

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“Insights from the Cushion”

Rev. Sam Trumbore April 3, 2022

Call to Celebration

What joy to be back with you again this morning ... and to be back in person again!

The last two months have been a time of restoration and renewal for me and I'd to bring some of it back to share with you. I've got lots of pictures of our trip to Hawaii I'd love to share with you, ... but perhaps Sunday morning might not be the right time for that.

What I would like to share with you this morning is a little of my experience at the Forest Refuge Meditation Center in Barre, Massachusetts.

As most of you know, I am intensely devoted to vipassana roughly translated as insight meditation. I've been practicing this Buddhist meditation method for over 35 years. I've gained a lot of benefit from practicing this meditation form daily... but there are limits to how much progress can happen in daily practice. Intensive practice at a retreat center can accelerate the gains of growth and development of one's wisdom and compassion.

Buddhism is a religious tradition that focuses primarily on just one thing: relieving the mental component of suffering. The Buddha had digestive problems and back pain he couldn't escape. The unpleasantness of having a body can't be fixed. It turns out however that addressing just this mental component of suffering has enormous consequences for human well-being and happiness.

May my words this morning help ease any suffering you are experiencing, or you may have brought with you. May this service enlighten your mind and stimulate greater insight and understanding. May you experience here compassion and loving-kindness as we join together in the celebration of life.

Spoken Meditation

This meditation comes from the Karaniya Metta Sutta,
found in the Pali Buddhist texts and [translated by Rat-na-prab-ha](#)

... meditate like this:

May all be happy and secure.
May all beings become happy in their heart of hearts!

And think of every living thing without exception:
the weak and the strong,
from the smallest to the largest,
whether you can see them or not,
living nearby or far away,
beings living now or yet to arise –
may all beings become happy in their heart of hearts!

May no one deceive
or look down on anyone anywhere,
for any reason.

Whether through feeling angry
or through reacting to someone else,
may no one want another to suffer.

As strongly as a mother, perhaps risking her life,
cherishes her child, her only child,
develop an unlimited heart for all beings.

Develop an unlimited heart of friendliness for the entire universe,
sending metta above, below, and all around,
beyond all narrowness, beyond all rivalry, beyond all hatred.

Whether you are staying in one place or travelling,
sitting down or in bed,
in all your waking hours rest in this mindfulness,
which is known as like living in [a heavenly abode]
right here and now!

In this way, you will come to let go of [opinions],
be spontaneously ethical, and have perfect Insight.

And leaving behind craving for sense pleasures,
from the rounds of rebirth
you will finally be completely free!

Sermon

March 1st wasn't the most auspicious time to cut off all contact with the outside world and begin a 14-day secluded meditation retreat.

As most of you know, February 24th the invasion of Ukraine began on a Thursday. American and European expectations at the time were that the Ukrainians would lose quickly because of Russia's overwhelming forces. By Monday, February 28th, everything had changed. Russia encountered fierce resistance. Europe and the United States rallied to support Ukraine. Putin had put Russia's nuclear forces on high alert. It looked like World War Three could begin just as I was leaving home. And I wouldn't be allowed to check my cellphone to get the latest news for two weeks.

I'd been wanting to return to the Forest Refuge to meditate since this congregation gave me a generous gift certificate for staying there as part of my 20th anniversary celebration. This was an extremely precious opportunity for a long, intensive meditation retreat. I decided I wouldn't let Putin's invasion delay it. The only thing that might have stopped my attendance was a positive COVID rapid test I had to take when I arrived.

For those of you who might wonder what in the world would motivate someone to meditate from early in the morning, all day and into the night in silence, alternating sitting, standing, walking and even lying down, here is a quick primer on the value of this kind of experience.

Evolution has gifted our species with a capacity to think, communicate, remember and to imagine in abstract terms thanks to the amazing power of the cerebral cortex. The problem is there isn't just one mind, there are many components to our mind that often do not coordinate and play well together. Traumatic experiences, cravings, misunderstanding and confusion, fears, attachments, likes and dislikes, all can distort our thinking, disturbing and unbalancing mental processes. This distortion of consciousness isn't just an occasional event for most of us. It happens a lot. Every day. And when it does, the result is unhappiness, suffering and misery.

Over 2500 years ago, prince Siddhartha Gotama was quite disturbed about the pervasive unhappiness, suffering and misery he saw around him, even among the prosperous and comfortable. After six years of intense effort, he unraveled the problem and discovered a solution to the pervasive human dilemma of a brain out of balance in the thrall of greed, hatred and delusion. He took the name Buddha, which means one who is awake and knows the way to liberation from suffering.

What is most remarkable about this solution he discovered is that we all have access to it, sometimes referred to as everyone having "Buddha nature." No God or Celestial Being need intervene on our behalf. Through the training of the mind, the solution can be discovered through direct personal experience. Every aspect of a meditation center is designed to support finding the solution that the Buddha discovered.

One goes to a meditation center to practice and train the mind in certain skills that lead toward that solution, to solve the problem of suffering. One of those skills is focusing the mind to initiate calm and tranquility, peace and joy. Another skill is witnessing the body-mind in action and at rest, learning how the brain works by witnessing it from the inside as body sensations, feelings and thoughts arise and pass away. One amazing quality of our minds is our ability to self-reflexively witness our brain activity. Sitting quietly without moving can be very helpful in that witnessing and learning process.

Witnessing and learning, however, isn't enough to help us get to the solution. We also need to understand what helps us get closer to the solution or moves us further away. Once the mind is sharp and clear, in its knowing awareness, opportunities for volitional choice become clearer. Clarity of opportunities for action are not enough however. We also need to know what the wise, caring, helpful, and wholesome choices are. And we need to know what the unwise, uncaring, unhelpful and unwholesome choices are that will lead to greater suffering and misery. And whatever we choose to do, attentiveness to the self-reflective process of witnessing the results of that action will continue the learning to add to our wisdom.

Meditation retreats simplify life and slow the mind down making witnessing and learning much easier, contributing to breakthroughs in self-understanding, growth and development. To illustrate this process, here are a few examples of insights over the course of the two weeks I spent at the Forest Refuge.

Many of you are aware of my dysfunctional digestive tract. There are many foods and some spices that cause me digestive malfunction. This has been a problem for me at previous meditation retreats. I vowed to eat very simply, mostly rice and beans, so I wouldn't have intestinal pain and discomfort.

Sadly, for a good portion of the retreat I did have digestive problems. Thankfully not every day and sometime only for a few hours during a day. But through careful witnessing of all the foods that entered my mouth and where and when I felt intestinal pain, I deduced two foods I was eating, raisins and apples, that caused me problems. The surprising part is these are foods that I thought I could eat without a problem. It was only when I was eating a very simple, restricted diet that I could recognize these foods as a problem. My ignorance of these sensitivities caused unwise food choices, a few raisins on my bowl of millet or quinoa porridge for breakfast, that yielded intestinal suffering later in the afternoon as the result.

Another problem I encountered at the meditation center was the dryness of the air. My first night, I woke up in the middle of the night with pain in my nose and sinuses from dehydration. Since I didn't have a humidifier with me, I was concerned about what to do. I tried a wet washcloth over my face. That didn't work very well. I put my damp towel after taking a shower near my bed. That didn't work. I washed my clothes halfway through my retreat and put up a drying rack in my room spread with wet laundry. That did help ... for a while until dry. What helped the most was sleeping with a facemask. The moistness of my breath stayed in the mask keeping my nose and sinuses hydrated.

The food and the dryness of the air suffering could be addressed by my actions. This next problem could not be fixed through my actions.

Meditation requires focusing the mind and observing what arises and passes away moment to moment. Distractions are not helpful. One of the most challenging sources of distraction is sound. You can close your eyes and mouth but not your ears.

The meditator sitting next to me was an older gentleman. He had built a little throne of pillows and cushions. Even with all these comforts, he moved and adjusted his posture every five to ten seconds for his entire meditation period.

If we were at a Zen sesshin, they would have whacked him with a stick or thrown him out. Typically, people are expected to sit without moving during the meditation period. Maybe move once, very quietly, if a painful position might be threatening bodily harm. This is an important training in impermanence. If the nose itches, and the meditator doesn't move. Almost always, the itch goes away all by itself. This becomes a lesson in non-reactivity. We can wisely choose when to respond to what arises and when not to respond rather than compulsively reacting. This is a taste of freedom and liberation.

At first, I became agitated and a little angry at this restless fellow disturbing my meditation. Then, I discovered I could be non-reactive, by using the fellow's restless energy as a reminder to check my attention. Each time he moved, I checked myself to recognize if I was daydreaming or watching my breath come in and out. I was able to tap his restless energy as a tool to deepen my meditation practice.

Craving and aversion are big impediments to meditation practice. After witnessing my mind very closely over many, many years now, I'm intimately familiar with this problem. It is a very hard problem to resolve because humans are strongly driven by their likes and dislikes. I've been able to eliminate many foods that bother my digestive system I still crave, but resist giving up others I like

that cause more minor problems. That's going on for me right now with apples. It can be a hard struggle to choose digestive happiness over craving.

I found what seemed to me to be a very promising solution to this problem. In meditation practice, there is a special state of deep concentration called the jhanas. In these deep states of meditative absorption, the meditator experiences seclusion from the senses. Craving, pain, aversion, restlessness, drowsiness, and doubt all disappear. The mind is filled with rapture, bliss and joy, absorbed in concentrated, single-pointed awareness of the meditation object. A happiness is experienced that is *independent of the senses*. Not only is this happiness *possible*, but a meditator can also develop the skill to achieve this state *by choice* when they wish to experience it.

At the Forest Refuge, meditators get to meet with one of two meditation teachers on duty every 4 days. In my first interview, I revealed my plan. I wanted to experience the jhanas as part of my retreat and begin developing access to them. The teacher cautioned me that it required skillful practice to do that. The jhanas couldn't be achieved by manipulating the mind into a particular state. A better way to approach them would be to relax into them and let go.

I took this guidance and put it aside as I fiercely attended to my breath, driving out other thoughts. As I deepened my concentration on the breath alone, I found my body relaxed and stress drained away. I started to feel the rapturous feelings and a sense of happiness. This was very exciting. Yet when I started to get deeper, my impulse was *wanting* it to go deeper and it would stop. I was finding it very difficult to just relax into the experience and let go rather than *making myself* relax and let go.

What initially helped in this process was imagining this relaxing and letting go process as moving into a kind of "yin" energy. This approach was very different from the driving effort of the "yang" energy needed to concentrate the mind on the breath and screen out distractions. I needed the yang energy to get close *then* needed to switch to the yin energy near the doorway to the jhana.

Unfortunately, cultivating the yin energy had a side effect of triggering a significant amount of sexual energy. That energy completely distracted me from the breath disrupting my practice. I was able to get back on track somewhat by channeling the sexual energy up into my heart through cultivating metta or loving kindness energy that also can lead to the jhana doorway. Unfortunately, I was less successful at that than necessary to get through the doorway.

By the end of the retreat I had still not been able to experience the jhana state, though the teacher told me I was in the neighborhood, which I found frustrating. I made a mistake thinking I could use the jhanas to free myself from craving, substituting a spiritual pleasure for a sensual one. What blocked the doorway was the very thing I was seeking to escape. I would have to find another way to extinguish the hold craving had on my mind.

That other way was the other side of meditation practice, the witnessing and knowing process rather than one-pointed concentration methods. I needed to witness the unsatisfactory nature of those cravings more deeply so they couldn't trip me up so easily.

I recognized I could do this witnessing work when I returned home. After all, dealing with the hindrances that block the awakening process is all part of the awakening process.

And maybe there aren't any shortcuts.

One of the most profound experiences I had at my first meditation retreat at the Forest Refuge in 2006 was discovering I wasn't doing the meditation; the meditation was doing me. It had its own organic process. Yes, I needed to understand how to do the meditation practice techniques I'd learned. Yes, I needed to know how to appropriately deal with the hindrances that interfere with my practice.

Yet more important than all my meditation skills, what I needed to do was arrive at the cushion, use that yang energy to follow my breath, *and then* get out of the way – bringing a kind of yin energy to the moment.

I'd forgotten this wisdom by bringing my agenda, my overactive yang energy, to this retreat.

I hope not to make that mistake again.

I drove home March 14th, after chipping layers of ice off my car windows and exhaustively cleaning my room for the next retreatant. I drove home with a sense of satisfaction, happiness, peace and ease. I knew that state wouldn't last, but for the moment, knowing such a state is possible is a sense of relief and motivation to keep going; to keep striving for a greater appreciation and ability to embody the solution the Buddha discovered; the solution to the pervasive suffering that burdens this world.

May my effort and my accumulated wisdom and capacity for compassion be a source of happiness, peace and ease for the members and friends of this congregation, our community, Unitarian Universalism and maybe our nation and the world as well.