

## Dharma Talk May 12, 2022 Meditation

Tonight, I am going to talk about Meditation. After all, it is the foundation of our practice. I am going to use this book— —How to Meditate—-by Pema Chodren for most of what I am going to say tonight. During practice period, Talus and I taught the Introduction to Zen class. I learned a lot from the material Talus presented—-so thank you for your contribution. After the class, one of the participants sent me an email with some comments about the class and he mentioned that he was reading How to Meditate and finding it very helpful in many ways. I have always liked Pema Chodren. She writes very well about topics that are hard to clearly write about and often has good practical advice about bringing practice into our daily lives. I thought it would be a good idea to read the book and compare how I meditate with what she recommends. It was very informative and helpful. There were some new (to me) ways of doing things and I realized that even with the ideas, I had heard before, some I had forgotten. So it was very helpful to read the book and give my meditation practice a tune-up.

She starts with some basics to keep in mind—-the importance of an upright stable posture and how much meditation is a body practice. When you are starting out, and for that matter, over the long haul—-set reasonable goals about when, how long and where you will meditate. Then stick to it. Some discipline is required.

There are some themes that appear throughout the book. One of them is: develop an attitude of kindness toward yourself and whatever you are experiencing. We all want to have a peaceful, comfortable, meaningful meditation, but that doesn't happen very often. It really requires a shift in attitude—-to drop our preferences for some things and our resistance to others and accept what actually happens. What if we could develop the ability to just notice achy knees, noisy traffic, a painful memory or emotion, a jumpy mind without adding things like a storyline, a tense body, self criticism or a wish for something else? Here is a quote about that: "The tendency to be critical, hard on ourselves does not come from Buddha nature—-the basic goodness within all of us. It comes from ego and our conditioning. We all have the

seeds of goodness and we need to nourish them. We train in attention, but it's friendly attention." So, be kind to yourself and curious about whatever you encounter.

Another point she makes throughout the book is the importance of coming back again and again and again—10,000 times—to our breath, our body and the present moment. We are more likely to be critical of distraction than we are to acknowledge the importance of coming back. We are so prone to not paying attention to our moment to moment lives, and while you can get judgmental about that when you notice it, the important thing is you have noticed it and you returned to the present moment. Have you ever had the experience on a long drive of going 10, 20, 30 miles and realizing you haven't been paying attention? Maybe we'll enough to avoid an accident but having little or no memory of the last many miles? How about listening carefully in a conversation or a class? When I was in my mid-20's, long before I started meditating, I participated in a group therapy marathon. It a bit like a weekend sesshin, starts on a Friday afternoon into the evening, and all day Saturday and Sunday into the evening. The first exercise we did was break into pairs and the instruction was for person A to spend 2 minutes telling person B about themselves and then the roles were reversed. We all returned to the big group and then the instruction was for person B to present to the group what person A told them. I was the first person to report to the group and I was so embarrassed to realize I haven't been listening while my partner was talking to me. I was thinking about what I would say and heard virtually nothing from her. I could only confess that to the group. I had no idea I was such a poor listener. It was an important lesson. I have improved since then, but there are still times in a conversation when my mind is somewhere else. Coming back is the only option and it's something to recognize when we are able to notice and come back to the present.

In one part of the book, Pema cites some neurological research: experienced meditators were put in an MRI machine so their brain function would show on a graph. The researchers discovered that habitual responses—when you are on "automatic pilot", lost in thought, or escalating emotionally, it's registered in the brain as a deep groove and they get deeper with

repetition. So conditioned habits are hard to break. But, when the meditators recognized they were lost in thought or repeating a habit, the pause in activity opens a new pathway in the brain. So, recognizing we have wandered and coming back again and again lays the foundation for new ways to respond.

Another theme that appears often is seeing each moment of your life just as it is with nothing added and seeing yourself just as you are—tired, relaxed, wound up, distracted, sad, joyful. She says: “meditation accepts us just as we are—in both our tantrums and bad habits, in our love and commitments and happiness. It allows us to have a more flexible identity because we learn to accept ourselves and all of our human experience with more tenderness and openness. We learn to accept the present moment with an open heart.” Everything in your life—every moment, every struggle, is the path Everything is an opportunity for awakening. I like the suggestion that we try to be like the sky, which accepts all weather without complaint or preferences. It has the space and the patience for everything. It is so common to be critical of ourselves when we are distracted, tired, having a lot of emotions. Our self judgements are extra and extra suffering. Again and again she says to accept your situation whatever it is—make friends with it. I know Thich Nhat Hahn recommends that we treat anger like a little brother. Gently hold its hand and offer it some tea. In the book *What Is Zen*, Norman Fischer says that “zazen (meditation) is sitting in the awareness of being alive, being present with the basic human experience.” The basic human experience includes all the struggles we add and create, so notice them with kindness. When I meditate, I don’t like being sleepy, especially during weekend or week long meditation retreats. I used to tell myself that I would rather be in pain because I felt more awake that way. One year during our annual week-long Samish retreat, I didn’t sleep well, and I was tired every day. I don’t know how it happened, but at some point I stopped being upset about it and just accepted it and it was ok, and actually at times very interesting. I noticed that even though I was sleepy, at times I alert for awhile, and those times would happen off and on throughout the day. I also figured

out that the worst thing about being sleepy was being upset about being sleepy. On its own, it was ok. Now I like it better than being in pain.

Now, I am going to go over a couple of the practical suggestions that Pema makes in the book that I found very helpful. First of all, once you have established your posture, do a full body scan—part by part—to see how your body feels—feet, legs, shoulders, back, neck, jaw, everything. Take a couple of minutes to do this so it is thorough. I was routinely doing a much more abbreviated version of this and when I took more time, I often noticed some tension in my shoulders and was able to relax and let go. I missed noticing that with the quick physical check-in.

She also recommends doing the same check-in with emotions and thoughts. What is the mind doing at the start of meditation? Are you aware of any emotions and if so, is there a place in the body where you feel them? A reminder—we are not trying to change anything. Whatever your emotional or mental state is, is ok—no judgement. You are establishing awareness of what is right now—this life, this moment.

If, during meditation or anytime off the cushion, you encounter strong emotions, she has instructions for how best to respond. When the emotion arises, go to the body and breathe in and out and at the same time, let yourself experience the emotion, but drop the storyline that goes with it. Emotion without the story attached is energy. So drop the dialogue that goes with it—who is to blame, what was done to you, what you are going to do or wish you had done—so, you are aware of the breath and the feeling in the body and just stay with that for awhile. Give it your kind attention and watch it move and change. This was helpful to me because I had been responding to strong emotion by dropping the storyline and focusing on the breath and almost ignoring the feeling in the body. It has been better to acknowledge the emotion and experience it with some space around it and see it change like everything eventually does.

Another helpful suggestion is taking an activity—especially one you do every day and making that the object of meditation. Can I give my full attention to brushing my teeth—tasting the

toothpaste, noticing the feeling of the brush in my mouth and the handle in my hand? Or, washing or putting away the dishes with full attention. I walk a lot and I often try to walk one block noticing what I pick up with my senses and what it feels like to walk—-legs moving, breathing, feet lifting off the ground and coming down again. I have also been using this exercise when talking with someone—-how long can I give them my full attention and how soon do I come back when my attention wanders? In the weeks I have been doing this, I notice again how hard it is to pay attention for any length of time and how important it is to keep coming back.

With things I do regularly, I tend to get into routines—-doing them a certain way—-and that was certainly true with my meditation practice. Overall, I would say trying Pema Chodren's suggestions has energized my meditation practice on and off the cushion.

Thank You.