

Applying Meditation to Everyday Life.

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The most common concept of education is that we learn from external stimuli—from books, lectures, art, music, TV, etc. There is another dimension to education; it comes from the literal meaning of the Latin which is to lead forth or draw out. This concept of education is to bring out that which is already there but not developed or fully understood. Socrates demonstrated the existence of past lives by showing that an uneducated slave boy already knew and understood profound mathematical truths by simply asking the boy questions and allowing him the opportunity of making the mental connections from the facts elicited. Although all of us have access to the Treasure House within us, we are not taught how to get at it. Putting meditation into practice is the process of learning how to be still within so that we can respond to the Buddha Nature within us. Out of the practice of serene reflection meditation arises the ability to be alert and sufficiently still in all activities so that we can fully use the capabilities we have. This does not make us gods or supermen; we still have the limitations of our humanity, but within those limitations there is another dimension which gradually opens up as the layers of ignorance are removed by spiritual training. Out of the ignorance we come to understanding: the alertness of meditation allows us to see the ignorance, the stillness allows us to plummet to its depths, and from there the understanding arises naturally when the selfish self is out of the way.

The underlying assumption here is that we are all part of the Cosmic Buddha and have the ability to be in contact with the Buddha Nature within us. This is the act of faith. When we act on faith we have the ability to be in touch with this adequacy or wholeness. To learn from anything, however, we must admit that there is something we do not know or do not understand. This creates an attitude of humility from which it is possible to accept knowledge and information. Both the willingness to admit that there is something we can learn and the acceptance of our own adequacy to learn it are essential. As Great Master Dogen puts it:

When we wish to teach and enlighten all things by ourselves, we are deluded; when all things teach and enlighten us, we are enlightened....¹

We normally face the unknown with fear and inadequacy, which makes it very difficult to make the best choices or the most intelligent decisions. When this passes and we look through the eyes of humility from the knowledge of our own adequacy, which is no different from the willingness to grow and learn, then we can use the information—even the information of our own fears and inadequacies—effectively. This is when we actually learn something.

All this may seem somewhat irrelevant to the application of meditation to everyday life but, in fact, it is the very process of meditation, the sitting still within ourselves, that puts us in contact with both our own adequacy and our own humility. This opens the door to learn from everything. As we learn and grow we come to know that “the Light of Buddha is increasing in brilliance and the Wheel of the Dharma is always turning.”²

Clarity arises naturally out of the effort of awareness. To pay attention is to stop putting our own ideas and opinions on the situation, simply and clearly to see things as

they are. This is not a constant state. Clarity will arise and go as the sun arises and sets or goes behind a cloud only to reappear again. The more we make the effort, the more we see where that effort can be made. Each time we go through one door, the next one appears in the distance. Each time we see what there is to do, we also see how much we have not done. This need not be a source of discouragement or despair: it is doing the best we can when we see where we can do better and make the effort to do it. This is the “always going on, always becoming Buddha” of *The Scripture of Great Wisdom*.

Every day the koan³ arises and we have the opportunity to put meditation into practice. We need to push back the frustration line or not react to the anger button or not tense up the greed tentacle, if only just for a little longer than usual. If we can give a bit more energy to the situation before we act on the anger, wait just a little longer before giving in to the frustration or acting on the greed, then stillness deepens and often we find that the frustration, anger or greed disappears. Sometimes we act on the anger or the frustration; then the only way to put meditation into action is simply to accept the situation and the consequences that develop. There is no need to complicate the situation with judgments or with guilt.

The area of greatest difficulty in daily life is not necessarily mechanical tasks or competence in work or even the complications of our relationships with others, but it is the relationship we have with ourselves and our greater self, the Selfless Self or the Buddha Nature. It is often easier to see when greed, hate or opinions get in the way of others than it is to see it in ourselves and often harder to know what to do with it when we do see it. But whatever the external situation, the only thing that we really have to deal with is ourselves, and the basic rules for dealing with ourselves and others are set out simply in the Precepts.⁴ External situations

and what others do are not as important as how we respond to them. The Buddha rejects nothing and uses everything to teach and enlighten us. Beneath the surface tensions or distrust or ambition, greed or anger, guilt or fear, lies something deeper—a stillness that is undisturbed by the superficial waves. When we act from this place something within us responds and it also responds in those with whom we relate: Buddha recognizes Buddha. It still takes a great deal of effort, energy and compassionate awareness, i.e., meditation, to do this and to do it effectively. “Forget the selfish self for a little and allow the mind to remain natural for this is very close to the Mind that seeks the Way.”⁵

Meditation must be done daily and in all facets of our lives. This meditation is the forgetting of the selfish self, not holding on to being hurt or angry, proud, friendly, compassionate, self-righteous, fearful, adequate or inadequate. Let all these things arise and let them go without clinging to or suppressing any of them. This is not an easy task because we have learned through many lifetimes to act on these manifestations of the self. If we want to truly go deeper and know the Cosmic Buddha for ourselves then we have no choice but to willingly give up our clinging to all selfish forms. These forms that currently bind us, however, are the source of our freedom. They are as a door which, while we cling to our suffering, remains closed; yet in our willingness to embrace and accept this selfish self, the door opens to genuine selflessness and a personal knowledge of something bigger and more wonderful than anything we can imagine or dream about. Buddhism does not require that we get rid of the selfish self, only that we do not indulge or suppress it. Out of that continual effort, the selfishness is converted into the Buddha Nature. Our realization of It will come and go and in the comings and the returnings our relationship to It will change, as will our relationships to all things both animate and inanimate.

When we chop onions we may have tears in our eyes and this may temporarily cloud our vision; we still have the responsibility to waste neither time nor the onion, nor chop our finger. Putting meditation into practice is just this. It requires being still within as we chop the onion. To get caught by the fear of possibly chopping our fingers or, through lack of awareness, to cut ourselves is to fall out of the stillness. Stop. Follow the breath up the spine as you inhale and down the sternum as you exhale and continue with the onion or go and bandage the finger. Do what needs to be done. Whether it is dealing with sickness or death, driving a car or simply wiping the dust from the table, it requires the same quality of meditation—awareness and a willingness to do better. We cannot clean the table effectively unless we can see where it is dirty; and so within ourselves we have to see where the dust of fears, greeds, angers, guilts, opinions, etc., have knocked us out of that fundamentally still place and know that this very dust contains all of the Buddha Nature and is not for one moment separate or apart from it.

Intellectual work also needs the application of meditation. To sift through the morass of information we have been fed and to allow what is relevant and useful to manifest itself naturally is to put meditation into practice. This same effort must also be used in working through misunderstandings and figuring out what it is that we and others have not understood. It is easy to get ourselves worked up over these misunderstandings or to ignore important points that need explanation. As meditation deepens, something nags at us not to ignore misunderstandings or to get bothered by them; just patiently persist when the opportunity arises. Learning to meditate will not make everything simple, easy, effortless, uncomplicated and efficient. Reality is bigger than that; life is more complex.

There is a persistent myth that meditation will make you a superman. On a spiritual level it will put you in touch with the certain knowledge that there is Something Indestructible, the Unborn and Undying, and that it is possible to be in contact with this limitless energy. However, It is not available for selfish use unless you want to create a hell for yourself. It is subject to the Laws of the Universe,⁶ which include the Precepts. It is available through gratitude and respect. All this naturally unfolds through meditation and its application. However, no matter how far one goes in meditation, one still remains human; there are physical limitations, emotions, thoughts, feelings, times of difficulty and times of stress. One continually comes around again to the beginning, standing there naked and unashamed before the Lord of the House, and out of the ignorance and the willingness to “sit up straight in the presence of the Buddha,”⁷ compassion, love and wisdom have already manifested themselves. To be completely human is itself the manifestation of the Buddha Nature. This is realized by putting meditation into practice. Out of that place of stillness, the Buddha Himself participates in both the suffering and the joy and is completely unmoved by either.

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1. Great Master Dogen, “Genjo-koan” (“The Problem of Everyday Life”), in *Zen is Eternal Life*, 4th ed., by Roshi P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett (Mt. Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, 1999), p. 205.
2. See *The Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity*, comp. Rev. Master P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, M.O.B.C., 2nd ed. rev. (Mt. Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, 1990), p. 112.
3. Any spiritual problem or obstacle we think separates us from the Eternal.
4. For the Buddhist Precepts, see pp. 71–83.
5. Dogen, “Gakudo-yojinshu” (“Important Aspects of Zazen”), in *Zen is Eternal Life*, by Jiyu-Kennett, p. 164.

6. The Five Laws of the Universe:

The physical world is not answerable to my personal will.

The Law of Change.

The Law of Karma is inevitable and inexorable.

Without fail evil is vanquished and good prevails; this too is
inexorable.

The intuitive knowledge of Buddha Nature occurs to all men.

7. Dogen, “Shushogi” (“Training and Enlightenment”), in *Zen is Eternal Life*, by Jiyu-Kennett, p. 96.