



A Creative Response to Uncertain Times – Introduction to Buddhism Course

The situation we are in

We called this course ‘A Creative Response to Uncertain Times’ as it is a difficult and challenging time that we are living through. Illness and death are very much in evidence and, at some level, the current situation reminds us that those facts of life are *always* there. At some point we will get ill, as will those we love. At some point we will die, as will those we love.

One of the things that particularly characterises this time is uncertainty and instability. No one is quite sure what is around the corner. Again, this is always the case. Things are never entirely stable. The nature of things hasn’t fundamentally changed, it is just more plainly obvious at the moment. It’s in your face. Within the space of ten weeks all our lives have changed utterly.

This challenges us existentially. It makes us wonder about our place in the world, about what we are doing here. It might make us wonder how we can free ourselves from the angst and fear we may be experiencing.

We tend to attach ourselves to things and people that aren’t permanent. This is okay in itself but when they change we don’t like it. It’s deeply disturbing because we are invested in things staying the same.

To attain happiness then, we are left with two options:

1. We can make existence conform with our desires, so we get what we want, when we want it.
2. We can transform our desires so that they are in harmony with existence – in harmony with the way things are.

It’s true that the second option is difficult, but the first is impossible. It is this second option that Buddhism is concerned with, i.e. effecting a profound transformation of our desires. Let us turn now to the origins of Buddhism.

The Buddha

Two-thousand, five-hundred years ago Siddhartha Gautama saw four sights that communicated to him the truth of unsatisfactoriness, the fact that life as it’s normally lived is never totally fulfilling, and that a new way of living needs to be found. The first three sights were of an old man, a sick man and a dead man. The fourth sight was of a wandering mendicant, a searcher for the truth (*shramana*), representing the possibility of an entirely new mode of living.

His appreciation of the significance of these four sights led him to go forth as a *shramana* himself. After leaving home he wandered around North-eastern India learning what he could through his engagement with the spiritual teachers that lived in the area. Eventually, after a six-year struggle, seated alone beneath a tree, he became the *Awakened One* – The Buddha.



Awakening is described in many ways. In simple terms we can think of it as a state of complete fulfilment, total freedom and unshakeable happiness.

Because of our natural cultural bias we tend to try and understand the Buddha in terms of the categories of thought that we are used to. However, it's important to recognise that the category of 'Buddha' is not one that we have in our culture. We tend to think in terms of 'god' and 'human beings' but the Buddha doesn't belong in either of those categories. Therefore, in the Buddhist tradition, he is not considered to be god, a son of god, an incarnation of god, or a prophet of god. However, he was not just an ordinary human being either, even an exceptional human being – he was an *Awakened* human being.

Awakening is a state of wisdom, compassion and creative energy. Wisdom is usually spoken of as a profound awareness of the way things really are. Sometimes, to illustrate this, the Buddha expresses his experience of Awakening in terms of a light that drives away the darkness of ignorance; hence he is also known as the *Enlightened One*. His compassion manifested primarily in enabling others to experience the happiness and freedom that he enjoyed through teaching them a path to this state. Because the Buddha lives in harmony with the way things are he enjoyed unimpeded spontaneous creative energy.

Within the Buddha's teaching there are some key principles that express his wisdom. One of these principles is that all things change. In these very strange and distressing times this is more apparent than ever. Instability and uncertainty are in evidence everywhere and we may see the truth of the impermanence and change more clearly than we normally do.

Over the five weeks of this course we are going to be exploring the following areas of Buddhist teaching and practice:

week 1	the Buddha mindfulness of breathing meditation
week 2	mind: reactive & creative connecting with inspiration
week 3	kindness meditation Buddhist ethics
week 4	meditation trouble shooting developing wisdom
week 5	spiritual community friendship

The Buddha's mode of communication was what is known as *ehipassiko* which means 'of the nature of a personal invitation.' In other words, the Buddha simply spoke of things in the way that he saw them and allowed others to make up their mind if they wanted to engage with his teachings and practices or not. Therefore, all that is required for your engagement with the course is an openness to life's experiences and an openness to exploring those experiences in the light of Buddhist teachings and practices.



Mindfulness of Breathing

One of the main meditation practices that the Buddha taught was the *Mindfulness of Breathing*. In this meditation practice we are endeavouring to be mindful of our breath. It's a simple, yet profound, practice that helps us cultivate awareness of what the mind actually is and what it does.

As well as this, by practising awareness of the breath, our various scattered energies will gather around it and this causes them to untangle and integrate. By practising the Mindfulness of Breathing regularly, we can experience ourselves becoming more together and more whole. This togetherness, wholeness and integration brings tranquillity and peace of mind.

How to do the practice

We do this practice by simply being aware of the breath in the body. In other words, we practise being mindful of our breathing.

Breathing is a natural process and we let it happen in its own way without trying to change it, force it or control it. We simply give our attention to it with the same kind of attitude that we might have when experiencing something in nature, like the wind moving through the branches of a tree, or waves breaking on a beach.

In this practice we're not trying to *think* about breathing, but rather to *feel* it. We're exploring the breath, being curious about the breath, being interested in the breath. It's not an idea about the breath we are concerned with, but an experience of the breath itself. As the poet says, '*Not an idea about the thing, but the thing itself.*'

Stages of the practice

To help us be aware of the breath, and to encourage a deepening and refinement of our experience of it, the practice is in stages.

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| stage 1 | mindful of the breath, with a count <i>after</i> the out-breath |
| stage 2 | mindful of the breath, with a count <i>before</i> the in-breath |
| stage 3 | simply mindful of the breath |
| stage 4 | mindful of the sensations at the point where you first feel the breath enter the body |

The count in the first two stages is a support to help you stay with the breath (the practice is not mindfulness of counting). In each of these first two stages, we count the breaths, up to ten cycles of in and out-breathing, and then we start the count again at one. The counting also helps us to notice if our mind wanders off.

If and when the mind wanders off, don't worry. Simply acknowledge that you have wandered off, and then return your attention to your breath (there is no benefit in giving yourself a hard time about it). If you are in one of the first two stages start the count again at 'one' after you come back to the breath.

Each time you notice that you have wandered off you move from unawareness to awareness. So, rather than thinking of the point where you notice that you have wandered off as a failure, think of it as a success!



Home practice this week

1. practise the Mindfulness of Breathing each day

Try to meditate at the same time each day if possible as establishing a routine is very supportive of your practice. Find a time and space where you won't be interrupted. I would recommend that you use the mp3 downloads to assist with your practice at home or you can time your practice by putting a time piece in front of you. You will find the mp3s on the following page on our website.

dublinbuddhistcentre.org/meditation-class-resources-for-download/

The led Mindfulness of Breathing to practise this week is track 2 on the mp3 downloads. If you don't use the mp3s for whatever reason do each stage of the practice for 5 minutes.

2. do one activity mindfully each day, e.g. washing your hands.

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thebuddhistcentre.com

At the moment The Buddhist Centre Online is running a special programme called *A Dharma Toolkit for Uncertain Times*.

thebuddhistcentre.com/stories/toolkit/

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windhorsepublications.com