**IMB Course Week 5: Meditation**

## Revisit homework 5 mins

Did folk do the homework – one precept for one day?

* What did they do?
* What were the effects?
* What did it feel like?

## Introduction: The Threefold Path 2 mins

This course is based on what is called the threefold path, the simplest formulation of the Buddhist path, dividing it into ethics, meditation, and wisdom. This isn’t a path we follow one aspect after another, we don’t practice ethics, then meditation, then wisdom, we work on all three together. But the later stages of the path cannot develop faster than the earlier ones allow. In particular, if we want to meditate more effectively we often need to look at how we live our life, the sorts of mental states we cultivate in our daily life, whether we overload ourselves with inputs, whether we are always distracted, unfocussed, hurried, anxious etc.

## This Week

So far we have mainly been looking at ethics in the early parts of each evening, then meditation after the break. This week we’re moving on to meditation in the threefold path, so we’re going to devote the whole evening to meditation, exploring some things we can do to improve our meditation in an experiential way, rather than talking about it. Then next week we’ll move on to wisdom, so come if you want to know the ultimate meaning of life, the universe, and everything!

## Positive counterparts of the hindrances. 5mins

Importance of conditions, lifestyle, and how we feel at the beginning of a meditation. Ideally we need to bring 5 positive qualities to our meditation, or else we need to use the meditation to develop them. These are:

**Contentment.** We need to be here in our body, in the present, content with our experience, enjoying what is actually happening; not always wishing for something better.

**Warm goodwill.** To meditate effectively we need to be on good terms with ourself, with other people, and with the world; otherwise our ill-will, resentment, or bad feelings about ourselves will well up when all external stimuli are removed.

**Commitment and wholeheartedness.** To meditate effectively we need to commit wholeheartedly to doing the practice; not just drift in indecision.

**Calm** – To meditate effectively we need to feel peaceful and calm, not agitiated and restless.

**Energy and alertness**. Being calm doesn’t mean being in a dream – the aim is also to have a bright mind, a clear awareness.

## Balanced effort 8mins

Tonight we’re going to focus especially on these last two, calm and alertness. In meditation we are not aiming for a compromise between these two, we are aiming to be **both** more calm **and** more alert!

* Like a native american hunter stalking prey, watchful and poised
* Like a climber totally focused on their moves on the rock
* Like a master jeweler cutting a priceless diamond

So the aim is to have more of both, but to start with we need to learn to balance calm and alertness. This is related to the idea of balanced effort. If we make no effort in meditation, we will drift, daydream, and maybe go to sleep. But if we make a forced, willful effort, our mind will be tense and agitated. So we need balanced effort, and a balance between calm and alertness.

Story of Sona.

* A musician, played the lute.
* Sona is very willful, trying to force himself, and getting nowhere with the spiritual life. He is talking about giving up and going home, so the Buddha asks him to come talk to him.
* The Buddha asks him, Sona, if you string your lute too loose, what does is sound like? Does it produce a beautiful sound?
* No , it goes ‘thwock’.
* If you string your lute too tight, what does it sound like? Does it make a beautiful sound?
* No, it goes ‘plink’.
* Sona, meditation is just the same, you mustn’t string your mind too loose or too tight, you must find the balance that makes beautiful music.

**Analogy of holding a bird.** Meditation is likened to holding a small bird in the hands. If you hold it too loose, it will fly away. But if you hold it too tight, it will get panicky and agitated, and you will hurt it. We need to find just the right amount of effort, to stop ourselves just drifting off, while at the same time not making the mind tight and agitated.

A lot of the art of meditation is about balancing effort, balancing energy, balancing calm and alertness. Tonight we are going to do a sort of workshop to look at some practical things you can do to balance our energy in meditation.

**Light levels:** Before we do that, I’ll just touch on one very easy thing we can do to adjust our energy level when we meditate. If we tend to be too sleepy, and need to brighten up, we can raise the light levels in the room. (There is no reason why we need to meditate in gloom – Buddhism is all about En**ligh**tenement, Illumination!)

On the other hand if we tend to be too restless and agitated, if we have too much uncontrolled mental energy, we can reduce the light levels in the meditation room.

In a similar way we can also use either bright or calming imagery – we’ll see some examples of this later on.

## Energy Workshop approx 40 mins

[To the leader: This is an experiential workshop, and you need to do it at the pace and in the way that seems right to you, while you are actually doing it.

Leading this sort of thing is a practical skill, that cannot be conveyed on paper.

If you are going to lead this exercise you need to experiment with the techniques involved, and make them part of your own practice. Then you need to lead this exercise from your own experience. So what follows can only be a rough guide.]

**Exercise 1 – inbreath and outbreath**

* Get folk in meditation posture
* Lead through body scan
* Direct attention towards the breath, keep it there for a while
* Tell them: Now focus on outbreath, letting inbreath happen of its own accord; tell them: emphasise outbreath, even sighing silently as the breath is released. (Use the words ‘release’, ‘let go’, etc, and speak in a calm soft voice.)
* Observe class: when some are drooping, move to next stage
* Tell them: now shift focus to inbreath, letting outbreath just happen of its own accord; say several times, focus on inbreath, feel the air coming into the body, the lungs filling **up** etc. (Use slightly sharper voice.)
* Observe class: when some look jumpy, shift focus back to outbreath for a while
* Briefly put awareness on both phases of the breath, then end the exercise, asking people to sit comfortably.

Ask: did anyone notice any difference? Draw out the responses.

Sum up:

Focusing on the outbreath helps us to calm **down.** When we sigh, let go, release the breath, we release tension. To accentuate this effect, we can even silently say the word ‘release’ sometimes as we breath out.

Focusing on the inbreath helps us to brighten **up.** When we wake up, go outside, survey the world and take a deep inbreath, we brighten ourselves up, we wake ourselves up, we give ourselves energy. The inbreath is **inspiring.** (Inspiration means breathing in.)

The stages in the mindfulness of breathing use these facts. Counting after the breath puts the focus subtly on the outbreath, so we settle down at the start. Counting before the breath puts the focus subtly on the inbreath, so we brighten up as we move deeper into the meditation.

Can use this as a tool in your practice. When we meditate we need to stay aware of our state, stay aware of the body, and periodically ask ourselves, “do I need to calm down, or do I need to brighten up?”

Between stages we should come back to our body. The body can be a guide. Are we slumping or slouching? We need to brighten up! Are we too tense and stiff? We need to calm down.

**Exercise 2 – the effect of moving the awareness in the body**

* Get folk back into meditation posture
* Lead through a body scan
* Direct attention to the breath, and keep it there for a while
* Now ask people to imagine they are breathing into a point four finger widths below the navel. Tell them it might help to touch this point to locate it. Imagine the breath is coming into the body, passing down through the body, to this point, then passing back up and out the nostrils. Keep the attention on this point as you breath into it. Do this for long enough for folk to fell the effects, keeping them focused by occasionally reminding.
* Now ask people to take the attention even further down, to a point below the ground. Say: imagine you are sitting on top of a vast silent cavern, with a still, silent underground lake at the bottom. Each time you breathe in a pebble drops noiselessly into this lake. Keep this up for long enough to have an effect
* Bring attention back to the navel for a while.
* Direct attention to the heart centre for a while. Ask people to breath into this point, keep their awareness at the centre of the chest as the breath comes in to this point, goes out from this point.
* Direct attention to the point between the eyebrows for a while. Ask people to keep their awareness at this point as they breathe in and breath out.
* Now ask people to take their attention to a point maybe an inch above the crown of the head, above the point where the hair circles round. They could imagine a light or a flame at this point. Keep the attention there for a while while following the breath.
* Now take the attention back down through the body: eyebrows->heart->navel centre, stopping for a while at each.
* End the exercise, invite people to move and make themselves comfortable in their own time.

Ask:

* Did you notice any differences. Draw out the responses.
* Did you have a favourite? What did it feel like?
* Was there a one of the locations you didn’t like focusing on? What did that feel like.
* Draw out the responses. Note the differences between people and comment on some possible reasons.

Summary.

Taking the attention down in the body helps us to calm **down**, to become grounded.

Keeping the attention higher in the body tends to brighten us **up**, make us more alert and sharp.

If this works for us, we can use this as a powerful tool in meditation. We need to stay grounded in the body in meditation, coming back to the posture between stages, noticing if we are slumping or tense, and if we need to brighten up or calm down. If we need to brighten up we take the attention up in the body. If we need to calm down or ground ourselves, we take the attention down to the navel, or even lower.

We can also use imagery to heighten the effect: eg the calm silent underground lake under the ground, or a bright light at the eyebrows or above the crown.

Many people notice a connection between the heart centre and the emotions. The connection between the heart and the emotions seems to transcend cultures, and represent something very real. We can use this in the metta bhvana: it can help to keep the attention centred at the heart as you think of people, to notice warm sensations in the heart, or even to imagine the people in your heart.

[To the leader: Possible problems:

* Some people don’t notice any effect, especially thiose who are out of touch with their bodies. Point out that our generalisations maybe are not true for everyone, but most people seem to notice the effects we have been talking about, and it can be very powerful. They may begin to notice it more as they get more experience of meditation.
* Some people notice that we’re talking about the chakras, and want to go all Hindu or tantric on us! Point out that the chakras are an elaborate imaginary system we don’t have to take literally. Different schools describe the chakras quite differently, which just goes to show that they are an imaginative construction. What we are getting at here is the actual experience that the chakras have been invented to explain. What is important is the experience, not the elaborate theories based on it. ]

Sum up ways of balancing energy: come back to the body periodically, especially between stages, notice the posture, and ask yourself if you need to brighten up or calm down. Use the breath, imagery, and the position of attention in the body to adjust the energy. If you are habitually at one pole or another, adjust light levels. Give practical tips for changing state, eg, showers, exercise etc.

## Setting up a practice 10 mins

Ask folk if they have been meditating at home. Point out the advantages of regular meditation. Exercise analogy – cannot get fit by doing something for half and hour once a week, need to do it regularly to see the effects.

What needs to be in place to allow a daily practice:

* A suitable place, conducive to positive states, perhaps with a focus, a picture, something beautiful.
* A regular time helps. The advantages of morning and evening, and people’s different energy levels. The power of the unconscious – if we regularly sit in the same place and at the same time for meditation, we easily slip into the mental states we associate with meditation.
* Suitable cushions or chair.
* Possible distractions dealt with, eg partner, kids, phone
* Reasons for candles and especially incense – these are anchors for the unconscious mind, that remind our unconscious what we’re doing, and evoke previous experiences of meditation.
* The appropriate attitude to inevitable distractions like noise – its part of the practice.
* Length of time – 20 mins at first maybe, but 5 mins is better than nothing. If we get on the cushion we may enjoy it, and stretch the session out. Don’t create unconscious aversion by pushing too hard. Enjoy it! Regular short sits are better than occasional marathons.
* Q&A about practicing at home.

## Invitation 2 mins

In case some people miss the last week, tell them that there is a free 6 week follow on, same time same place. Point out that its important to stay in touch with people who are practicing to keep going – we know this from experience.

## Total Approx 72 minutes