

The Other Half of Basic Buddhist Practice - Or Should it Be?

Ken Jones

How often have we heard somebody say that they have such a demanding life that it leaves them no time for practice? By this they commonly mean that they don't have time for regular meditation. What they forget is that they have excellent opportunities for the forgotten half of Buddhist practice here in the West...

Once upon a time a yogin retired to the mountains to concentrate all her energies on spiritual awakening. After ten years of intense meditation practice she felt ready to return to the ordinary world to share her realisation with others. Along the muddy road to the first small town she was splashed dirty all over by a heedless rider. She cursed him, but immediately after was aware of her angry reaction. In solitude she had completed only half her practice. So when she arrived in the town she took a humble, ill paid job and remained there amid the constant frictions of everyday life. After another ten years she felt as free in the town as she had on the mountain. People started to react to her in a new way, and sought her advice and help. Like what would be the most effective and insightful way to prevent a supermarket being built on the edge of the town which would ruin local businesses?

Traditionally, Buddhist practice is predominantly in a monastic setting. Thus, in Korean monasteries twice a year, summer and winter, there are three month meditation retreats with a minimum of ten hours sitting each day. At other times of the year there is a slightly lighter schedule. But Westerners are typically high achieving individualists. They have lighted upon meditation, taken it from the monastic context, and held up 'enlightenment' as the goal.

But monastic training begins with the half of the practice which tends all too easily to get lost in the West. Thus, in Korean Zen for the first six months novices are not tested on their ability to meditate, but on their ability to serve. They will have to work from 3 am to 9 pm cooking, cleaning, gardening, building, day after day. If they are still there after six months they may take a first ordination and enter the meditation hall. And later on, to counteract any deep attachment to spirituality and meditation, the monk or nun will be asked to take on various offices, 'robbing' his own her time and energy, as cook, head gardener, guestmaster, victualler and so on.

For us Westerners it is important to recall periodically how very central to the basic practice is this mindful giving and service, beyond our personal likes and dislikes. And it is supremely important to know how to make a really sensitive and skilful inner work of it.

This is a particular value of engaged Buddhism, that is to say, ecological and social engagement with the suffering of the world, through giving, service and action. This takes us beyond the closer and less avoidable obligations we have to children, partners, friends, colleagues. It challenges the time, energy and freedom still left to us after meeting those obligations. In the Christian idiom, only those who have fully divested themselves of what they most value will pass through the eye of the needle.

In declining the above for Interbeing Alex White made some helpful comments. These enable me to correct misunderstandings and also to invite comment from other NEB members. Alex wrote: "I don't approve of the message, and I think it could do harm...The Buddhists I meet need more self-sacrifice, more self-denial, more time consuming charitable activities taking them away from (a) family, home, friends, and (b) their personal sources of joy and renewal, like they need a hole in the head". To that I would add (c) making space for just hanging out idle!

So, let's go back to basics. Buddhist practice is very much about deepening awareness of the constant ebb and flow of desire and aversion in the self as the source of suffering. To the extent we can see this without being gripped by it, we are freed' to experience our lives with a clear seeing perception of just how things are and how we are. We can then respond in ways which are appropriate both to outer and inner circumstances. Thus, we will be deeply moved by the news from Bosnia. However, we may have virtually no resources, time or energy to help since all are being used up in supporting and caring nearer home. Or we may already be into what Thomas Merton called a 'frenzy of activism'. Strong feelings of guilt and duty may arise, and these may be supercharged by a Christian upbringing or what we believe good Buddhists' are supposed to do. Buddhist teaching enjoins us to try to stay with those feelings in deep awareness. They are part of our reality as well! as Bosnia. We need to be kind and gentle when our little struggling self gets all twisted and anxious, and try to see where these feelings come from.

Each of us needs to find his or her own Middle Way as to how much stuff we can handle as a helpful practice. If we feel our life is already very demanding then we will already have enough going on to fertilise our practice without creating waves big enough to drown us by trying to save the world. The last three sentences in my article are about the ultimate perspective. !f we try to be saints before our time it can only end in tears! But apologies to the many fellow Buddhists already overburdened in the ways Alex mentions who may fee! even worse after reading my article. I suggest we perhaps need in NEB together to examine more closely such overburden-ness. It would be helpful to hear of readers' experiences, please.

Copy from Indra's Network, Journal of the UK Network of Engaged Buddhist.