to refrain from selfish activities that are injurious both to themselves and the world around them.

As a result, meditators experience a marked reduction in such negative mental states as guilty dread, paranoia and fear. Another benefit is that, as individuals, they become harmless to other beings and come to be trusted and well liked. This in turn breeds self-confidence and a mind that settles easily into meditation. In addition, the willingness to abide impeccably by the precepts highlights the areas of life that give rise to craving and hatred. As the overarching aim of the teaching is to eradicate all craving and hatred, the discipline of keeping the precepts therefore forms an indispensable aid in seeking out and understanding all the causes of suffering within us.

Moderation

In addition to keeping precepts, students are further encouraged to adopt an attitude of moderation in all things. The Buddha described his teaching as a “middle way”, a way that avoids all extremes of behaviour such as excessive sensory indulgence on the one hand and self mortification on the other.

Some of the situations students need to be aware of in this regard include how much time is given over to socialising, how much sensory stimulation via music, films, TV and other media goes on, how many hours we work and, very importantly, how much food we eat. The art is in keeping a healthy balance that allows us to enjoy what life has to offer without becoming a slave to it.

Sense-restraint and contentment with little are practices that help to ensure that the mind is calm when we meditate and that our lives are balanced and not too busy or chaotic, so that there is ample space to develop our practice every day.

Perfections

Whereas the training in precepts and moderation is designed to curb negative or unhelpful behaviour, the training in the *pāramīs* or perfections is aimed at encouraging the growth of very positive qualities.

The ten perfections are:

Generosity, ethical conduct, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness and equanimity.

The common thread between all these qualities is the willingness to put oneself out for the sake of others' welfare. The results of developing the altruistic side of our nature are many and varied, and always positive. Through performing compassionate actions we become a genuine force for good in the world, helping to lighten the burden of suffering in others. This also naturally encourages others to view life in a positive way. Another result of such activity is that we create a genuinely positive self image, we feel good about ourselves and others will see us in a good light too.

In terms of the meditative endeavour, maintaining a healthy self image is crucial. In the course of training the meditator will need to investigate and come to terms with every aspect of personal experience whether that experience is regarded as good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant, wanted or unwanted. Developing compassion in these ways fosters a mature outlook and a serene, unruffled mind capable of contemplating all aspects of experiential reality.

Mindfulness

In the Pali Canon, the Buddha states emphatically that the one way to the cessation of suffering is through developing mindfulness and clear comprehension. As has been previously stated, all suffering is based in craving for life to be different than it is. Craving itself is born of ignorance—not seeing and not understanding the way life really is. Mindfulness is the direct opposite of ignorance. The student’s task is to pay bare attention to all aspects of personal experience in order to find out directly the processes that lead to suffering.

It is direct observation of the true nature of mind and body in all aspects of life, *in addition to meditation*, that is the key to success in following the path. Students are encouraged to apply themselves to generating mindfulness in all areas of their lives. Cooking, cleaning, enjoying a walk and even driving the car can all be turned into opportunities to pay attention to what is actually going on in mind and body.

Gradual development of mindfulness begins to reveal the links between our actions on the physical, verbal and mental levels, and the kind of results such actions produce. With time and application, clear comprehension grows and the student becomes truly wise as to what kinds of behaviour lead to a happy and peaceful existence here and now and in the future. Developing mindfulness also generates experiential understanding of the transient, unsatisfactory and impersonal nature of all conditioned phenomena.

Meditation

Formal seated meditation is an indispensable part of the Buddha's teaching and students are encouraged to sit for a minimum of half an hour on a daily basis. Developing a peaceful, harmonious mind and being able to turn it in a focussed way to whatever we choose is a wonderful skill to acquire. In seated meditation we learn how to deal with the unruly mind in order to bring it to a point of stillness.

To meditate, students sit with closed eyes in a straight-backed chair with the body and spine held in an erect but relaxed posture. Feet are kept on the floor either crossed at the ankles or flat to the ground and the hands are kept folded in the lap. Importantly, once settled in a comfortable position meditators are not to move. Although possibly awkward at first, ensuring the body remains still is an essential prerequisite for stilling the mind.

Once the body is settled, the next step is to master the wayward, discursive mind. To help train the mind, meditators take the sensation of the rise and fall of the abdomen that occurs due to the breathing process as an object of contemplation. Each time the mind wanders away from the task, attention is gently returned to that sensation. Over time and with patient application the mind begins to delight in the peace and stillness of remaining one-pointed, and potentially distracting thoughts, although they may still arise, are no longer attended to. Once hindrances to meditation have been overcome, it is then possible to use the mind in a number of different ways. At the House

of Inner Tranquillity we teach two distinct but interrelated meditations: Loving-kindness and Insight.

Loving-kindness or *mettā* is the meditation on friendliness in which we focus the mind exclusively on the good qualities of beings and wish peace, happiness and well being to all. *Mettā* is an entirely positive mental action that brings many beneficial results including a sense of inner peace and happiness, a feeling of connection with all of life, and healthy relationships. This practice also helps to calm the mind, freeing it temporarily from selfish preoccupations and generates a state of concentrated awareness that can then be used for Insight meditation.

Insight meditation or *vipassanā* is the meditation on the ‘three marks’ or characteristics of all conditioned phenomena. These are: that all conditioned things are *transient* and therefore *unsatisfactory* and that all things are *non-self*; they are without any abiding core or separate identity. The repeated observation of the fleeting and insubstantial nature of all physical and mental events leads to insight into the true nature of existence that lies beneath the surface appearance of things. It is this transcendental wisdom that dispels the ignorance that creates craving and attachment and hence suffering. The culmination of the practice is the realisation of *nibbāna*, the complete cessation of suffering.

Study and Reflection

Meditation alone is not enough in coming to realise the cessation of suffering. Study of the Buddha's teaching is an essential supporting condition for success, for without it we will have no context for what happens in our meditative experience. Students are advised, therefore, to undertake a certain amount of study to compliment their practice.

Over the years the Aukana Trust has published a series of books that give a detailed account of the Buddha's teaching and how to walk the path successfully. Details of these can be found at the end of this booklet. The Centre also holds regular Wednesday evening meetings and classes where all aspects of the training are discussed, including study of the Pali Canon. In addition we have an extensive book, tape and CD library where information can be gathered. The teachers at the Centre are only too happy to answer questions and will be able to direct students to relevant material for further investigation. It is the student's responsibility to be proactive in gaining an intellectual appreciation of the teaching.

However, the student also needs to beware of excessive intellectuality. The Buddha's teaching is something you do, not just think about. Thinking is necessary of course, but it must be borne in mind that the objective of this way is the direct experience of the way life really is, not in theory but actually. While study is therefore a vital support for the meditative endeavour, it goes nowhere unless balanced with real and extensive meditative practice.

To gain the maximum benefits from this way, students need to adopt an intelligent approach to the path. Pondering or wise reflection on what we discover in our mindfulness practice is invaluable as it enables us to corroborate the study of the teaching with our own experience. It helps us to put all the information our mindfulness has gathered together and to determine the links between those facts. It is through such wise reflection that we begin to piece together the processes by which suffering arises and upon what those processes depend for their existence. The fruit of such retrospection is clarity—the clear comprehension as to how and why suffering occurs and how it is brought to an end.

Meetings and Events

Meditation is, by its very nature, a solitary pursuit. However, attempting to follow the path does not need to be lonely. Generally speaking most people in our culture do not have any understanding of the Buddha's teaching or meditation. There is an enormous benefit in having somewhere to go that offers the opportunity to hear *Dhamma* regularly and to be with a group of like-minded people.

For these reasons the Centre provides a range of events that members of the group can attend. As a minimum, students need to aim to attend the fortnightly Wednesday lecture evenings. In addition there are the alternate Wednesday tape and library evenings, Monday night study classes and Saturday morning Open Meditations.

There is also the opportunity for those serious about the practice to come in one day a week as a day student, meditating with the full-time community in the morning and undertaking work projects in the afternoon, always with the emphasis on developing mindfulness and all the other aspects of following the Buddha's path.

The chance to be with others who are walking the path and to share experiences along the way helps to prevent a sense of isolation from developing. Over time a real sense of camaraderie and genuine friendship with fellow students begins to emerge. To have regular access to a meditative atmosphere away from the hurly burly of daily life is like finding an island of tranquillity amid the chaos—a real refuge.

Retreats

To complement daily practice and to aid the deepening of the meditation, the training also includes attending regular residential retreats at the House of Inner Tranquillity. Freed from household chores and work commitments, students are able to devote themselves wholeheartedly to their practice in an environment created exclusively with this purpose in mind.

The Centre offers three kinds of retreat. A weekend introductory course provides newcomers with a brief 'taste' of what life on retreat is like and how it is run. The six day silent retreat allows for maximum involvement with the practice as there are eight separate hours of seated meditation per day and personal interviews with a teacher in the course of the week. The third type of retreat is the six day integrated retreat which incorporates seated meditation in the morning with work projects in the afternoon. This helps meditators to learn how to incorporate mindfulness into daily life and the work-a-day world.

The residential courses have been carefully designed to provide students with the best possible supporting conditions for success. The retreat schedule and house rules are necessary to ensure the smooth operating of the retreat. In addition to these conventions, the absence of sensory distractions such as television, radio, mobile phones and computers allows the mind to settle down and focus on the task at hand.

Everyone who attends a retreat is expected to abide by the rules both in spirit and to the letter. Discipline is a very

important aspect of the training as it highlights areas of craving, attachment and self-concern. Learning to accept whatever life brings us is a central tenet of the Buddha's teaching and this applies to all aspects of the retreat including the food we are given to eat and the guidance offered to us by teachers. The students who are best able to put aside any personal issues are the ones who gain the maximum benefit.

Summary

From this account of the training given at the House of Inner Tranquillity, it will be clear that attaining the happiness and peace of mind that the Buddha designed his teaching to bring about does require a long term commitment and devotion to its practices. However, the rewards of undertaking the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path more than compensate any sacrifices the student has to make along the way.

The training leads to a gradual unfolding of wisdom into how life really works. It offers a framework whereby we can make sense of the world around us and thus know how to live happily within it. It also presents a radical perspective as to the nature of existence and a practical method of discovering for oneself the hidden truths that lie beneath the surface of life.

Along the way as wisdom grows so too does peace, love and happiness, and there is an inversely proportional reduction in negative states like greed, fear and isolation. Given enough time and application, the training eventually culminates in permanent freedom from all craving, hatred and confusion, the realisation of *nibbāna* and the complete cessation of all suffering.

The House of Inner Tranquillity was founded by Alan and Jacqui James who successfully walked the Buddha's path to its conclusion and gained direct, personal experience of its effectiveness. The training continues to be given today on that same basis—that enlightenment is a reality attainable by anyone who undertakes this fascinating journey with earnest commitment and devotion.

Notes

Those living abroad or at a significant distance from the Centre and who are therefore unable to attend Wednesday evening meetings are still very welcome to undertake the training at the House of Inner Tranquillity. Contact can be maintained through interviews conducted either via video link or by telephone, and by attending retreats on a regular basis.

This booklet has been developed for the lay student. For suitable applicants there is always the possibility of longer terms of training as a full-time lay student or as an ordained monk or nun. For more information, ask one of the teachers.

These books published by Aukana Trust are available by mail-order:

A MEDITATION RETREAT by Alan & Jacqui James

With clarity and directness of approach, the authors elucidate the practice of mindfulness, covering such topics as how to meditate, hindrances to the practice and surmounting them, the teacher-student relationship, and enlightenment itself, the final goal of the spiritual journey. £7.95

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