



Towards a Creative Response to Troubled Times – Introduction to Buddhism Course

Mind: Reactive & Creative

Last week we looked at what it means to be mindful. When we engage with this practice we notice, amongst other things, that the mind pulls in a different direction to that which we set out on. As a result we find ourselves paying attention to something other than what we intended.

The mind tends to pull towards what it has done before. In other words, the mind reacts (i.e. *re-acts*). There is a stimulus, then a reaction. When functioning in this way the quality of the mind is *determined* by what stimulated it. You get an example of this with predictive texting, where your smartphone makes it really easy to use the same words that you have used before, rather than say something different. This reactivity arises from the force of habit.

However, the mind doesn't always function like this. It can also *create*. This is the mode of functioning where something *new* emerges independent of what stimulated it.

What we can see then is that the mind has two ways of functioning:

- the *reactive* mode
 - characterised by unawareness
 - sometimes likened to the state of drunkenness
- the *creative* mode
 - characterised by awareness

Buddhist practice is about moving from one to the other, from the reactive mode to the creative mode, and from the creative mode, to an ever more creative mode.

We make this transition through mindfulness practice; in particular by noticing what is happening and creating a space between the stimulus we receive, and our response to that stimulus. We do that by coming back to what we are directly experiencing when we notice that our attention has wandered away.

Preparation for Meditation

It is important to prepare well for meditation. What we are doing when we prepare is moving from *breadth* to *focus* – from a broader kind of awareness to a more focussed awareness. We can do this by checking in with, and experiencing directly, these difference aspects of our overall experience:

1. our *surroundings* (including sounds)
2. our *body* (including feelings in the body)
3. our *emotions*
4. our *thoughts*



By doing this we receive a more vivid sense of what is happening and can meditate more appropriately on the basis of that awareness. Learning to respond appropriately and creatively to what is actually happening, both in meditation and in life more generally, is a key skill that we develop when we practise the Dharma.

Inspiration

One other important aspect of preparation is *inspiration*. Inspiration is important because it exerts a counter force to that of habit. One key aspect of inspiration that we need to connect with is the conviction that developing ourselves through meditation is a real possibility for us.

This is what the Buddha represents. As well as being the historical teacher and founder of Buddhism, he also represents the ideal of human awakening. The Buddha can seem a bit distant, particularly if you've only just started to learn about him, so we can bring to mind human qualities that we'd like to embody more fully in our own lives. Qualities like kindness, resilience, fearlessness, contentment, trustworthiness and intelligence.

The important principle here – and this is what the Buddha as ideal epitomises – is having a sense of something that inspires us and that we can *grow into*. You get a sense of this in the Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer's poem *Roman Arches*.

Roman Arches

Inside the mighty Roman church the tourists stood crowded in the half dark.
Arch extended behind arch and no overview.
A few candle flames flickered.
An angel without a face embraced me
and whispered through the entire body:
"Do not be ashamed because you are human, be proud!
Inside you arch behind arch opens infinitely.
You will never be completed, and it is as it should be."
I was blinded by tears
and led out into the sun-gazing piazza
together with Mr. and Mrs. Jones,
Mr. Tanaka and Signora Sabatini
and inside them all
arch behind arch opened infinitely.

So it is important to contact this inspiration as part of our preparation for meditation. It is valuable to reflect on what we find inspiring and find some kind of symbol or emblem of that which we can bring to mind. This is what a Buddhist shrine represents. For your practice at home, you might like to find something for your meditation space that symbolises what you find inspiring. For example, an image, some flowers, some incense or a candle.

You might like to bring something to mind as you prepare for meditation like a thought, a poem, a phrase or word, a memory, a person or a story.

Just Sitting

After making the effort to direct the mind in meditation – in the case of the *mindfulness of breathing* by returning your attention to the breath – it is important to spend a period of time *just sitting*. What we do when we just sit is simply sit with whatever is happening without making any effort to change it. We are simply being receptive.



Home Practice this Week

1. Practise the *Mindfulness of Breathing* each day, paying particular attention to the *preparation* at the beginning and the *just sitting* afterwards.
2. Find two ways to *reduce input* and create space in your life. Here are some ideas of things you might like to try:
 - notice how you use your smartphone
 - turn it off for periods of time
 - turn off notifications
 - delete apps that are distracting
 - unsubscribe from group emails
 - if you are working on a computer, close down programs that you are no longer using
 - turn the radio off
 - do nothing but eat when you are eating
 - do nothing but drink when you are drinking
 - put away reading material
 - tidy away clutter
 - turn the television off by a particular time in the evening
 - read a book instead of looking at a screen
3. You might also like to reflect on what you find inspiring and try to bring something to the place where you meditate to remind you of that.

Online material on meditation posture

You will find some excellent material on meditation posture on Kamalashila's website.
kamalashila.co.uk/blog-2/styled-2/

Other online material and books

Much of the material is based on a talk by Sangharakshita which you can find here, on Free Buddhist Audio.
freebuddhistaudio.com/audio/details?num=31

The DBC's online programme.
dublinbuddhistcentre.org/online

If you wish to make a donation to the DBC you can do so on the following page on our website.
dublinbuddhistcentre.org/donate

At this time Windhorse Publications, the publishing house associated with our Buddhist community, is offering special promotions, including a free ebook each week.
windhorsepublications.com