

1. Welcome to the course!

It's great that you've decided to come on this short introduction to Buddhism and meditation. These notes, available from the Manchester Buddhist Centre web site (www.manchesterbuddhistcentre.org.uk), are intended to complement the teaching you'll receive on the course, and certainly not to be a comprehensive introduction to the subject in their own right. There are other recommended resources – both books and web sites – and you'll be given a handout listing these at the start of the course.

2. The Three Jewels and the Triratna Buddhist Community

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 – 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 Gautama, but people began to call him the Buddha some time after he gained awakening (or enlightenment or Buddhahood).

The Buddha said that others could do what he did – we can all become awakened if we make the effort – so the Buddha Jewel also represents our own potential. Practising Buddhism allows us gradually to realise our potential for awakening.

- 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 that he recommended which lead to awakening.
- The Sangha – the community of those who are trying to share in the Buddha's insight, or have gained insight themselves. This term can be applied to either the present time (i.e. the 'community'), or the past (the Buddhist lineage).

This course is run by members of the Triratna Buddhist Community, a worldwide organisation that was founded in the UK in the late 1960s by Sangharakshita, an English Buddhist monk who had spent 20 years in India before realising that a new approach to Buddhism was needed in the West. 'Triratna' means simply 'Three Jewels'; we recognise that these are the things that are most precious to us, which we need to describe as directly and straight-forwardly as we can in our teaching. Those of us who are teachers therefore do our best to describe (and exemplify) the core principles and values of the Dharma. These principles and values are independent of any particular historic or cultural emphasis, as we believe strongly that what the Buddha taught simply concerns what it is to be human, and is therefore equally valid at any time and in any culture.

3. Prince Siddhartha and the Four Sights

In order to begin to explore Buddhism we need to start with the Buddha (we'll come back to his personal story at various points throughout the course). Siddhartha Gautama, 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 person 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. Why do Buddhists meditate?

One of the practical things that we'll be looking at on this course is meditation. In the Triratna Buddhist Community we see Buddhism primarily as a practical matter – you might say a set of tools that are all useful in bringing about positive change. As everybody knows, one of the most powerful tools in the Buddhist toolkit is meditation; it's certainly practised on a regular basis by most Buddhist practitioners. However, do we understand why this is? What is it about meditation that makes it such a significant practice towards trying to change ourselves?

Hopefully, the answer to this important question will gradually become clear as the course progresses and we do a fair bit of meditation. For now, we might say that meditation is about awareness – at a mundane level, of (1) ourselves, (2) other people and (3) the world around us. The first of these three types of awareness involves making the space to experience ourselves more fully – having a clearer understanding of the sort of person we are, and what things influence us. Common sense suggests that this sort of self-awareness is an absolute prerequisite if we're to have any chance of working on ourselves to make positive changes.

Awareness of other people is obviously important too, because humans are social beings by nature and, as we all know, there's a huge amount to be gained by understanding others better and communicating with them more effectively. As for the world around us, Buddhists would say that, whether we know it or not, we're connected with that world in an intimate, incredibly complex way. This being the case, the more fully we can experience our connections with the world, the better able we're likely to be to make a positive contribution to it.

To use a slogan once popular at the Manchester Buddhist Centre, "Awareness is revolutionary"!

5. Meditation posture

Before doing anything else in meditation, we must first learn how best to sit. There are two simple principles to posture, which have been described together as 'relaxed diligence':

- 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 – there will be an ideal height for your body shape, which you probably need to find by trial and error;
- 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 a cushion.

6. Body awareness and stillness

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. In this context, we particularly notice thoughts; when we notice that our awareness has drifted into 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 more 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 can remember that the body is relatively still, and begin deliberately to bring our awareness down into it. The more you allow your awareness to rest with the body, the more you experience its stillness. This approach can be very rewarding, as the stillness and physicality of the body act as 'antidotes' to the restlessness, insubstantiality and sometimes dizzy pace of the mind.

7. What you could do in the week ahead

- Try to do some 'body awareness' meditation on six out of seven days – even if only for five or ten minutes;
- Notice any responses in yourself to any of the Four Sights. You may feel ill, or notice that somebody close to you is looking older, or hear that someone you once knew has died. You might also feel inspired by somebody who, in their own way, is 'seeking after truth' (this certainly doesn't have to be in a Buddhist context!). You might even be prepared to say something about the effect of such experiences on yourself at next week's class.