

SITTING IN THE MIDDLE

We can see being present as really the heart of meditation. Our meditation is really only as good as our ability to be present. Though necessary presence isn't enough by itself, we need also to be curious. Presence and curiosity work together. If we are present we can be curious, if we're curious it helps keep us present. By curiosity I mean being interested in what's happening in the body and noticing our thoughts. The question really is – are we interested in what's going on?

Meditation in my opinion is so very simple, not easy, but so very simple. It comes down to being present with and witnessing our experience as it's happening. We don't need to get anywhere, don't need to create a special state of mind, or to feel a certain way, or not feel a certain way. We just sit with a sense of curiosity and witness whatever is arising. We may hear a bird sing, we notice that, we may hear a car pass by, we hear that too. Nothing complicated about it at all. We witness the breath (not so that we can become concentrated) but because it's there. We witness the sensations in the body, maybe a pressure in the side, maybe a tension in the belly because it's there. There maybe a twitch in the eye, we witness that, maybe our hands are cold we witness that too. Why? Because this is our life as it is right now, this is reality.

We may find that we are lost in thoughts, maybe anxious thoughts so we bring awareness out of our spinning heads and into the felt experience of anxiety in the body. We can do the same with any other strong emotion too, experiencing the energy of it in the body. Not to get rid of it but because it is there. Though it must be said that experiencing the energy of these states in the body does tend eventually to their ceasing.

We have no agenda for what should turn up, so we don't make a choice for or against whatever does turn up. We don't judge anything as good or bad, we just watch, we just notice. We see it all come, and we see it all go. In this way we foster an attitude of acceptance. Acceptance to the pleasant and unpleasant. This is not to be confused with passivity, if we find our selves getting lost in thoughts, fantasising etc, we notice our thoughts and come back to our felt experience of the body and the breath.

This coming back to our bodily sensations allows us to experience our life as it's happening right now, rather than dreaming of a life we would rather have. Also awareness of the body, that is feeling all the sensations that arise in the body tends eventually to relax the body. Though there may well be times when long held tensions "rise to the surface" and make us feel more tense than usual. These are all good and necessary stages we may go through.

One thing we can do to help us stay and to watch our experience is to adopt an attitude of what I call sitting in the middle. When I go to sit – and indeed in daily

life – I have the intention to sit (or be) in the middle of my experience no matter what my experience is. It may be fear, anxiety, joy, boredom, lust, ill-will. But the point is to be right there with it, as it is, and not getting lost in wishing my experience, my life to be different.

What slowly happens is that we slowly become comfortable with the uncomfortable. We become intimate with ourselves and no longer see anxiety, fear, lust etc as an enemy to be avoided. What I'm saying is that we don't need to treat them as hindrances to be got rid of, but as part of our selves that we can come to understand. We can actually learn something about ourselves from these energies if we are curious. Anxiety for instance might be telling us something about how we are living our lives. If we are fearful for example, we can bring ourselves out of our spinning mind and into the feeling of fear in the body.

Everything is meditation, there is nothing outside meditation, we don't have to be in a certain state of mind before we can meditate. Whatever is in our awareness that's it! That is meditation, meditation is simply awareness.

As we watch our experience in this way we begin to become more intimate with our selves, with our thoughts and emotions, and we begin to free ourselves from their tyranny. We become more comfortable with them, but also as we continue with this watching we begin to see their true nature, that they are not-self, that we are not our thoughts and emotions. We begin to see that we are something much vaster and more wonderful, we are Pure Awareness itself. This is freedom and what Meditation is essentially about.

It's the watching of experience that is more important than what is watched. It is the art of watching experience - irrespective of what the experience is – that is going to lead us to freedom. If we cannot watch our experience and contain it and see it for what it really is, then we will be forever lost in our own subjective worlds.

I have used quite dualistic language here, for example, there's a me and there's my experience that I'm watching. But this is our experience and that's fine. But as we meditate this way over time a shift takes place. There can be less of a sense of me watching my experience, of me meditating. At times we may experience periods where the watcher, the meditator, falls away and there is just pure awareness, spaciousness, vastness, there is freedom.

Basically what I'm suggesting we concern our selves with, in meditation, is very simple. I'm suggesting we feel the bodily sensations, and to notice our thoughts. We notice our thoughts so that we can see through them and stop being fooled by the stories the mind throws up.

Nowadays as I practice I don't think in terms of changing myself. I don't have an ideal that I'm trying to change myself into. I did for many years try to live my life from how I thought I should be, from ideas of how I thought I should be - more kind, more patient, more friendly, more confident, more mindful, more like my friend, more like my teacher, more like the Buddha. I should be able to give better public talks, should be better at study, should be able to think clearly, should meet lots of people...the list of how I thought should have been was endless. Now I simply think in terms of being aware. And through simply being aware, integration happens and I actually find myself changing. Not changing into an ideal outside of myself but simply changing into who I am. And I find this both thrilling and very, very satisfying too. This is freedom.

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