

## **The Berkeley Buddhist Priory Newsletter March - April 2006**

### **The Mind of Meditation by Rev. Daishin Morgan**

(Reprinted from Chapter 3 of *Sitting Buddha: Zen Meditation for Everyone*, by Rev. Daishin Morgan. This book is an excellent introduction to meditation and training and was recently published by Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey.)

When doing zazen we are giving expression to our true nature, by that I mean our actual existence in the present moment. The past has already gone and the future has not yet come so where are we? You cannot answer that question by thinking about it, because as soon as you formulate an idea of where you are, you have already moved on. The answer lies in just being or "just sitting" as zazen is sometimes called. This involves using the mind in a new way. To do that you have to let go of thoughts and feelings as they arise, or else you will be concerned with the thought or feeling of the last moment and not really be present. You are not meditating if you sit there thinking about what you did yesterday or what you will do in a moment or two. It is no good trying to prevent thoughts from arising; they occur because you have a normally-functioning mind. Yet you don't have to follow those thoughts; you can simply let go of them. A thought that spontaneously arises is just a thought. It is not right or wrong, but what you do with it is very important. If an old resentment comes to mind and you let it go, anger becomes less. If, on the other hand, you indulge

the thought by letting it run on and on, then hatred is nurtured. What is important is to come to the right relationship with your thoughts: not holding on to them and not pushing them away.

The first thing is to begin to discern the role of the will in thinking. For example, a memory seems to spring from nowhere of something that happened on your last holiday that is a spontaneous thought. Now you start to think about where you will go for your holiday this year that is a deliberate thought. It is this deliberate thought that you have to set aside. Don't worry about the spontaneous thoughts, although as your practice deepens you will find more thoughts are deliberate than at first seemed to be the case. Learning how to regain control of your deliberate thinking is crucial. Otherwise, you are the slave of thinking and can never be internally still. To know your own presence and "just sit", you have to use the pristine mind that is your true nature with nothing volitional added. Don't try to make the true nature be what you want it to be let it alone so you can know the essence of yourself as it is. We are so used to asserting ourselves, to instantly responding to every thought and feeling with another thought. We almost never spend time with pure being, just sitting without asserting the "I". To meditate is to do nothing: you don't need to express anything, ask for anything or reject anything. The work of meditation is to free yourself from doing all of these things and to release yourself from a whole load of mental investments and projections at the same time.

Those thoughts that are not volitional, at least at our current level of awareness, have relatively little effect and so do not disturb zazen, but volitional thoughts keep the mind

operating at the level of the phantom "I" discussed in chapter one. When we deliberately think, we create karmic consequence. In other words, we pattern our mind and brains according to how we think and that disposes us to act in similar ways in the future. An idle fantasy may not do anyone else any harm, but it disposes you to more idle fantasy in the future and you then spend much of your life only half present. Most people have the false impression that they cannot control their deliberate thought processes; they try to let them go but the thoughts seem to have a life of their own. You are the one who is thinking your thoughts nobody else is doing it and thoughts are dependent upon your will. The difficulty in letting go of thoughts usually arises because we are attached to them; we believe we enjoy thinking them or find them reassuring.

Quite often during meditation people attempt to justify themselves. A memory comes to mind that is a little uncomfortable and they elaborate a whole case for their defence including a rousing speech to the jury. Sometimes we are afraid and thinking is a way of seeking reassurance. Sometimes we just have a dull mind and sit like a pudding. Our thinking may be rational and ordered, but more likely it is a jumble of fantasies, inner dialogues and memories, all flitting here and there without much focus.

It is alarming and humbling to see for the first time just how our minds behave. There is an endless variety of answers to why we find sitting in meditation difficult. I find it helpful to notice how many thoughts involve fear or desire somewhere in their motivation. These two are the basic driving forces behind the phantom "I". At this point, it is important to stress that not all these mental activities should be seen as

wrong, though they are inappropriate when practising zazen. The ability to think things through is vital to our well being, but if that faculty can never stop, if we are the slave of our thinking rather than its master, then we have a problem.

If I am due to fly somewhere next week I may find myself having a fantasy about terrorists taking over the aeroplane and me very heroically fighting them off! Said like that it is easy to see the comic side, yet I am actually a bit nervous about flying and the mind throws up this reassuring fantasy. To set these thoughts aside, I need to see that I am a bit afraid and willingly sit within the fear. When there is fear, just be frightened and accept it. This is another way of saying look directly at the fear and it loses its power. If I wish to know the true nature, I must be willing to be with things as they are. The remarkable thing is that when I do that, I become free of the affliction. Mental states like fear and desire, as well as other feelings and emotions, are deeply linked to thoughts. In fact thoughts and emotions are really part of one continuum.

The process is the same when anger arises. It is accompanied by thoughts, usually a rehashing of the events that made me angry or a speculation about what I will do about the situation. Now it is important to watch anger very closely whenever you have the chance to study it through your own direct observation, but don't cultivate it just to see it! When it has arisen, notice what it feels like, notice how it waxes and wanes according to how your thoughts run. It may fade somewhat until you think again of the offence you feel you suffered and off you go again. When this kind of thing happens, we are feeding the anger with the energy of our thoughts. To do zazen is to notice that the anger has

arisen; don't get involved in judging it as good or bad, justified or unjustified. Put aside the recurring patterns of thought and you find that perhaps there is a lot of hurt and sadness beneath the anger. There will be thoughts associated with those feelings too; let them go as well and the feelings of hurt will also dissolve. In an instant one can pick up the anger again in which case repeat the process. If we practice this, in time we become a much less angry person and are able to let anger pass more quickly when it does arise. It is possible to see anger coming and choose not to indulge it. The most obvious way one can see this is through being aware of a rising situation that we know can produce anger and being ready, and most importantly willing, to not choose it. If one keeps going with the practice, eventually one can let go of the very cause of the anger which is the frightened self.

When I was a teenager I quickly grew to my present six foot three inches. My parents and I moved to an old country cottage with low door lintels. My father was also tall and, like me, would bang his head when not being very aware. He would vent his feelings by thumping the lintel with his fist and swearing a strategy I quickly adopted. When I learned to meditate, I realised it was possible to bang my head and not thump the lintel and swear; even though reeling from the impact, it was possible to remain still inside. There was a moment of choice. The lintel had not meant to do me harm and the frustration was my own feeling of foolishness. I realised I felt sillier thumping the lintel and I could save myself the inner turmoil of the anger.

Other situations where anger arises can be much harder to see coming and often we only realise we are angry after we

are already well into it. Even so, with practice we can let go of the thoughts and just contemplate the feeling of anger. If we can do that the anger will vanish. However, there is an important point here and that is we should not direct our effort to making the anger go away. Just don't go on feeding the anger with angry thoughts. We need to accept whatever arises within zazen and be willing to be still with it: don't feed it and don't push it away.

Now why is it that thoughts\emotions disappear when you look directly at them? Memories, thoughts and feelings are all regarded in Buddhism as mental objects. The brain is viewed as a sense organ that is used to perceive mental "things". (There are six senses in Buddhism, the normal five plus the mental sense.) Within our field of mental view, we can only be aware of one thing at a time. We can shift from one mental object to another in less than a blink of an eye; nevertheless, it is only one thing at a time. This means that if our attention is moved away from sustaining the thought stream, then that stream will cease. Anger, desire and fear all depend upon a thought stream for their continued existence; once you are looking directly at them, you cannot continue the thought stream and so they cease. We can get caught up with thoughts again in an instant, but we have a choice whether to invest in them again or not. Much will depend on how willing we are to let them go.

We all know what it is like to lie in bed at night and worry the useless going round and round the same circle in our minds, rehashing the same "what ifs" but unable to lay the matter to rest. I find it helps to break the stream of thought and give myself a pause in which to redirect my mind. One way I have found to do this is to recite a short scripture or perhaps

to recite the Three Refuges: "I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma, I take refuge in the Sangha". (One could recite anything here that expresses something of one's true intent in life.) The effect is to break the self-perpetuating thought pattern and to affirm my intention to base my life on what is true rather than on the fantasies and projections that give rise to worry. I need to give expression to these wishes in the manner of my recitation and not just mouth the words. This works if I put my faith in zazen rather than in worrying.

The world we experience is the world created within our own minds. Our thoughts and feelings depend upon how we view the world; they are not absolutes nor are they as solid or as real as they seem. By learning not to be driven by thoughts and feelings, we can see how they are like a fantasy or a dream. Knowing this we can return to the primordial mind of zazen. Thoughts and feelings do not necessarily stop, but we no longer mistake them for our true nature.

Zazen is about learning to free oneself from the grip of afflictive thoughts, emotions and feelings because they drive us to act in ways we later regret, or they colour the world so that we see our projections rather than reality. This is a serious problem and the source of much suffering and evil. When fearful thoughts are allowed to run on, particularly when they are thoughts about another group, they lead to anger, then to hate and rage and under the influence of that, genocide is possible. By doing something about our own thoughts, we are directly reducing the amount and spread of evil in the world. Afflictive mental states in Buddhism are seen as any movement of the mind that tends

to obscure the true nature of ourselves and the world. We all have our theories on what needs to be done to make the world a better place and they almost always have to do with what other people should do. To undertake the great project of training ourselves in zazen is to realize that it begins with ourselves.

I have given a rather rough analysis of how the mind gets caught up in its mental objects, be they fantasies, thoughts or emotions. However, in meditation itself one should not analyse at all. In this moment now, "why" is not the issue; what matters is that you stop feeding those thoughts. In the same vein, it is important not to judge the thoughts as good or bad as that just continues the process. Don't judge and don't make excuses, just sit! If you are going to bring the mind under control, you have to do it now there is no other time. Of course, there are many good and necessary uses of the mind. The whole of the Buddhist sutras are an example. Zazen needs to become the default position from which we use our abilities to plan, think things through and utilize all the other wonderful abilities we have. You do, however, need the right understanding of what you are doing, the right frame of reference and to know the check points that can prevent you from going too far off the track.

There is one last important piece of advice. When you are meditating, don't sit there watching yourself doing it or you will be trying to split yourself in half. It comes down to trusting that you are meditating unless you see you are not, in which case you also see what you need to drop.

In summary, then, the main points of how to do zazen are to sit up straight and ground yourself in your physical being. Let go of thoughts and emotions as they arise. If you do not

feed them, they will cease to disturb you. This leads you closer and closer to your true nature, the primordial mind that is one with reality. Zazen is to just be this mind which we already are without adding anything to it. It is to accept all that arises as appearances within the mind. There is no need to fight or judge these appearances; simply let them go by putting aside the thoughts connected to them. Although greed, anger and delusions will continue, we do not have to join in the dance that they invite us to follow. When we sit still in the midst of what comes, we find stability and peace of mind and this is the source of compassion.

Priory Altar for February 19 Avalokiteswara Ceremony

## **Priory News**

On December 18, the Priory celebrated the great Enlightenment of Shakyamuni Buddha. It is good to see the Sangha to come together to offer our gratitude to the Buddha. It was a beautiful ceremony with the Sangha singing many special Enlightenment Day hymns. After the Dharma talk, we had a very pleasant potluck lunch to help celebrate the day.

Amanda Snedaker, a member of the Priory Sangha, moved in early February, to Shasta Abbey, with the intention of becoming a monk. Mike and Judy Lara generously hosted a farewell potluck lunch at their home on January 28. Many Sangha members came and shared the meal and had the

opportunity to give Amanda their best wishes. The Priory will miss Amanda, her consistent presence at the Priory and her willingness and generosity. We appreciate that all of us will still have an opportunity to see Amanda whenever we go to the Abbey.

Jet, the venerable Priory three-legged black cat, has survived many health problems and is still a lively and warm presence at the temple. Her latest health problem is failing kidneys but it may take a while for her kidneys to fail completely. Since Jet is eighteen years old, her kidney problems may not even affect her natural life span.