

A Zen Gateway Course

First
Steps
in
Buddhist
Practice

An experiential course

“Come O Kalamas, do not accept anything on mere hearsay. Do not accept anything by mere tradition. Do not accept anything on account of rumours. Do not accept anything just because it accords with your scriptures. Do not accept anything by mere supposition. Do not accept anything by mere inference. Do not accept anything merely because it agrees with your preconceived notions. Do not accept anything merely because it seems acceptable. Do not accept anything thinking that the ascetic is respected by us. But when you know for yourselves – these things are immoral, these things are blameworthy, these things are censured by the wise, these things when performed and undertaken conduce to ruin and sorrow – then indeed do you reject them. When you know for yourselves – these things are moral, these things are blameless, these things are praised by the wise, these things when performed and undertaken conduce to well-being and happiness – then do you live and act accordingly.

(Kalama sutta; Sutta Pitaka)

Introduction and an overview of this course

Welcome to this course 'First Footsteps in Buddhist Practice' which is the practical addition to the theory course – Introducing Buddhism.

As the title page to this booklet says this course is experiential; in other words it is about how the principles taught by the Buddha are put into practice. This practice takes into account both the body and mind because, unless both body and mind are brought into this spiritual practice, it simply will not work.

Where exercises are suggested then it is necessary to try them out, observe the results and then to write to write them down in this way you build up a record of your own direct insights. In this way your own experiences form the basis of insight into your own body, heart and mind which is the beginning, middle and end of any Buddhist practice:

“In this very one-fathom long body, along with its perceptions and thoughts do I proclaim the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, the path leading to the cessation of the world.”

(Sutta Pitaka)

The world to which the Buddha refers, in the quote just given, is the world of sorrow and suffering known as 'dukkha', a state of dissatisfaction with the world from which human beings suffer. It is the ending of this suffering which is the final aim and objective of all the Buddha's teachings.

This course is divided into six lessons.

The lesson sections for this First Footsteps course provide space for you to write up the results and conclusions of the exercises undertaken. It is advised that you take the time to fill these in so that you can refer to them to remind you of the principles to be implemented in developing a Buddhist practice.

This course will hopefully give a taste of what it means to practice Buddhism rather than just to read or hear about it. Like any other skill, such as learning a musical instrument or taking up a sport, it requires discipline, effort and determination. But if undertaken joyfully it opens out the heart, develops inner strength and brings us to the realisation that we are not alone in our endeavours but rather part of a long lineage. The Buddha's path is 2,500 years old and is a well trodden path; we quickly discover that 'my' problems are far from mine only and in this the recognition of self in others and others in oneself germinates the seed of human warmth and compassion, which along with wisdom form the two legs upon which Buddhism stands.

With good wishes on taking your first steps along the Buddha's ancient path to that ancient city which is called the human Heart.

I take refuge in the Buddha
I take refuge in the Dharma
I take refuge in the Sangha

Lesson One

What is mindful awareness?

Any book on Buddhist practice will refer to terms such as mindfulness or awareness and much is mentioned about how to develop it. Sometimes it is referred to as becoming more conscious and this word gives us a pointer as to meaning. The word 'consciousness' comes from the Latin root 'cognoscere' meaning 'to know' or 'to understand' something. Quite literally to be conscious of something is to know something. This knowing is a functioning of the Heart/Mind which is just now aware of the presence of something. For example consciousness of sounds is to know that just now sound is being heard, a sudden whiff of dinner is to know that there is just now a smell of the coming meal and so on. In addition to consciousness or awareness of outer stimuli it is possible to be aware of inner stimuli. We can be conscious of our moods, our thoughts and feelings, memories and dreams. Of all these things we also can become aware. The place where we become aware of these things, whether from outside or inside is called 'citta' in both Pali and Sanskrit. This term 'citta' has no direct translation in English but is what we shall refer to as Heart/Mind – the seat of consciousness, the place (using this term figuratively), where awareness of mindfulness arises.

Just pause for a moment and listen carefully...

When we make an effort to listen the Heart/Mind seems to turn outwards and like a net it catches the sounds which come into it.

Now pause and look around carefully noting the surroundings for a few moments...

Becoming conscious or aware has two sides to it. One is this making an effort and the Heart/Mind opening up and the other is the sense data which, of itself, falls into it.

So becoming aware is not something that 'I' can make happen as I cannot command what will fall into the net of awareness. However by making the effort to open up the Heart/Mind awareness of things arises as a consequence.

This now leads us to a seemingly small but significant point: Awareness always has an object.

There can be:

awareness of colour and forms

awareness of sounds

awareness of smells

awareness of tastes

awareness of tactile sensations

awareness of the inner landscape of thoughts, feelings, moods etc.

There cannot be awareness of nothing, for nothing is by its nature and definition that of which there is no awareness.

Exercise – Eating a piece of fruit

Put aside about ten minutes for this exercise and retire to a quiet place with a piece of fruit. For this exercise make your actions slightly slower than usual so there is a time for awareness to rise up in the Heart/Mind.

Making the effort to open up to the piece of fruit pick it up and look it over carefully. Remember to take your time. After examining it smell it; after smelling it, rub it.

Now pause for a moment and note inwardly any sensations that have arisen. Just now what thoughts are arising? Just now are there any feelings or sensations arising about the exercise for example? Just note these and then proceed with the exercise.

If it is necessary to peel the fruit or to cut it carry out this procedure looking and listening for the sights and sounds which are now impacting on the Heart/Mind. Every so often pause and note inwardly what is arising then proceed with the exercise. Carry on in this manner until the fruit has been eaten.

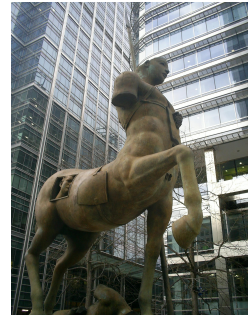
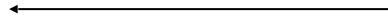
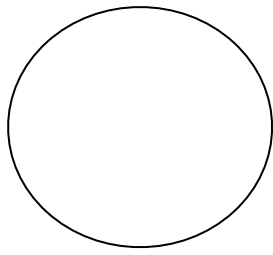
After the exercise, note how carrying out this procedure has affected mood, and how long the effect lasts?

Make a note of your findings in the box below:

Write down what was noticed during and after the fruit eating exercise

By making an effort we discover that the awareness of things both inwardly and outwardly increases. The incidence of things noticed increases. This 'noticing' is to become suddenly aware of something.

However this act of noticing is not something that 'I' can do, so to speak, it happens to me or rather it arises of itself in the Heart/Mind.



Awareness of...

Noticing

Object noticed

Exercise – Taking a stroll whilst looking and listening.

This exercise is an extension of the previous one. Only this time take two or three walks for about half an hour making the effort to open up looking and listening.

Remember as well as looking and listening externally to look and listen internally as well.

Even at this early stage it is worth making the point that mindful awareness is not about making ‘my mind blank of thoughts & feelings’ rather just to allow what is there anyway to be noticed.

What was noticed on the walks internally and externally?

We are only at the beginning of this exploration of awareness so don't expect everything to appear at once!

Lesson Two

Awareness of the Body

In the last lesson we took a general look at awareness and followed some exercises to bring the experience of being aware into perspective.

Lesson One also pointed out that we can only be aware of something not of nothing. In the teachings of the Buddha there is a short sutta called the Satipatthana which classifies all the possible objects of awareness under four headings called 'The Four Foundations of Mindful Awareness'. These four headings are:

1. Body and physical sense data as objects of awareness
2. Feeling/sensations as objects of awareness
3. Heart/Mind, its moods and emotions as objects of awareness
4. Mental formations such as thoughts, intentions and imagination as objects of awareness

We will be looking at these categories and be using them to explore and develop awareness in these four directions over the next few lessons. For this lesson we look at awareness of physical sense data and in particular at how the physical body and consciousness interact.

The interconnection of Body and Heart/Mind

These days most people are familiar with the concept of body language and that what a person is thinking and feeling is conveyed by posture and movements of the body. We are also used to being entertained by TV magicians and mentalists who have developed their ability to 'read' body language to a very high degree, so good as to make their guesses seem miraculous. However we all, either consciously or unconsciously, have this ability and for social animals such as we are it is practically indispensable. Life becomes very difficult if we cannot do it. We know for example that what a person says and the way that it is said may make the message appear genuine or insincere. If we are approached in the street by a stranger who asks us for help the chances are we are already 'reading' that person in order to make a decision whether to assist or not.

So in this way we are already familiar with the idea that the physical body (and the sound of the voice) can convey what is going on in the Heart/Mind. However what is not always appreciated is that this avenue is a two way street in since much of what we are currently feeling (our present mood) can be altered by simply altering physical posture.

Exercise - The Three Postures

For this exercise take a few minutes and retire to some place where you can be alone.

You are going to adopt three postures and will need to maintain them for the duration of about ten seconds. The postures should

be adopted in sequence. To make the effect clear it is advised that the sequence be run through a few times.

Whilst carrying out this exercise, as well as opening out the Heart/Mind to the physical postures adopted so that they are correct, pause to notice how the postures feel.

The three postures to adopt are as follows:

1. From a seated position bend your torso and head downwards so your head is close to your knees. Pull in the elbows to your sides and curl your hands into fists. Scrunch your toes up and pull your legs in towards your body. Make your body shrink into as small a space as possible. Hold.
2. Now uncurl and stand up straight with arms down by your sides touching the body. The head should be upright with face forward and eyes looking straight ahead. Make sure the spine is upright as if to attention. Hold.
3. From positions 2. raise the arms towards the ceiling so that the body is in the shape of the letter 'Y'. Tilt the head back and gaze upwards. Hold.

What was felt when each posture was adopted?

Briefly describe what was felt in each position:

position one:

position two:

position three:

What we are looking for is not whether what you felt in one position is the same as what others feel; what we are interested in is to notice that a state of consciousness was altered by the simple fact of changing the posture from one to another.

The reason that this is important is that awareness too is a state of consciousness and we need to identify the conditions which give rise to it. One of those conditions is the physical form.

Sports people, actors, singers and dancers all use their bodies to support their skill or craft. Take the opportunity to observe such

professionals. See how they use their bodies to enhance the state of awareness necessary to carry out their activities.

Now for our final exercise in this lesson we will use some of what we have found in the above exercises in practice.

Exercise - Doing a disliked chore

Most people have to do some chores either at work or around the home. In our usual way we divide things up into things I like and things I don't like. Those things I don't like often get left to last or until there is no further option but to do them.

For this exercise we are going to use the fact that the usual state of consciousness associated with such a task is one of 'dislike' and to see, if using the body, whether that state of 'dislike' can be changed.

The actor who is about to step out onto stage may well be nervous, may just had a blazing row with someone, may be saddened by some personal loss and yet must be able to drop all this when going out on stage. Quite literally the actor is so well trained that s/he can give him or herself so completely into the part that any thought of oneself is forgotten. This is done by the wholehearted act of giving myself into the part being played. This is what we can do with this disliked chore.

If, for example, the chore is ironing, well I can always distract myself by listening to music or watching TV whilst doing it. But this is not to give myself wholeheartedly into the task. Rather I am splitting 'myself' off from the body which is doing the task whilst I ghost about somewhere else. This in fact only reinforces the dislike of

the task as it acts out of a refusal to be in the same place as the task taking place. So the first thing to do is not to create distractions. This exercise is to go into the task face on. The next thing I find is that, having decided to do this face on, I really don't feel like doing it. In other words the resentful feelings arise and I begin debating the usefulness of the whole thing. This too is a distraction and in fact provides an escape route from being in the body which is doing the task. So the next thing is to really use the body energetically in doing the task. If thoughts arise, no need to get upset or carried off by them just take a firm grip on the iron and pay close attention, really giving oneself as wholeheartedly and sincerely into the task as is possible. What then happens?

What happens when wholeheartedly given into the task?

Lesson Three

Sitting Meditation

Before we move onto the second of the Four Foundations we will cover the essentials of sitting meditation which for the Buddhist practitioner complements the mindful awareness practice in daily life.

Sitting meditation (as different from meditation in our round of daily activities) has been much in vogue for a number of years; and if you look at the list of titles available in a book shop you will see that all sorts of methods and techniques are covered by this word. The scientific community is also taking much interest in the physiological effects of meditation in long term practitioners and it seems that everyone has their own reasons for wanting to practice it.

However in Buddhism, as in other religions, meditation is a practice that is used to develop insight. Insight is the ability to see things as they are really without the deluding thoughts and passions which so often fill the Heart/Mind. As part of a religious practice meditation is a staged activity made up of two parts. The first is a quieting meditation used, if not to silence the usual torrent of thoughts and emotional reactions, then at least to quieten it. The next part is known as insight meditation and uses various objects of meditation to bring insight into the Buddha's teachings to the practitioner. The latter method is usually carried out under instruction.

For our purposes we will be looking at, and practising, the quietening meditation.

The posture for sitting

Meditation can be sat on a cushion on the floor or on a chair. If you can sit on the floor using a cushion then it is advised to do so. Please note that it is not necessary to be entirely comfortable but it is necessary for the position used to be enduring.

From our last lesson we know that the body posture will guide the type of consciousness which will arise as a consequence. So we are looking for a stable, upright and relaxed posture to give rise to a similar inner state.

Stability is brought about if the lower part of the body making contact with the ground is well balanced. This can be achieved on a cushion by either sitting cross-legged with both knees on the ground or kneeling using several cushions or a meditation stool. The kneeling posture should be astride the cushions with the knees apart and the weight of the body on the cushions or stool rather than on the lower legs and feet. On a chair the same effect is brought about with the knees apart and with feet flat on the floor. Please make sure that the hips are slightly higher than the knees as this will tip the pelvis forward and allow you to relax without the back slumping into the shape of an archer's bow.

The hands should be together and supported in the lap, the head upright, not tilted up or down, and the chin drawn in. Breathe through the nose and keep the mouth closed; the teeth together but not clenched.

This is the physical posture for sitting meditation.

Inwardly there is now the heart which, like a monkey in a heavily laden fruit tree, hops about first tasting this and then tasting that; in other words the Heart/Mind goes every which way.

To bring this under some kind of restraint, to allow inner clarity to arise, we need an object of meditation to act as a tethering post for the Heart/Mind. To this end we use the breath which is always with us whilst alive.

To begin with just notice the breath going in and out for a bout half a dozen breath cycles.

Now, in particular, notice the out breath and notice it right to the end of the exhalation. Notice also how each time the body exhales there is a slight sinking sensation in the body rather like a small sigh. It is important to give yourself into this sinking sensation and allow it to carry the Heart/Mind down into the spacious quiet of the body. However it will be discovered that this is probably not enough: the thoughts will come and carry away attention from the breath and you may find yourself still thinking merrily away whilst breathing out. So, to curtail this, we put a count on the exhalation for the full duration of its length. The count is mental; a thought which is used to prevent a thousand other thoughts arising.

“Oneeeeeeeee, Twoooooooooo, Threeeeeeeee, and so on. Simply count to ten and then start again at “One”

The important thing is not just counting from one to ten and then back to one again but rather to give yourself whole-heartedly into this activity just as was necessary in the last lesson's exercise with

the disliked chore. In the same way by doing this whole-heartedly the Heart/Mind rouses itself and pulls itself together!

No doubt thoughts will still arise and 'I' will be carried far off by them. This is only to be expected and in itself is of little consequence. When this happens at some point the realisation will arise of having just been carried off by thoughts for a while and, as soon as this arises, then immediately to let go of the thought stream and come back to the out breath; the count beginning at "Oneeeeeee" as wholeheartedly as possible.

To begin with practice for about fifteen minutes once a day four or five times per week. It is good advice to try to sit at the same time each day and, if possible, in the same place. In the same way as if we eat and sleep at regular times the body gets to know the routine and quickly gets the body ready for the up and coming activity, so it will recognise that a certain time is dedicated to meditation and will begin to get the Heart/Mind ready for the sitting practice.

The Second Foundation of Mindful Awareness

The Second Foundation is called 'Feeling/Sensation' and is the second of the Five Skandas. This sensation arises in awareness as a result of contact with sense data from any of the six senses (the five physical sense doors plus the objects of the inner landscape: thoughts, emotions, memories etc.).

These sensations may be felt as:

- pleasant
- unpleasant
- neither unpleasant nor pleasant also called a neutral sensation

The most obvious examples are; if I accidentally put my finger on the hotplate of the cooker, shout out and quickly pull away the finger in pain; alternatively I am offered a plate of biscuits and see my absolute favourite reach out in pleasure for it. The neutral sensation will not really concern us for the time being as it is the first two sensations which lead onto the arising of desire.

As the experiences of pleasant and unpleasant are accompanied by movement, sensation is also described as a

- movement towards
- movement away
- neither towards nor away

This movement may be very slight and may just involve attention being oriented in a different direction. This is frequently encountered in sitting meditation. If sitting for a while counting the out breath a feeling of boredom arises as not much is happening.

This emotional reaction is unpleasant to bear, but we are physically sitting still and so cannot just get up and switch on the TV. However consciousness itself can move in a different direction and give rise to interesting thoughts and daydreams about holidays and what it must feel like to be enlightened! So this function of sensation arising moves us from what is unpleasant to what is pleasant. It is important to realise that this function acts quite independently of conscious will though it conditions the latter also. Sensation also conditions our sense of taste. Perhaps I like my cup of tea quite sweet and then someone gives me a cup of tea with no sugar in it. Now, if there is no possibility of getting any sugar, I can just put up with this and drink it but somehow I cannot make myself like it. In this way I cannot just control sensations by an act of will. They operate unconsciously.

Sensations are important in our practice because they condition desires. From our experience we can see that, if something unpleasant arises, the desire to move away from it arises as a consequence. The desire for pleasant sensations also arises due to this factor. In the Four Noble Truths the Buddha pointed out that much of our sense of dissatisfaction arises as a result of desires, craving taking us over and leading us to make decisions we might later regret. Therefore being able to contain sensations without being driven by them is an important step on the road to inner strength. Being able to act wisely rather than impulsively means having the fortitude to bear with quite powerful sensations without being carried off by them; to this end mindful awareness of sensations becomes of great importance.

Before moving onto our exercises for this lesson there is one further point to look out for in our experiments with this Foundation. Many sensations of both pleasant and unpleasant arise as a consequence of thoughts, memories or emotional

reactions and these can become tied into spirals, or loops, which lead to many of the anxieties from which we suffer. Developing a clear awareness of this foundation of sensation prevents the Heart/Mind being dragged along by many of the repetitive thoughts and fantasies which can blight our everyday functioning as good human beings. The Heart/Mind does not distinguish in sensation between a physical object which produces a pleasant sensation and the memory of the same object. So the same sensation will arise in both cases. Even our day dreams and fantasies are continually producing sensations as can be noticed if attention is given to this Foundation practice.

Exercise - Sensations produced by thoughts.

As you read the following passages pause where you see three dots like this... and allow a few moments for the scene to unfold in imagination:

You are standing atop a vast municipal rubbish tip... Before you, as far as the eye can see, is an ocean of garbage rising wave upon wave... The sound of seagulls screeching fills the air... they fight over scraps whilst ravens pick over the corpses of fast food containers looking for scraps...

Suddenly the direction of the wind changes and the fetid smell hits you full face... A movement near your feet suddenly draws your eye to the large brown rat scuttling towards you now...

Take a moment to notice the sensation...

Now let us move to another scene:

You are lying on a recliner by an empty swimming pool in front of a villa... The sky is blue the sun is warm and bright... In the near

distance you can hear the lapping of waves on a sandy sea shore...
Gazing at the pool its still surface mirrors the sky... You feel relaxed and the scent of the flowering lavender fills your nostrils...

Take a moment to notice the sensation...

You can repeat the exercise a couple of times perfect the imaginary scene.

Make a brief description of the sensations arising from the two scenes

For the second exercise we return to the importance of being able to contain sensations of pleasant and unpleasant and why this is an important skill to develop in life generally.

Exercise- Containment of sensations

Think of an example of where enduring short term unpleasant feelings worked to greater benefit in the longer term.

Lesson Four

The Third Foundation of mindful awareness – The Heart/Mind

For this third Foundation we will be looking at the moods and emotional states of the Heart/Mind and seeking to develop awareness of the different emotional states when they arise.

The Six States as a model of consciousness

For this exercise you will need to familiarise yourself with that classic Buddhist symbol The Wheel of Life and in particular the six states which appear on the Wheel. If necessary go and take a look at some information about this symbol. We are now going to use these six states as a map of the various emotional states which can arise into consciousness.

The Wheel is closely associated with the subjects of karma and rebirth. Classically the subject of rebirth is thought of in terms of life-to-life but for our purposes we will consider rebirth from one state of consciousness to another.

When a powerful emotional state erupts it is usually so powerful that it simply sweeps us away and we can end up acting impulsively, that is blindly, so that later on we may regret our actions when returned to cooler blood! It is as if for a short while 'I' became something or someone else who, contrary to my best intentions, had his or her own idea of what right now is important and what I will do. This is reflected in the idioms we use in connection with

such moments; “I got carried away” or “I was quite beside myself” . Our forebears may have put it even more starkly; “The devil made me do it!” All these sayings reflect a sense that our emotional reactions operate outside of ‘my’ control. They come and they go and for a while they take charge. There is an old Indian saying, “Do not bestride the tiger for you may not alight”, which reflects the same insight. So in Buddhism we personify these emotional states as the different categories of beings found in the six realms. This helps us look back at these emotional states of consciousness, not as ‘mine’ which they are not as they have an autonomy, view and ambitions all of their own, but in a more objective way.

With this in mind let us now look at the six realms or states in terms of our own psychology.

Heavenly Realms: A state of bliss and/or superiority. Think of the gods of classical Greece on Mt. Olympus. They were proud, superior, luxurious and powerful, given over to using humans as pawns in their games. Although usually associated with happiness and feelings of joy there is a darker side to this state of being.

Asuras or Fighting Daemons: These beings are given over to irritations, anger and fighting with fists, verbally or in plotting. Anger can be overt aggression or passive aggressive, recalcitrant, obstreperous, hot or cold, vengeful taking pleasure in plotting the destruction of enemies.

Pretas/ Hungry ghosts: These beings are in a state of perpetual wanting that can either never be satisfied or not for very long. This covers all our obvious wanting but also our yearnings, craving for what is not here now and general restlessness showing a sense of feeling dissatisfied with the present circumstances.

Hell states: The realm of depression and despair, disappointment and pain.

Animal realm: The animal realm is characterised by impulsiveness, acting on blind instinct. The beings here lack the wisdom to see the longer term consequences of immediate self-gratification. This state is opposed to foresight. Thus one may speak and act in a way which may result in harm to oneself and others. Animals have no real power so this state is also a personification of a time when we are 'like sheep' and cannot help ourselves. We are victim to circumstances such as animals are in the wild: think of the fly that endlessly bangs its head against the pane of glass not seeing the open window only inches from its plight.

Human realm: The human realm is the one from which, according to the Buddha, liberation from suffering is possible. This is only true of the human realm and from no other realm. This realm encapsulates the best that is human rather than the worst as when we say 'to err is human' or 'he is only human' which usually refers to a defect in someone's character. Here are the supreme virtues that each society reveres in its heroes and heroines such as bravery, perseverance, self-sacrifice and so on. The particular function which marks this realm is that of wisdom, awareness, the ability to see ahead to the consequences of one's actions and to act in accord with that wisdom. Cultivating awareness as part of a Buddhist practice is to cultivate this same human state.

The Six States Map of Consciousness

So the exercise for this lesson is as follows: Overleaf you will find a diagram, a stripped down Wheel showing the six states ready to be populated by your own emotional experiences.

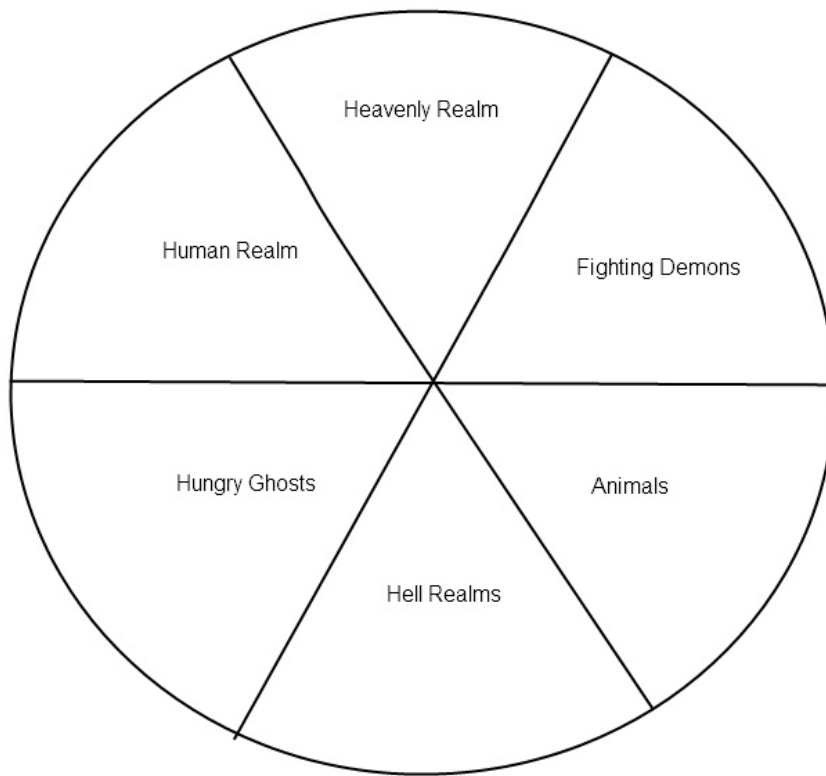


Figure 1

As a preliminary exercise to consolidate the meaning of each state take a large piece of paper and make a copy of Figure 1. Then take some time to think of a character, from either real life or fiction, whose personality typifies a being from each realm. So, for example, who would best sum up the virtues of a human being? Who is always in despair, full of moans and groans? Who is always irritable? And so on. Place their names in the relevant realm on the chart.

Now, for the next month look and listen carefully and note when you, yourself enter into one of these realms. You will probably notice them after the event; this is fine for now.

When one has been seen just make a very short note of:

1. the situation in which it occurred
2. how you knew you were in that state; what told you that this certain emotional state was occurring

Make notes, perhaps in a notebook but also just make a short note, for recording purposes, on the Wheel itself. Notice which realms fill up first, notice also any patterns of behaviour when in any of these six states.

Lesson Five

The Internal Commentator

Most of us are aware of this inhabitant of the Heart/Mind who sits like the sports commentator commenting upon what is being done, who meanders into the past and is also full of opinions and judgements about the future. Anyone who has practiced sitting meditation will also be painfully aware just how persistent this one is and how he cannot be laid down by an act of will, just like the emotional states encountered in the last lesson.

What follows is a Japanese folktale. When you have read it see if you can answer the questions which follow on:

Once, there lived a woodsman who every day would go to the wood to make firewood to sell in the market. One day, having selected his tree, he had just started chopping it down when he happened to look over his shoulder to the far side of the glade and he saw a most peculiar animal. The creature looked like a deer but it was snow white from the tip of its nose to the tip of the tail.

The woodsman thought to himself, "I've never seen such an animal in this wood in all the years of my life."

Suddenly the deer spoke to the woodsman, "You're thinking that, in all your years working in this wood, you've never seen anything quite like me before".

The woodsman was astounded and thought, "It can speak!"

To which the deer added, "And now you are shocked to hear that I can speak".

"And it knows my thoughts," thought the woodsman.

“And now you are incredulous that I am telepathic,” said the deer. The deer went on. “And now you are thinking that if you can catch me we could join a circus and would become rich and famous and you would never have to make your living chopping wood again. But now you are thinking that maybe it is not such a good idea that I know all your thoughts – everyone might get to know your secrets and what then?” “And now you think that perhaps I am a devil come to torment you and perhaps you had better take your axe and dispatch me.”

And with that the woodsman ran at the deer with his axe but the deer, being able to anticipate the woodsman’s thoughts, simply stepped out of the way. Again and again the woodsman ran after him sometimes hiding behind a tree, sometimes feigning having given up only to try to sneak up behind the deer.

“And now you think that hiding behind that tree I will walk past and you will get me then.”

Whatever the woodsman tried the deer knew immediately because he could read all his thoughts.

Finally the woodsman realised all his efforts were pointless and that the only thing to do was to go back to chopping down the tree.

“And now you think that perhaps by ignoring me I will go away,” commented the deer.

But as the woodsman got back to his task which he had been doing for many years the deer watching him began to have less and less to say. Finally the deer fell silent and the only sound was the ‘whack’, ‘whack’, ‘whack’, of the axe against the tree. Just as the woodsman raised his axe for the felling stroke the axe head detached from the shaft and flew twirling round and round through the air until, by chance, it struck the deer slap bang between the eyes killing it stone dead.

1. Who or what is the snow white deer in daily life?
2. Why can't the woodsman get rid of him?
3. Why is it that the deer, later on, runs out of things to say and goes silent?
4. What is the significance of the axe head detaching and killing the deer?

Some of these questions are easier to answer than others but have a go at all of them. You might find them easier to answer after having a go at the awareness exercises for this lesson which have to do with the thought streams.

From the work with the Three Fires in the last lesson it may well be apparent by now that these Fires or emotional states operate through three 'doors' these are through

- acts of the body
- acts of speech
- thoughts, opinions, judgements and allied mental operations.

In most people thoughts are often considered the closest thing to myself: they feel the most personal. The acts of body and of speech whilst still considered 'mine' can more easily be seen objectively but my thoughts seem to be me! The famous Cartesian saying "I think therefore I am" is true because 'I' am this thought and not anything else.

Because of this deeply felt attitude thought streams very easily come in and take over the Heart/Mind. This is what makes them so

difficult to see as just another object of awareness because they are so strong and have great power to carry me away. Thus instead of being seen as an object, in the same way as it is possible to be aware of just now hearing a car going past, 'I' am subject to them.

Every attempt 'I' make (being a thought myself anyway) not to be carried away by thoughts only seems to make matters worse. It is like the turtle who tries to wipe out his footprints in the sand with his tail only to make an even bigger mess!

The problem with this state of affairs is that whilst awareness or consciousness is carried away on some thought stream then awareness of every thing else is dimmed. The more I am preoccupied the less awareness in general of what is going on right under the nose.

So what can be done about this state of affairs? If 'I' am the problem, being made up of thoughts, and these thoughts when unfettered carry away the Heart/Mind and thus lower functioning awareness then what is necessary for 'I' to be laid down, forgotten in some way? Our story gives the problem and the antidote very clearly. What is necessary is for 'me' to give myself away into what is just now needing to be done. In other words 'I' lay myself down and forget myself in the doing of the ordinary tasks. But, and here is the important bit, this 'doing' must involve the body.

Why is it important to include the body? Once again just listen for a few moments... Does that listening need any thinking? It might be that some thoughts arose during the listening but that does not matter. Does the ability to hear, or to see, or to feel, touch, taste or smell require thinking to function?

Our own experience shows that it does not need thinking since the body and its senses work with no thinking whatsoever. In fact going into the body, as we have already done in the previous

lessons, we find that there is no thinking at all in body consciousness. It is this fact that can be used; by cultivating awareness of body and its sense bases consciousness is less carried away by thoughts. That is not to say that we are looking to stop thinking – rather to re-dress the balance which sees consciousness being swamped by thinking to the exclusion of others. Thinking itself is a very useful tool and it has brought great benefits to humans as a species, but in the same way a hammer too is a very useful tool but no need to take it fishing!

The following exercises can be used to help ‘cut through’ persistent thought streams. Our exercise for the coming month is to employ them in our daily business whenever it is found that the thought streams are taking over and see if the awareness of the thoughts arising can be bolstered by their use.

Methods of breaking thought chains and collecting the Heart/
Mínd

- Awareness of body via whole-hearted giving myself into what is being done

How does this work?

Like our woodsman the activity and awareness of the activity of the body occupies consciousness to the forgetful exclusion of the thoughts.

- Bowing and prostrations

How does this work?

Any wholehearted act throws out ‘I’ and bowing or prostrating the body is the ‘laying down of ‘I’ which are the

thoughts themselves.

- Jumping back into the situation

How does this work?

See if you can get used to acting before thinking about it. How often does someone say, its your turn to wash up and I allow myself to think - oh! Not right now. Instead learn to move the body before the thought can arise to block it. The same for the alarm going off in the morning. Just get out of bed quickly before a counter-prevailing thought arises such as - 10 more minutes! The faster we can move the body the less the judgement can get a grip on consciousness.

Do not expect it all to be easy. A Buddhist practice takes many years to fully develop the strength needed to tackle powerful emotional states and obsessing thoughts but even a little practice will produce results quite quickly if Right Effort is made.

Lesson Six

Setting Up for a Long Term Practice

In this last lesson we will be looking at the following subjects:

- The devotional aspect of a Buddhist practice
- Setting up a shrine at home
- Where to go to deepen and further a Buddhist Practice

Before we look at the above, and as this is the final lesson in the course, it may be useful to review what has been done and think about what has been found to be useful to include as elements in your own daily practice.

Moving on:

Take some time to itemise what has been most helpful in all the areas covered by this course and draw up a list of practices to help deepen the daily life practice.

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The Devotional Aspect of a Buddhist Practice

The formula of the Three Refuges or Three Jewels appears in all the major schools of Buddhism. These consist of taking refuge in the Buddha, taking refuge in his teachings (Dharma), and taking refuge in the Buddhist Community (Sangha). Something that is a refuge is also a support and in this context it supports us in the development of a spiritual practice.

How can the Three Refuges support a Buddhist Practice?

Buddha: The story of the Buddha is a traditional story which is more than just a founding story; it is a training story also. The elements within the story show some of the problems that may be encountered along the Way and how they might be solved. In this way the story of the Buddha can become an object of contemplation as we begin to recognise that the story of the Buddha is in fact the story of our own religious practice.

As the making of Buddhist images was forbidden for about two hundred years after the Buddha's death all representations of him are not literal but symbolic. When we bow before a Buddha statue it is not before an historical personage but rather we are bowing to the ideals upon which Buddhism is based. In this way the person of the Buddha is now the personification of those ideals of Wisdom and Compassion and it is these to which we pay our respects when we make offerings of flowers, incense or when we bow before him. As part of our practice we can contemplate the image of the Buddha just allowing it to perfume awareness to remind us of the chosen spiritual path and to reinvigorate us if our motivation is weak. Finally, classical Buddhist images are teaching aids in themselves and are made using very precise, traditional principles. Thus the eyes of the Buddha teach restraint in using the eyes, of the mouth, of the hands and body and so on. In other words the image of the Buddha becomes the example for life.

Dharma: The teachings of the Buddha also form objects of contemplation and regular 'immersion' into them is indispensable along the Way of training. Having the suttas/sutras to read occasionally, perhaps for five or ten minutes at the start of the

day, sets us up in our daily practice. Going to hear the teachings and making use of the opportunities to ask questions is also taking refuge in the Dharma.

Sangha: The Buddhist community consists in the first instance of the ordained nuns and monks but also includes Buddhist friends and the support network of temples, Dharma centres and so on. If we have local classes then try them out and see if they answer a spiritual need. To take part in the life of a temple making offerings of gifts or donating time and labour in the atmosphere of a community can also help in developing a practice. As we settle into sitting meditation and our practice in daily life deepens and if we have established a relationship with a Buddhist community then we may have the opportunity to take part in retreats on occasion. All this can help with the practice.

Setting up a shrine at home

If we are serious about a Buddhist practice there will come a time when we may wish to set up an altar at home to provide a focus for either making offerings of incense or for chanting and as a place where we carry out sitting meditation. It can lend some atmosphere to the home and acts as a reminder of our commitment.

Some may have the space to dedicate a whole room to this. It can be set up with a Buddha image with somewhere to burn incense sticks and also to have a vase with a flower, flowers or even artificial flowers to remind us of the interconnectedness of all nature. Otherwise the corner of a room or even part of a shelf can be used. To begin with either a statue of the Buddha or perhaps a picture would suffice; it is not necessary to spend a fortune to

make a shrine. Far more important is the dedication in the heart and to this end it should be kept clean with the flowers watered and old incense sticks and matches cleared away regularly. This too is part of the discipline. There can be a tendency to make the altar too cluttered; simplicity with some aesthetic quality should be the overarching values for the shrine.

And finally...

How to go on? A lot will depend on your locality and what is available. Those who live in large towns or cities will no doubt have more choice than those in more rural communities. However, many small towns have meditation groups. Often these are quite general and are open to all. There is no need to feel that you must stick with the first one you encounter. Some will resonate more than others and your own judgement and common sense will have to be exercised. Remember the Buddha taught self reliance!

Although a certain amount can be done by oneself, if there is an inclination to go deeper into the training then a teacher will be required. The relation between teacher and student is of great importance in Buddhism more so than which tradition the teacher comes from. It is useful to go to some talks by a teacher and to try out the training given for a set period say two to three months: that should be enough to make an evaluation. One thing that is not advised is to mix different teachers and different traditions. Each teacher has his or her own style, although all will fall within the Buddhist framework of ethics. Each tradition, although based on the same principles, will have different methods and each is self-contained. To mix a bit from one with another is to give oneself the risk of a spiritual hangover and at best will lead to naught.

Here on The Zen Gateway we host an online Dharma Centre featuring weekly Zazen meditation, with live Dharma talks and an opportunity to interact with a teacher to discuss starting out or to bring practice problems too. We have a small community of regular practitioners with whom to interact and learn together.

We hope this course has given some insight into the ancient path pointed out by the Buddha and will inspire you to take a few further steps along this well trodden path bringing warmth of heart and insight into the True Nature of being.

May all beings be happy and all attain
Buddhahood!