

This handout is intended to give you a little bit more background to some of the topics that we'll cover on this one-day course. It will hopefully support you in carrying on your interest with the principles of Buddhism, and the practice of meditation, after the course. Let's start with some very practical things:

## **1. 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.

## 2. Starting to meditate

On the course we shall 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.

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!

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.

## 3. The Buddha's Quest

In order to begin to explore Buddhism we need to start with the Buddha! Siddhartha Gotama, the founder of the whole tradition, could be described as a young prince (his father was the chieftain of a clan called the Shakyas). Siddhartha lived roughly 2,500 years ago, on the borders of modern-day India and Nepal. How he came to become the Buddha is a fascinating story that goes deeply into the human condition, as we would say these days.

Although a young, wealthy, healthy and happy man, Siddhartha became preoccupied – we might say obsessed – with the question of human suffering. Traditionally, we are told by Buddhist scriptures that he saw four fairly normal things as if for the first time – these are referred to as the 'Four Sights' and were experiences that apparently shook Siddhartha to the core. The Four Sights were as follows:

1. Ageing (as demonstrated by an old and decrepit man seen in the street);
2. Sickness (seen, in a similar way, in the form of somebody with the symptoms of serious illness);
3. Death (A corpse being carried, uncovered, through the streets);
4. A seeker after the truth – this sight came in the form of a ‘sadhu’, a man who had turned away from mundane society in order to seek earnestly for something more meaningful).

Although Siddhartha would have known very well of the existence of these four things, the point is that he really took them to heart. He fully realised that nobody, whatever their position in the world, can hope to escape from the first three. We might say that he escaped from the habitual denial of these truths to which we're often (or even usually) inclined. Can you relate to this – do you really accept the inevitability of your own ageing, sickness and death? As for the fourth sight, we might relate to the ‘seeker after the truth’ in terms of anyone we've encountered (whether personally or through the media) who has inspired us by their aspiration to something bigger and more meaningful than the usual mundane concerns of life – work, success, money, status and the like. Do you have any such people that have inspired you at some point?

#### **4. Siddhartha's Path to Awakening**

Inspired by the Four Sights, Siddhartha took the radical decision to give up everything that was dear to him – including his wife and baby son – to leave his comfortable existence and deliberately wander, unrecognised and homeless. This turning point is traditionally called his Going Forth, and can be understood in both literal and symbolic terms. In order to follow in his footsteps, we don't actually have to leave our families and move to the wilderness, but we do have to be prepared to leave unhelpful aspects of our old selves behind.

Having left a life of unusual ease and luxury, Siddhartha now opted for exactly the opposite. For several years he practised ‘austerities’ – in other words, various extreme practices designed to push his body and mind to the limits of their endurance. At the time, this approach was widely thought to be necessary for the gaining of any significant ‘spiritual’ insight, and Siddhartha built a reputation for being one of the most extreme and dedicated practitioners of this path of self-mortification. Sadly, the path didn't yield the hoped-for outcome – Siddhartha's awakening to the true reality of things – but it did very nearly lead to his death from starvation and exhaustion. Just in time to hang on to his life, he abandoned his extreme practices, to the disappointment and disgust of his many fellow-travellers.

There now follows an important and fascinating part of the story. Siddhartha, now at a loss as to the way forward on his quest for meaning, remembered how, when he was younger, he had reached a mental state of tranquillity and profound happiness, quite by accident. As a boy, sitting comfortably under a rose-apple tree, he had been watching his father taking part in ploughing a field. Without any deliberate effort, he suddenly found himself in a strange and

delightful state of mind in which he not only felt still, relaxed and contented, but also experienced a deep insight into the fragility of the lives of the small creatures disturbed by the plough. He realised that the route to insight could be the opening of the mind through the medium of meditation, and vowed that he would dedicate himself to that pursuit. After many days and nights of unbroken meditation, on the full moon night of May, full insight arose in Siddhartha and he finally achieved full Awakening from the sleep-like state that characterises human beings to a greater or lesser degree. He had been completely transformed to become the 'Buddha'; what is more, he had identified the route to transformation that would subsequently allow many other human beings to realise awakening, and this would eventually become the foundation of the whole, vast Buddhist tradition.

## **5. Siddhartha Becomes the Awakened One**

As Awakening 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. However, 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 to communicating such clues. In a sense, the problems for Westerners who first encounter Buddhism are firstly 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. This course is obviously far too short to do justice to the question, "What is Awakening?". More importantly – and this was a problem that vexed the newly-awakened Siddhartha – his experience of Reality was a direct one, and he wondered how (or, indeed, whether) it could possibly be communicated to other human beings.

The Buddha, we are told by traditional accounts, pondered the questions of whether and how his experience could be described to others, in order that they might be guided in the same direction. Fortunately for us (and for the millions of others who have followed his teachings over the intervening centuries) he decided that this could be done, although necessarily by indirect means. He recognised that people are very different, and need to be brought closer to Reality by a wide range of approaches. For the next 45 years, he taught a very wide range of people, from kings to peasants and even criminals, using a range of approaches based on his recognition of what those individuals most needed.

## **6. The Buddha's Teaching on Ethics**

One important aspect of the Buddha's teaching lies in the area of ethics. Let's be clear – this isn't the same thing as what might be called 'morality' in other faiths – it doesn't have anything to do with our being told how we should behave. Instead, we can summarise the Buddhist ethical code in the maxim "actions have consequences". The Buddha recognised that all things arise in

dependence on pre-conditions, and as part of this universal truth every human action – absolutely without exception – has its resulting outcomes.

This ethical dimension of the broader principle of ‘conditionality’ is often described as the Law of Karma. ‘Karma’ generally means action, but specifically an action that is a matter of human choice. In other words, karma is concerned with our intentions, so we can say that Buddhist ethics are the ‘ethics of intention’. It’s very important to recognise that there are various other sorts of actions that also have consequences. For example, being exposed to a virus can cause us to become ill, but this is unlikely to have anything to do with our intentions or the way we exercise them. It’s therefore important to remember that the law of karma is only one aspect of the wider law of conditionality.

In considering how karma affects us, we can simply say that an ethical (or ‘skilful’) action (in other words, one carried out as the expression of ethical intentions) is one that results in happiness, for oneself and for others. An unethical (or ‘unskilful’) action is one that results in suffering.

There are three kinds of ethical action, according to Buddhist thought – physical action, speech, and acts of the mind. The relevance of the last of these is that an ethical thought will result in happiness, while an unethical thought will result in suffering. Wishing someone well, for example, makes us feel happy, and we’ll probably do things to try to help that person. If we wish harm to someone, however, such a state of mind is an unpleasant one, and if we act from that state, we’ll cause more suffering.

## 7. The Five Ethical Precepts

Fortunately, the Buddhist tradition provides us with a practical ethical framework. This serves to remind us of those areas of behaviour in which we can easily find ourselves acting unskilfully or (to take the opposite view) where we can positively undertake to try to be more skilful. The Five Precepts can be regarded as ‘training principles’, which are stated in both negative and positive forms (in the following section, the positive forms are set out in *italics*). Notice that the emphasis is on your own voluntary choice, as suggested by the repeated phrase “I undertake...”:

1. I undertake to abstain from harming living beings.  
*With deeds of loving-kindness, I purify my body.*
2. I undertake to abstain from taking the not-given.  
*With open-handed generosity, I purify my body.*
3. I undertake to abstain from sexual misconduct,  
*With stillness, simplicity and contentment, I purify my body.*
4. I undertake to abstain from false speech.  
*With truthful communication, I purify my speech.*

5. I undertake to abstain from taking intoxicants.  
*With mindfulness clear and radiant, I purify my mind.*

The **first precept** encapsulates them all – if you're practising it then you're practising all of the precepts. The basis of Buddhist ethics is non-harm, in both the physical and the psychological senses.

The **second precept** includes stealing, but also includes the subtler act of taking things that are not freely given, such as using up other people's time and energy against their wishes. This is a common area where we can easily act unskillfully!

Because the area of sexual relationships is one in which our emotions can be very strong, the Buddha devoted the **third precept** to it. It's the first precept applied to the sexual arena. At the more obvious extreme, it's very unskillful to commit rape or to be unfaithful to our regular partner. However, we can also consider the subtler ways in which we might allow our sexual behaviour to cause harm, for example by being over-possessive or deliberately exploiting our partner.

The **fourth precept** recognises that Buddhists try to find and then live by the truth, so to tell lies – even small ones – would be to go against that commitment. Not telling the truth causes confusion and mistrust because it undermines human relations. Of course the truth is sometimes painful to hear so we also need to speak with kindness and at an appropriate time. The 'speech precept' is one that many people find particularly demanding, because human communications are so often complex and unskillful remarks can 'slip out' because we haven't stopped to think about their consequences!

The principle behind the **fifth precept** is awareness. Intoxicants tend to make us less aware, which blurs our ethical sense – it's easier to break the other precepts when we're intoxicated. Obviously alcohol and recreational drugs are included here but so are subtler intoxicants, such as the beauty of another person, or intoxication with youth. By the way, many Buddhists avoid alcohol completely, but there's obviously no prohibition. It's up to you, as for all the other precepts, to examine the consequences of your actions – in this case, the effect of the intoxicants you use and the extent to which they cause you to act less skillfully.

## 8. 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 one or more of the led CDs – for example, 'Body Scan', 'Mindfulness of Breathing' and 'The Heart'.

## 9. What to do after today

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

- to meditate 6 out of 7 days a week - even if this is just for 10 minutes;
- to consider coming on a 'Buddhism Level 2' evening course.

You could see your meditation sessions 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.

If you're interested in the next level of course ('Buddhism Level 2'), please check at reception, or on our web site, for details.

We hope to see you back at the Manchester Buddhist Centre before too long!