



THE DISCIPLINE OF LETTING GO:

THE VIEW AND PRACTICE OF MEDITATION

Transcript of a talk given at the first meditation session of the Shambhala Institute's Summer Program, June 18, 2002.

by Richard John

What is meditation?

Good morning, everyone, and welcome. I'd like to begin by giving a brief overview of the purpose of this meditation practice, which Michael [Chender] laid the ground for very beautifully in his talk earlier this morning. I was struck by the idea of calling the practice "profound relaxation," as he did. I think this is extremely appropriate, because

meditation is indeed about relaxing, opening up, and letting go. Meditation also has a sense of boundary, or container, and precision, which is very necessary for setting the stage, creating the conditions.

There are many, many experiences and practices which people call meditation, and I think for many of us that word is often accompanied by a sense of vagary—in fact, to some of us meditation *is* vagary. But in this case it isn't that at all; it is actually very precise.

The form of meditation I will be introducing this morning is practiced within the Buddhist traditions. There are many subtle variations on this form, and there is no one right way, of course. This type of meditation is generally referred to as mindfulness-awareness practice. A more technical term is the Sanskrit word *shamatha*, which is usually translated as "calm abiding."

In this case, meditation is understood to be a kind of taming process, a way of taming the wild mind and letting the speedy, agitated, busy mental worlds that we inhabit settle to the earth. Relaxation is a natural process of settling and letting our natural gravity take its course. But at the same time it is a very wakeful process; we are alert and attentive.

This form of meditation is often associated with Buddhist traditions, but it is actually much older than Buddhism. It has no particular origin; it has probably been around as long as any form of civilization. But it is the form that was used by the historical Buddha in his own quest.

It is important to remember that the Buddha was not a Buddhist. He was quite a radical spiritual explorer. What he actually was engaged in, in his native India 2,500

years ago, was a kind of action learning. He brought his own profound insight to the goal of getting to the bottom of what it means to be a human being—or waking up to that, you could say. The word *Buddha* simply means “awake.” So that is the simplest way to think of this process. It is a process of waking up. It is also helpful to think of it as a learning discipline.

Hearing, contemplating, meditating

Traditionally, waking up is described as a three-fold process of hearing, contemplating, and meditating. Originally, *hearing* referred to the fact that ancient wisdom traditions were oral, because they existed long before the written word. But in our case, hearing just means taking in information—hearing a talk, reading a book, taking it from the web. The discipline associated with that is simply getting it right, being accurate. It also implies that we need good information, that it is not about being bombarded with media and constant stimulation, but that we are actually listening to things that matter. We are taking in information that is genuine and authentic, and that has wisdom.

The second part of the process is *contemplating*. The way I am using these words is quite specific. Certain traditions might even reverse the meanings of meditation and contemplation. But in this case, contemplation is about making the information personal. Through this discipline, external information becomes an internal understanding that makes sense to us personally. In this view, all of our leadership disciplines related to reflection, inquiry, dialogue, and so on are forms of contemplation. They are about absorbing information, digesting it, chewing on it, and letting new understanding arise from that process.

Any genuine spiritual or educational tradition would fully acknowledge these first two—the importance of good information and the need to contemplate and process it. But the third part of the process is usually missing. In some ways it is the most critical, I think, because it makes the most difference. This is the process of *meditation*.

The third part of the learning cycle, meditation, is best understood as letting go of all our intellectual activity. Just letting go of it. We think we have to build an edifice of beautiful ideas and cultivate that, which we can do. But the part we may not know is that it works best if, once that knowledge has been cultivated, we just let it go. Then it becomes internal wisdom, and we are no longer separate from it. We don't have to drag around the baggage of our intellectual bits; they are always going to be with us anyway. So there is a process of opening up, letting go, settling, and relaxing. This is the soft spot that Michael was referring to earlier this morning.

Attitude

In this case, meditation isn't about engaging in a self-improvement regimen that we will have to struggle with. Quite the contrary. If we become skillful at seeing and

letting go of our confusion, then what remains is excellent. At the core there is wisdom, there is compassion, there is skillfulness—everything we need as part of being human. The assumption that underlies this meditation practice is that by seeing clearly how we obstruct these innate qualities and by beginning to let go of those tendencies, wisdom can manifest.

The kind of attitude or atmosphere that is appropriate for engaging with this type of meditation is very gentle. It is not a matter of whipping ourselves into shape or feeling bad because we are confused. It is quite the opposite. There is a tremendous need for kindness or friendliness towards ourselves. In fact, that may be the most important part of the instruction. We could do this with an attitude of acceptance, and without too much judgment about how well or not well it is going, without trying too hard to get it right. We judge ourselves all the time, and this is an opportunity to train ourselves to be a little kinder, a little more friendly, towards ourselves. That kindness then becomes available to everyone.

The practice

I am now going to go through the steps of the practice, and I invite you to do each step at the same time I am describing it. As I said earlier, the practice has a container, or boundary. What we are containing in this case is our life—everything I think of as me. I have a body, and I have a mind, and I have a way of engaging the world, and all of those are being contained by the meditation practice. The discipline includes a way to handle the body, a way to relate to the mind, and a way to engage.

And once again, I know many of you have experience with other variations of meditation practice. This is of course not a problem, but I do have a request. Since we are doing this practice together, if we all do it the same way, we have a common experience that we can talk about. So I ask that, for now, you just give this method a try.

I'll begin with body and ask you to take a particular posture. The first thing is to plant yourself very comfortably and firmly and squarely right in the middle of your cushion. Just sit down on the earth, which is in the form of a blue cushion in this case, and make yourself at home. It is your home. Take your seat—we talk a lot about taking your seat or being at home on the earth. So that is the first step. Stop what you are doing, and sit down. Really sit down. It should be comfortable. There is definitely a process of getting comfortable, so be patient with that. Your legs can be folded in front in any way that is comfortable for you. This type of cushion is called *gomden*, which is Tibetan for “meditation seat.” It helps you to sit upright. There is a quality of dignity to it. It is like a little throne. It is not a matter of hiding out in a corner somewhere; you take your seat on your throne. And then you do nothing.

If you could just do that, the rest of the instruction would be unnecessary. If you could just take your seat on your throne, appreciate your good human heart and be

wakeful and open and simply present, that would be it. That is all we are doing here. But usually we need some technical help to create the right conditions for that.

After taking your seat firmly and having your legs folded comfortably, it is very important that your back is quite upright. We are definitely sitting upright. This is the part where most of us, since we don't have wonderful posture or we are not quite as limber as we used to be, can experience a bit of a challenge. It takes getting used to. There is a sense of our head and our shoulders being lifted up, and our back being fairly straight. The spirit of it is not rigid, but it is up. Just let your arms hang naturally at your sides; palms down on your thighs is fine.

So that is the posture. Firmly seated, legs comfortable, hands on your thighs, head and shoulders up. It is very symmetrical. Everything is forward. Your chin is drawn in slightly. In this practice we keep the eyes open—or partially open if that helps us stay contained. But we are not trying to create a dream world and we are not trying to pretend that something is different from what it is. We are actually just being present together in this room. So the eyes are open without really looking at anything, and the gaze is somewhat down. Just allow your visual field to be there, whether it includes a cushion, the floor, or a person right in front of you.

Just hold that posture for a minute in your own way. It is very upright but very relaxed at the same time. You can sense places where you are holding tension and just let go of those if you can.

[Short period of silence.]

We are simply human beings sitting on the earth holding our posture, being dignified and doing nothing. Just being.

Naturally, what comes up for us, usually very quickly, is that we need something to do or the mind gets extremely scattered. There is a need for some kind of focus or anchor. The one that is most universal is the breath, our own breathing. We already have our breath; it is completely available. Actually, it has the interesting quality of being partly ours and partly not ours. It is both an internal and an external process, so it is a gateway connecting our body to our world.

The first thing is to just find our breath. There is no manipulation of the breath in this practice. Whatever our breath is doing is fine. If it is very slow and deep, that is fine. If it is quick and shallow, that is fine. It doesn't matter; it will take care of itself. We are not trying to do anything with the breath. We are just being with it, placing our attention on the breath.

We will work with that for a minute—just be with the breath as it is going in and out. We feel it going in, going out. It is not a matter of thinking about it or conceptualizing it; we are just riding it, going in and out.

[Short period of silence.]

It is very simple. We are just sitting here, being alive, breathing, and appreciating that.

I will now suggest a further subtlety of working with the breath. It is possible to stay very one-pointed on the breath as it is going in and going out. That can help settle the mind, but it also creates a very concentrated, contained sensation. Particularly in this context, we are using the meditation practice as a basis for our engagement with each other, with the world, and with our society. So in this case we place more attention on the breath as it is going out. There is a sense of letting go and expanding outward. We dissolve and then we go out again. So let's work with that.

[Short period of silence.]

That is the complete method for the body and breath. We sit upright but relaxed, with attention on the breath, and as each breath goes out, there is a feeling of letting go. We are unwinding a little bit, letting go of ourselves, just going outward into the space. As the breath goes out and dissolves, we go out with it. We are not pushing anything out or exhaling deliberately; we are just riding it.

As we sit here just being human and breathing, of course the other thing that is happening is that we have all sorts of interesting things going on in the mind. Our life presents itself in all of its colour and busyness and emotional energy. We find that we are thinking about everything. We might be feeling what's going on in our body right now. We might be thinking about breakfast, about all the things we forgot to do, people we need to talk to. We hear sounds in the room, we notice all the visual bits that are in front of us, the colours and textures. Or we are feeling self-conscious, feeling peaceful, feeling sad, feeling relieved, feeling anxious, remembering something that upsets us, things from the past, and ideas for the future—everything, everything. A constant flow, a stream of thinking and feeling.

We have now created a container for that flow, so this thinking actually can become clearer. Our awareness, which is bigger than the thinking, can begin to emerge. We can begin to just simply be aware of everything. It is very possible— and that is the rest of the meditation practice—to just be aware of everything that is going on in the mind. We become aware that we are having a big fantasy, and that is just what is happening. We become aware that we have subtle anxieties or big anxieties or sadness or little cheerful things, little humorous things, thoughts of someone we love, thoughts of someone we can't stand.

We just notice that all of it is happening. There is no judgment. This is one of the most important and most challenging things for us. We are not trying to have happy thoughts and get rid of bad thoughts. The kind of thought doesn't matter. Whatever is there, we create a container of acceptance and kindness for it. Whether it is emotional tones, discreet thoughts, muddy thoughts, any kind of sensation or

thought, we just notice it and then let it go if we can. We are very gentle with it, noticing that it is happening, and then remembering our breath, coming back to our breath.

This is the entire cycle, the entire process. We create a body container using the breath as an anchor, and in particular we use the outbreath because it has a softness and openness to it, and then we have an attitude of acceptance towards whatever arises in our experience. Nothing is excluded. We let it be there, let it go, and come back.

The point is not to try to get it right, because we can't get it exactly right. The point is training. We are practicing, over and over and over and over again, to come back. We are training ourselves to come back to just being present, without a lot of second thoughts. When the second thought arises—the thinking about the thought—we become aware of that also, and come back to our breath. So it is very complete.

Let's do this together for a few more minutes. In the midst of your practice, if you need to shift your legs or stretch for a minute, just do it. The idea is to be still and comfortable, and in order to do that, sometimes we need to move. So just do it and then come back to your posture. We'll do the practice for about 10 minutes and then we can have questions if you like.

[Silent meditation practice.]

[Gong.]

Q&A

Question: What is the best time of day to do this?

Richard: Any time. Most of us find that first thing in the morning is good. If you really want to apply it in your life, it is good to do it early in the day and then again late in the day. But it really is a matter of personal preference. Some people are very regular and like to do things in an orderly way. Other people tend to do things in spurts, so they may sit a lot at one time and then not at all at another. In general, if you want to learn the practice and cultivate it, it is good to do it in the morning. Obviously, there is a lot to get used to. A good length of time is about half an hour. If you only have ten minutes, ten minutes is fantastic. Ten minutes is infinitely better than nothing. Just getting yourself to the cushion and taking the posture and remembering that you exist or don't exist—just being present—is so valuable.

I hope it is clear that the purpose of the meditation is training for everything else we do in our life. It is not an escape. We are training our minds and bodies to be present and to allow our natural wisdom and clarity to emerge.

Question: What do you recommend in terms of with music or without music?

Richard: This is where you get into questions about what is meditation and what is not. On the one hand you can apply mindfulness and awareness and being present to anything, whether it is driving, working on the computer, cooking, or listening to music. But that is not this. The actual mindfulness-awareness practice is what we just did. You may not have any choice, if you have an apartment with someone playing music next door. But in this case playing meditative music while you sit is called “listening to music,” not meditation.

Question [cont.]: Okay [laughs].

Question: I hope to learn a lot this week about how to integrate this into my organization. I used the word meditation the other day and my executive director almost fell off her chair. There was some sense that this belongs to a religious tradition and that there is “no place for this” in our organization. I am hoping to change that. I am wondering if you could say a few words about how you might language this to a group of supervisors, so you could bring some of this into the workplace in a way that is natural. That’s a big question, but I wonder if you could say a few words about that.

Richard: That *is* a big question, and I think it is an extremely relevant question for those of us who have worked on this exact issue. There is a lot of subtlety involved in having this make sense to people, and I think it is necessary to go through a series of steps to get there. There are such strong preconceptions about anything having to do with meditation—we have strong preconceptions about religion or spirituality or anything else that seems peripheral or even contrary to just getting the job done. In the past twenty years or so, there have been incredible shifts in that perception, but I think it still involves a fairly small percentage of people.

As far as language goes, one of the ways to make this accessible to people is by talking in terms of awareness, thinking clearly, and having good communication. In fact, the learning disciplines many of us are familiar with—reflection, inquiry, dialogue, and so forth—all require the ability to be present. To have a management meeting in which good decisions are made requires a tremendous clarity and ability to be present. While meditation might sound like something that will take you off on some spiritual journey, or off to another planet, actually what it is doing is creating exactly the right container for a management meeting. This is true.

There is so much to be learned about this question. I think it is doable. Some of us have led meditation workshops for managers, starting with people who are open to it, usually calling it mindfulness and awareness practice. Some of us did it right here in Halifax last year. My colleagues, Joe Litven and Molly DeShong—who are both present here—and I worked very hard trying to come up with a good one-day workshop. We held it at the Halifax Club, a very traditional business organization. It was a men’s club back in the mid-1800s; now it is an exclusive business club. We invited 30 or 40 of our clients who we thought might be interested, and 15 of them

came. That was an extremely good turnout! We did what we are doing today, sitting on the cushions—the whole thing. We talked about the practice and we also talked about management issues.

Part of what makes it work is introducing it in a context that is comfortable for people. Working with peers is also important. Those are just a few ideas. We could pursue this topic for the entire week.

Any other questions? Yes, Molly?

Question: I just want to ask Richard to think back to that day we spent at Innovatia, when you introduced mindfulness and awareness in a very simple way to a group in about 10 minutes. Do you remember how you did that? I think that could be useful here.

Richard: Yes, it is definitely doable in any sort of gathering or meeting to introduce the idea of awareness. You can refer to the *Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, where it talks about moments of awareness. I would just say that we are going to be silent and present for a moment. You don't call it meditation, you just say, "Let's relax, be present, and focus." It has a tremendous impact.

Question: It is very hard for me to sit like this when I am uncomfortable. My legs kept going to sleep.

Richard: There is a technology that goes along with meditation practices—finding the right cushion set-up. These cushions are perfect for some people, not so perfect for others. I'm afraid we don't have a lot of ways to alter the situation here. If you find that something is going to sleep, you should definitely move it, including yourself. So it is not a matter of suffering through something. A certain amount of experimenting is appropriate.

We are creating opportunities where you can work with meditation instructors several times during the program. They can help you with your posture and answer other questions that you have. Some people need to sit higher, some people need to sit lower. The idea is to find a way to be comfortable, not to suffer. We are already suffering enough.

Question: Is sitting the only option? Could you be lying down or in another position?

Richard: You could be. This is the best way to start. You could definitely sit in a chair if you need to. If you aren't sure whether you need to, try the cushion. Some people alternate. As for lying down—good luck. It is possible. It is considered a very advanced practice [laughter]. But it's not a good way to start. (It is usually called "sleep.") If you are doing an intensive meditation session—we will have a longer session on Wednesday—the sitting period is interspersed with periods of walking meditation. This whole group will get up and walk for awhile. That is considered a

way to bridge the austerity of sitting still on a cushion with your everyday life. You develop a portable awareness and take it with you.

Question: I wonder if other people are having trouble staying awake.

Richard: Do you want us to ask?

Question [cont.]: I want to be reassured that I am not the only one. I would like suggestions on how to bridge over that, because the letting go is easy, but letting go too far...

Richard: Getting sleepy is not, of course, unusual. There are some interesting things to say about that. Often, if we have been extremely active or if our minds are very busy and speedy and we stop to meditate and we sit down and we do everything exactly right—we get our posture and our attention on the breath just right—there can be a tendency to almost black out. The contrast is too much. Other times we are just tired. If you are too tired to do it, you might need to just rest.

As far as how to work with it, if you are having a period of drowsiness, the most skillful way to work with it is to regard it simply as what is happening in your mind. You can maintain your posture and maintain a sense of awareness as you are going into the drowsiness, with the knowledge that it is temporary. Then you come back out.

Many people would tell you just to wake yourself right up and if that approach is your preference, that is fine. You can perk up your posture, stretch and breathe a little bit, and just refresh yourself. Or stand up and exercise a little and come back. That is fine. So, whatever appeals to you. It's not unacceptable to try to wake yourself up at all costs, but if you find yourself going in and out of different states, it's actually very interesting to just stay with it, and to ride it.

Question: In this practice, are you staying open to an idea that there is some kind of enlightenment or spiritual divine samadhi, and this method will get you to such a place?

Richard: Yes and no. It's better not to think of it that way. One of the most important traditional instructions is to not hope for good meditation and to not worry about lousy meditation. Whatever it is, is exactly what it is, and is acceptable. The interesting thing is that by having that attitude, you actually can become quite stabilized. Your mind can become very open and you can find there are times when you are very peaceful. You feel complete and you feel full and satisfied, and that is just great. But to hope for that is hopeless. It is much better to be open to the agitation and the confusion and discomfort and all the things that are going on, and to make that your meditation. To accept that is the most powerful and the most beneficial thing you can do.

So, the short answer is no, we are not striving for any kind of a state. But at the same time we are also open to such a possibility, just as we are open to whatever else comes along.

I think our time is timing out. Thank you.

Richard John has been a friend and associate of the Institute since its beginning. Having had careers as a craftsman, industrial designer, and management consultant, he is currently executive director of the Halifax Shambhala Centre, a meditation and study centre that is the focus for approximately 600 members of the local Shambhala Buddhist community. Richard is an acharya, or senior teacher, who has been practicing and teaching Buddhist meditation for over 25 years. In the early 1990s he completed the first three-year meditation retreat held at Gampo Abbey in Nova Scotia.