

1. Siddhartha's quest

Last week we heard how Prince Siddhartha, who was eventually to become the Buddha ('the awakened one') was deeply troubled by the 'four sights' – namely the inevitability of (1) sickness, (2) ageing and (3) death – and also saw (4) the possibility of responding to these three by searching for a meaningful way, as symbolised by a 'holy man'. The overwhelming conclusion for Siddhartha was that, seeing the fate of human beings so starkly, he had to act radically and as a matter of urgency – to put himself outside the norms of mundane existence and dedicate himself to discovering real meaning.

Acting on this impulse, 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, roaming the wild countryside of northern India, 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 though, 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.

So what was the nature of the Buddha's Awakening? In trying to answer this question we need to make a crucial point. In a sense, his experience can be described relatively easily, if we only use factual, intellectual language. However, this is no more meaningful than trying to describe colours to someone who has been blind from birth. The full import of the Buddha's realisation can only be appreciated through direct experience, which is precisely what Buddhists ever since have sought – and what many have succeeded in gaining. Awakening is within reach of all human beings, as long as they are prepared to make enough of a change in their world view to be ready to embrace it. In subsequent weeks of the course we shall try to gain some idea, albeit indirectly, of what it would be like to see the world through Awakened eyes.

2. The Middle Way

We have seen how Siddhartha explored the opposite extremes of his former life of indulgence and worldly pleasures, and the rigorous self-mortification that very nearly led to his death. Fortunately he realised, just in time, that neither extreme held the possibility of the breakthrough he was seeking – at this point he decided to take a more moderate path. It's very important to understand that this idea of the 'Middle Way' also has symbolic meaning – we could say, for example, that we are unlikely to grow spiritually if our conditions are either too easy or too difficult. We need to establish a healthy balance – and in this the practice of meditation can help us to understand where we are, what our habitual tendencies are, and in which direction we want to move.

In another sense, the principle of the Middle Way is important in Buddhist thinking because it helps Buddhists to take a pragmatic, balanced view of the available options. Life is clearly complicated – it can be extremely difficult to understand the factors that influence our own behaviour, so what chance do we really have of understanding the motivations of others? Despite this complexity, we like to think that we have some valid understanding – in other words we possess 'views'. In Buddhism these are seen as being major contributors to our failure to have a real understanding of things – in other words, to our ignorance or delusion. Against this background, it can be a dangerous thing to take too strident a view in one direction or the other; it's unlikely that these extreme positions do justice to the complexity of the situation. The middle way can therefore be interpreted through many, very different examples – but what they all have in common is that maintaining

balance and breadth of outlook is always important if desirable change is to be possible.

3. The Mindfulness of Breathing practice

This week we begin to look at the Mindfulness of Breathing practice, the first classical Buddhist meditation we'll be looking at (and, according to tradition, the one that Siddhartha was practising in the run-up to his Awakening). In this practice we are actively practising awareness, using the natural process of our breathing as an object.

It's really important that the starting point of the Mindfulness of Breathing is a period of body awareness, of exactly the sort that we briefly looked at last week. If our mindfulness is weak because we are 'living in our heads' and distracted by thoughts, we need to make a conscious effort to bring our awareness down into our body, preferably into our abdomen. Having taken up a suitable posture that is both relaxed and alert, we could spend a little while reflecting on how we are stably, safely supported by the whole mass of the Earth beneath us. We could also reflect that our upright spine is reaching up into space, encouraging feelings of spaciousness and expansiveness.

From this well-established contact with your body in general, allow your breathing to come into the fore, perhaps starting with a few deliberately deep breaths. After doing this, however, you need not try to breathe in any particular way – you might remember that the breath is a normal, very physical bodily process. It comes in and goes out naturally and you don't need to change it. Part of practising mindfulness is to experience whatever comes to our awareness non-judgmentally, so however the breath is, that's fine. It may be long or short, shallow or deep, rough or smooth – the practice is simply to notice each breath just as it is.

Stage 1

You can now begin stage one of the formal practice. In this you allow your awareness to rest with the breathing and, as the outward breath reaches its end, you silently and gently count 'one'. Your breath comes in again, then goes out and, at the very end of the outward breath, you count 'two'. Try to continue in this way up to a count of 'ten' then, after the subsequent breath, begin at 'one' again. Allow the breath to follow its own rhythm and try to keep the counting soft and light. Remember that counting is just a simple marker that allows you to notice more fully a specific point in the breathing process (in this stage the ends of the out-breaths).

Stage 2

In stage 2 the breath continues to follow its own rhythm, but we make the quite subtle change to counting at the beginning of the in-breaths. In other words, we count 'one', then immediately breathe in, then breathe out. Notice the very slight gap between breaths, then count 'two', breathe in and breathe out. Again, we continue in this way all the way up to 'ten', then back to 'one'.

The reason for the slight change of emphasis is that, whereas the technique for stage one has a calming, pacifying effect, placing our count at the start of the in-breath provides energy for developing awareness of our breathing.

There are two more stages to the complete Mindfulness of Breathing, but we can complete the picture next week and just concentrate on stages 1 and 2 for now.

Dealing with distraction

As soon as we embark on a meditation like the Mindfulness of Breathing we inevitably notice just how hard it can be to keep to the very simple instructions above! It's quite normal for most people to become quite seriously distracted, even in such a short space of time. We may be distracted by sounds or physical sensations, but the most usual cause of distraction is thoughts; thoughts triggered by other thoughts, by emotions or by feelings. This is completely normal – in fact, it's only when we start meditating that we realise the scale of it, and perhaps feel that it's out of control.

Each distraction (or chain of distractions) happens when the 'scenery' – everything in our awareness *apart from* the intended object of our meditation becomes more interesting than the 'path' – our ongoing attempt to follow our breath. Occasionally this may be valid – we're in danger or we see something really important about our lives – but more often than not the distractions are relatively unimportant and not concerned with the present moment. Of course, you will need to decide this for yourself!

We might wonder whether we can do anything about this challenge of constant distraction. The answer is 'yes' - we can stay aware of whatever experience unfolds, whether or not it's intended or expected. In other words, we allow ourselves to notice what happens even when we go off the 'path' and into the 'scenery'. When we realise that this has happened we can actually congratulate ourselves for noticing our deviation from the 'path', then simply return to it with a non-judgemental awareness. To put it another way, we don't 'beat ourselves up'! In fact, we can say that, every time we have recognised and responded to our distraction, we have had a small moment of insight into our own minds – so this is actually a very positive thing!

With practice, we should find that regular meditation gradually generates more mindfulness and more concentrated awareness.

4. What you could do in the week ahead

- Try to do some 10 minutes' meditation on 6 out of 7 days – ideally, a little body awareness as a foundation for a period of the Mindfulness of Breathing.
- Notice your extremes of ease on the one hand and effort on the other – and be aware of the option to take the 'middle way'.