



Introduction to Buddhism Course

Week 1



1. Commitment and patience

If you are really interested in seeing changes to your life we recommend that you try the following things.

- to come to the whole of the course;
- to meditate 6 out of 7 days a week - even if this is just for 10 minutes a day.

You could see the meditation sessions that the course includes as your treat - to give yourself permission to sit and allow the mind to settle; to allow yourself space in which to let go of some of the business of the day. There will probably be times when you come up against some resistance to meditating - you may not feel like it or you may think "What's the point?". This is where patience is required, seeing that to change ourselves takes time and consistent effort. It is helpful to commit to the practice and allow this commitment to take you through the ups and downs.

2. Meditation posture

We can see the meditation that we'll be doing on this course as the practical aspect of practising Buddhism. Before doing anything else, we must first learn how best to sit for meditation. There are two main principles to posture:

- That you are upright and stable;
- That you are comfortable and relaxed.

Bearing these needs in mind, you can either sit in a chair, or else on the floor using cushions to find the right posture. On cushions you can use an astride or a cross-legged posture. However you decide to sit, remember that the two principles above are the ones that count!

If you are sitting on cushions, consider:

- Cushion height;
- Knee support (if sitting cross legged) - remember that, ideally, the knees need to be lower than the hips;

- Hand support, to prevent the weight of the arms from dragging the shoulders down;
- Ankle support (if you are sitting astride the cushions and your ankles ache).

In sitting on a chair, consider:

- Back support;
- Hand support;
- Your feet should be flat on the floor or cushion.

3. Starting to meditate

This week we'll begin to look at meditation through cultivating an awareness of our bodies. Body awareness is very important in meditation; in fact, we can see it as the foundation of all meditation practices.

In the body awareness practice we simply bring awareness to different areas of the body and notice what is going on there. We also notice when the mind has become interested in something else. Particularly, we notice thoughts; when we notice that our awareness is with thought we bring it back to the body, gently and without judgment.

Body the root of stillness

As we sit in our chosen meditation posture, although there are movements of the breath and other slight movements of the body, the body in general is still. We can use this stillness in our practice. The body is solid and has weight - this can be acknowledged, and the more we acknowledge it the more grounded we can feel.

The other thing that can happen in this posture is that the contents of the mind come more into focus. We become more aware of the thoughts that occupy us, and our feelings and emotions. We may be quite surprised at how unruly the contents of the mind are, but this is quite natural. Up until now how much time have you spent just sitting and not doing anything in particular? There are a lot of aspects of our experience that have been waiting to be acknowledged by awareness and now they have come to make their presence known!

Shifting from thoughts to body

As we acknowledge the stillness of the body, we begin to experience it fully. We can also learn how to shift our awareness. This means that that, as we notice the thoughts pulling us here and there, we also acknowledge that the body is still and we begin deliberately to bring our awareness down into it. The more you allow the awareness to rest with the body the more you experience its stillness.

4. The 'Three Jewels'

The highest values for a Buddhist are the Three Jewels. Whatever country Buddhists practice in, whatever style they follow, all Buddhists try to bring these values more and more into the centre of their lives. They are:

- The Buddha – who was a man who lived in India roughly 2,500 years ago. The 'Buddha' is a title, not a name, and it means something like 'he who knows or understands', or 'the awakened one'. His name was Siddhartha Gotama, but people began to call him the Buddha some time after he gained Enlightenment or Buddhahood.

The Buddha said that others could do what he did – we can all become Enlightened if we make the effort – so the Buddha Jewel also represents our own potential. Practising Buddhism means gradually realizing our potential for Enlightenment.

- The Dharma – has a number of related meanings. It means the Truth that the Buddha realized; his teachings, which are his attempts to communicate that truth; and also the various practices which lead to Enlightenment.
- The Sangha – the community of those who are trying to share in the Buddha's insight, or have gained insight themselves.

We sometimes use the expression '**Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels**' to indicate that a practising Buddhist has chosen to express his or her profound confidence in them – in a sense, deciding to live their lives with reference to them. 'Going for Refuge' isn't meant to suggest escaping from the everyday world. Instead, it refers to living in that world through a commitment to the example of the Buddha, the profundity of his teaching and the example of the spiritual community.

5. A little more on Enlightenment

As this is the goal Buddhists are trying to reach, you'll want to know what it is. It's very hard to describe it though, as it's outside our usual range of experiences – a bit like trying to describe the taste of chocolate to someone who's never eaten it. Still, we have to try, and the Buddha and other enlightened people have given us some clues to what it might be like. Throughout the centuries over which Buddhism has been practised there have been a huge number of approaches and a bewildering mass of literature. In a sense, the problems for Westerners who first encounter Buddhism are both which part of this huge tradition to focus upon, and then how to make sense of what has been handed down to us in Buddhist literature. On this course we'll use a relatively simple model to give some structure to our discussions – this model is known as the 'Threefold Path' of **ethics, meditation and wisdom**.

Whatever model we choose to help us understand the Buddha, his teaching and the Buddhist community, the really important thing is that we can relate what we learn to **our own direct experience**. This can't be stated too strongly, as the alternative is to exercise 'blind faith' to a greater or lesser extent. It's also the reason why Buddhists practice meditation, taking time out of their normal, busy lives to examine that direct experience and see what they find!

6. Recommended reading:

Change your Mind – by Paramananda
Who is the Buddha? – by Sangharakshita
What is the Dharma? - by Sangharakshita

If you would like to be led through the meditation practices when you are alone you could consider buying the led CDs – 'Body Scan' and the 'Mindfulness of Breathing'.

7. Homework

- To try to meditate 6 out of 7 times a week – even if only for 5 or 10 minutes;
- To bring your awareness to a daily task such as washing up or cleaning your teeth. Try to experience the sensations that arise, the water on your hands as you wash up, its temperature. Also notice what thoughts arise whilst doing the task. Do they take you away from the task? Are they drawing you into the past or future? Just notice these and come back to the bodily experience of whatever you are doing.