

Something to sit on

by Piya Tan

Many people still have an extreme view about meditation. Some think it is magical; others think it is intellectual headwork. In fact, there are more meditation “experts” today than ever before, but they could hardly remain silent for a minute or sit still for a moment.

If we accept the early Suttas as authentic teachings of the Buddha, then we must say that meditation involves both body and mind. And it is hard work, at least for the beginner. But I like to tell my students to recall how a toddler learns to walk. It simply never gives up. The toddler first tries to stand, it falls, it gets up again, falls, up again, and so on until it can really walk.

We were each that infant once. Now we can run if we want to. But it is time to learn to SIT in the deepest sense of the word. That is, to sit in deep stillness, delving into the stillness and clarity of our minds.

We love to listen to good and famous speakers talk about meditation, but it is even better if we close our own eyes and see more of ourselves. We have heard of the three monkeys: one closes its eyes, the second its ears, and the third its mouth. Meditation however begins with the taming of the six monkeys: we see less, hear less, smell less, taste less, and touch less.

We temporarily shut down the five physical sense-doors so that we can totally focus on the mind, the controller of the sense-doors. As Lewis Lancaster, a professor of Buddhist studies, once said, “Since pain originates from the senses, it is possible to control it through mental and physical methods.”

The body needs to be stilled first before we can still the mind. For this reason, early Buddhism insists on personal moral virtue (the five precepts), that is, our body and speech must be harmonious first.

Most teachers would begin meditation instructions by showing their students how to sit properly. My favourite imagery is that of a hen hatching her eggs. Imagine you are a hen sitting over some eggs. First the hen shuffles herself about a bit until she finds just the right posture. Then she sits totally still. After a while, she would turn her eggs around, and then sit again, and so on, for as long as needed to hatch the eggs.

Once our body is still, we begin to deal with our thoughts. This is mostly letting go of thinking about the past, or planning for the future. At first, while meditating, we may recall some past events, or plan what to do after the meditation. This is a mild form of worrying: when we worry we are thinking of the past or the future.

This is called worry because there is nothing we can really do about the past: it is gone; we can plan for the future, but it will take its own course anyway. The point is that while delving into the past or the future, we are neglecting the present, which is the only reality there is (for meditation purposes, anyway).

One of the best ways of keeping our minds in sync with the present moment is to watch the breath. (The Buddha himself did this when he was only seven; so, breath meditation is

safe for children. He used the same method to awaken to Buddhahood; so, it is the best method we can use for spiritual liberation.)

The idea is very simple: keep your attention gently but firmly anchored to your breath. This is unlikely to happen at first. So whenever the mind wanders off or some distraction (a thought, a sound, a smell, or discomfort) intrudes, simply bring your attention back to watching the breath. Remember the infant learning to walk?

On the other hand, you might surprise yourself how easily you settle into a beautiful inner stillness, especially when you are meditating in a quiet and conducive place. (Oh yes, make sure you switch off that hand-phone first, unless you are already an expert meditator.) How long you sit does not matter, but make it a habit of naturally going into watching and stilling your breath whenever you can.

If you still find all this difficult, then it would be good to look for a proper meditation teacher (one you feel happy meditating with). And if you are progressing well, and wish to improve your meditation, you should find a spiritual friend in a meditation teacher so that you go even further.

Meditation is like learning to play great music: you must master the instrument (the mind), and a maestro can help you do this better. But you must yourself practise. The most beautiful music comes from the silence of our minds. Let us sit on it.

In a number of suttas, the Buddha reminds us:

“Whatever a teacher should do out of compassion for the good of disciples,
for the sake of their welfare, it has been done to you by me.
These are the foot of trees; these are empty houses.
Meditate! Be not heedless! Regret not later!
This is our instruction to you.”

(eg Kaya Sutta, S 43.1/4:359) = SD 12.21