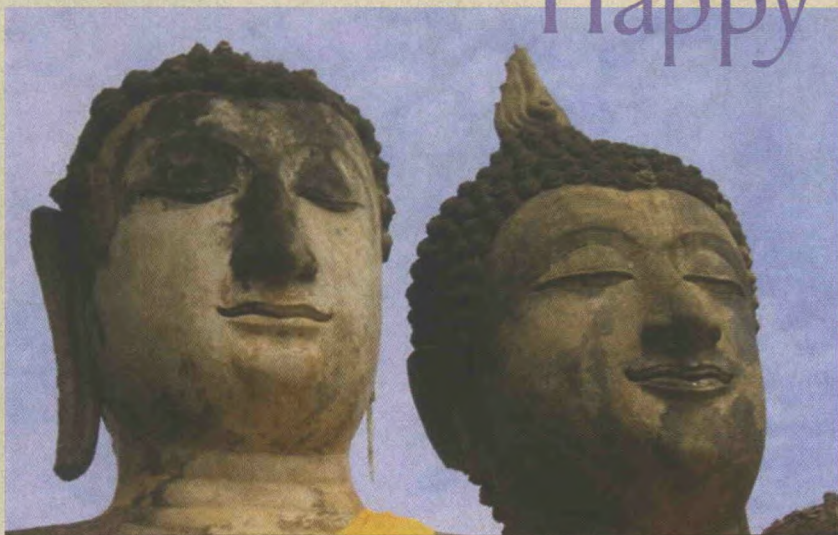


How to be a Happy Meditator



Buddha statues in Sukothai, Thailand. Photo by Sandra Peterson.

To be successful in our meditation practice – and attain inner happiness – depends as much on our actions in between the meditations as on the meditation itself. In Part Two of his series on meditation, Fedor Stracke presents some ways we can have greater success, together with an analysis of some common mistakes.

One conducive condition is, of course, a regular meditation practice. To be able to establish a daily meditation routine it is crucial to develop a feeling of happiness with our meditation.

One obstacle is to push ourselves beyond our ability and impose on our practice an idea of how much we *should* meditate rather than looking at how much we are actually *able* to meditate. We can build up so much resentment that we end up feeling nauseous and tired just thinking of the meditation cushion.

Even great bodhisattvas can meditate only according to their mental ability and merits: For the average beginner this is also true.

In the long run, it may be much more beneficial to base our practice on principles such as *quality over quantity* and *slowly but surely*. After all, ideally we should feel happy and inspired just by thinking of sitting again on our beloved meditation cushion.

Five Types of Enthusiasm

To ensure that our practice does not get derailed by a lack of enthusiasm, Asanga suggested implementing these five types of enthusiasm:

1) **Armor-like enthusiasm** is the joy in the practice preceding the actual meditation. It is like the armor that

we put on before going into battle.

2) **Enthusiasm of training** is the joyful mind with which we then engage in the actual practice.

3) **Enthusiasm of self-confidence** is the joy in our abilities, overcoming self-denigrating thoughts like, “How could someone like me accomplish this?”

4) **Irreversible Enthusiasm** is necessary to prevent us from throwing in the towel when our practice is not immediately successful or takes longer than expected. This enthusiasm is essential to be able to see our practice through.

5) **Enthusiasm without content** helps overcome the small mind; e.g., out of laziness focusing only on one small part of the path.

These five types of enthusiasm are a great psychological aid to achieving our aims. To foster great enthusiasm, meditation on the *benefits* of meditation is as important as the actual meditation itself.

A Holistic Approach to Meditation

Just like the blossoming of a lotus flower, which will happen once the cause and conditions come together, our meditation will also develop, once all the causes and conducive conditions are present.

That is why adopting a holistic approach to Dharma practice, where we view the meditation as a central part of

our practice rather than the whole, greatly facilitates our spiritual development.

Apart from the daily meditation itself, the actions that can be either very conducive or harmful to abiding meditative stabilization and penetrating insight are those that we do in daily life.

Our actions have a great effect on how the mind behaves during meditation because they are the vessel that contains the water of concentration. Just as the water in a bowl can only come to a standstill when we stop bumping the bowl, our meditation can only develop if we stop bumping the mind with harmful actions.

That is why Lama Tsongkhapa said, "The return will be extremely low if one, after having made an effort in the session, does not rely on mindfulness and introspection on the object of meditation after having completed the session ..."

Controlling the Doors of the Senses

The meeting between senses and outer object generates an awareness of the outer object which, if pleasant, leads to attachment and, if unpleasant, leads to aversion. During meditation this contact is limited, and it is possible to have good mindfulness of the virtuous inner object. The real danger lies in-between the sessions, when we are exposed to the many external objects that generate a multiplicity of disturbing thoughts in our mind.

The two stages which prevent the delusions from taking control of our mind are: (a) preventing the generation of delusions in the first place; and (b) retaking control of the mind in case delusions have been generated. The first is the function of mindfulness, and the second the function of introspection. In such a way we can say that the whole path is contained in the practice of mindfulness and introspection.

In the first case we are able to maintain mindfulness of the virtuous object, e.g., love and compassion, throughout the day. Once the mind has been distracted from that object, and anger has been generated, we have lost mindfulness of love and compassion. Now we need introspection, which can recognize this and return the mind to the virtuous object.

Acting with Introspection

Throughout the day we need to check up repeatedly with introspection whether our actions of body, speech, and mind have fallen under the control of harmful thoughts or not. In such a way, we can separate harmful actions from wholesome actions.

It seems innocent enough to leave the mind under the control of the disturbing thoughts because, for most, it is the status quo. But it is good to ask ourselves, "Why am I not enlightened?" "Why am I experiencing problems?" If we go to the root, it is because we have allowed the mind to be controlled by disturbing thoughts, distracting the mind with external objects.

When we direct the mind internally onto itself we often find such a multitude of disturbing thoughts and it is difficult to decide with which one to start. The advice of the Buddha is to begin with the more obvious delusions, and then work our way down to the more subtle ones.

In such a way, on the basis of initially recognizing our good qualities as well as our faults, we can gradually increase the qualities that we already possess (everybody possesses qualities), and also learn new ones. On the other hand, we gradually reduce our harmful attitudes and also prevent the generation of new ones. What would be the use of no longer overeating chocolate only to take up smoking?

Eating Right

For good meditation it is important to watch our intake of food; if we eat too much or too little, this affects our practice adversely; the same goes for unhealthy foods or foods obtained through wrong livelihood.

Sleeping Right

Ideally, we reserve the earlier and later part of the night (i.e., early morning) for meditation and sleep only in the middle. It is recommended to go to sleep before midnight as the sleep obtained then is particularly healthy.

Part of the holistic approach to meditation is to also include the accumulation of merit and the purification of negativities in our practice. These are part of the whole, and support our meditation.

By putting the Dharma into practice with mindfulness and introspection in daily life as well as during our meditation, then over time we will be able to observe tiny changes in our actions of body, speech, and mind, and we are set to be a happy meditator. ☸

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