

# Continuing Practice after a Retreat

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*This article is based on a talk given on the last day of an introductory retreat weekend at Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey in 2011.*

This is intended mainly for those who are quite new to practice though I hope some aspects may be helpful in a wider sense. Each of us continues to train with the sorts of issues discussed here, no matter how many retreats we have attended.

If we decide we want to live from a meditative perspective when we return home from a retreat, how do we go about doing this? It can feel strange going from the all-round supportive atmosphere of the monastery or temple to the normal pulls and resistances of our ordinary daily life. It is normal to have contradictory feelings on leaving a retreat, particularly when we are not used to retreats. We might feel a strong sense of relief, of being let off the leash after days of disciplined living. We might feel a bit of a ‘come down’ and a bit low. Such feelings are not surprising given the intensity with which we have thrown ourselves into the retreat. I usually feel deeply encouraged after a retreat, but I also feel physically pretty tired, and this tiredness can last a while.

It can be challenging re-entering our normal life. Most of us need a bit of time to ‘come to’ and to re-establish contact. We may be going from a silent reflective atmosphere to a noisier

one. Those we return to may be apprehensive of how we may be after a retreat. We may feel like reading the paper, eating cake, watching TV, not unpacking our bag, all at once! ‘Phew, I don’t *have* to do it’. Or we may feel a strong urge to tell everyone what we experienced. We may feel a bit grumpy, or we may need to accept others feeling a bit grumpy that we’ve been away.

So what do we do? We can pause: what’s good to do here? It may really help to show some appreciation and to make contact with those we return to. Perhaps we can find a low key way to relax without swamping ourselves. We need to let things settle. Re-entering needs care and kindness, for everyone’s sake. There may well be time to tell people what we’ve been doing, but better as it arises naturally, or when they ask.

### **Grounding in the fundamentals**

Having taken part in such a variety of events at the monastery or temple, it may feel confusing as to how we should integrate these into our daily life. So much has happened.

I’ve found it helpful to keep things simple, and to ground myself in the fundamentals. So, my focus has been on setting up and continuing a regular meditation practice, on doing my best to keep in harmony with the Precepts, and on being as kind to myself as I can when I fall over. I need to find a steady pace in my practice I can walk at, and not hold myself on too tight a rein.

When we do this, other things can always be brought in to enrich the fundamentals as and when they help. I have found it helpful to trust that, if I ground myself in the fundamentals, what is useful from my experience at the monastery or temple

will naturally be absorbed and integrated into my daily practice. I don't try to remember it or to reproduce the forms.

### **Regular sitting**

Most importantly we need to cultivate a regular meditation practice without being too idealistic. Some regular meditation each day helps: a length of time we can sustain in our lives as they are, morning and evening if we can. A splurge once or twice a week is not quite so helpful. It is also important not to compare and to judge (adversely) how much we are able to sit with what we did on the retreat, and to be content with doing our best. We do need to be sensitive to how it might look to people we live with, if we were to suddenly rearrange the furniture, insist on quietness, and leap out of bed early every morning. It may be better some mornings not to get up early and to spend time relaxing together, and maybe to sit later. Those around us may not understand too much about meditation. Thankfully, the listening, receptive quality of meditative awareness itself is always accessible to us, moment by moment, as we gradually learn how to integrate meditation into our daily life. Whilst it is certainly very helpful to find or set up a quiet and encouraging space to meditate, we need to be really careful not to communicate to others through our actions that we are trying to get away from or are irritated with them.

Personally I don't eat silent meals normally, but I can always find ways of being more attentive at meals as they are, maybe in listening to others when they are talking to me. My meditation varies in timing and length and sometimes, because of circumstances, I don't get to sit for as long as usual. There is no need to be rigid—intention and willingness are the key.

### **Allowing our perspective to change**

Over time our meditating regularly subtly changes the way we look at things, opening a deeper and more inclusive perspective. However enthusiastic we may be, we can't will our way into this. If we persevere it creeps up on us. We don't need to fear losing it. I used to be afraid, on leaving a retreat, that my daily life was so chaotic and messy, that both I and it were not good enough to make progress. We need to be kind and patient with ourselves if we notice such a sense of desperation, and not act on it. We can take heart: nothing can make us train, *and*, nothing can stop us training. We find the heart of practice just where we are. The circumstances of our lives, now, *are* the appropriate vehicle for deepening our practice.

### **Respecting others**

We choose to work on ourselves. It is a mistake to insist that others train. Whilst enthusiasm helps, people tend to back off from 'evangelical' meditators, 'evangelical' non-smokers, 'evangelical' vegetarians, whatever. We all tend to back off when we are lectured at on what we ought to do and what is wrong with us! As we continue to meditate we can just let things emerge and not rush to judgement. We can 'feel out' what response is most helpful and compassionate in each situation. Great Master Dōgen tells us that the signs of Enlightenment are generosity, tenderness, benevolence and sympathy. As we go on, we may even find that aspects we thought of as the most difficult and most unpromising in our lives, can turn out to be the most helpful. Meditation enables us to thaw and untangle.

## **Training with the Precepts**

In doing my best to live by the Precepts<sup>1</sup> I have found training with their spirit is important. I break the Precepts where I wilfully, carelessly, or gratuitously, put myself in situations where I know I have difficulties with pulls and resistances. However, I don't break the Precepts when I find myself in seemingly very similar situations where such situations have arisen from how my life genuinely emerges. Then such seemingly unpromising situations become teaching. I don't need to climb mountains if I have a fear of heights. But if I am with friends on holiday and we are walking together up a hill it may be good to join them.

Occasionally I need to stand firm. And still, I can find ways to be true to my heart in ways that are sensitive to others: how we do things is often just as important as what we do. As we go on, a changed perspective creeps up on us and we, too, change. If I don't persevere and am lazy, I will continue to gouge out my habitual grooves, in unawareness and suffering. But, if I do persevere, even when I fall over I really don't need to beat myself up. Rather I just need to come back to being present again and again, listening, and then go from here. It is *never* too late to pause, to listen, and to follow the inner compass of meditation in daily life.

## **Meditating in activity**

I've always really appreciated Sōtō Zen's emphasis on integrating meditation practice with an ordinary daily life: each reflects the other, and meditating in activity is no less important than sitting meditation<sup>2</sup>. Through our practising meditating in activity we refine our capacity for being receptive and respon-

sive: being receptive to what comes, with openness, flexibility and good grace; and responding wholeheartedly in as collected a way as we can manage. We offer our willingness and our best effort.

When meditating in activity<sup>3</sup> we often focus on a particular task. And, because meditative awareness is inclusive awareness, we find ourselves, at the same time, naturally aware in a background way of what is happening inside us and outside us—a gentle ‘listening’. We can trust this awareness and don’t need to strive to be aware.

It seems to be all going along well. Then we notice our mind has wandered and we have got ‘caught up’. We just simply ‘come back’, again being responsive to the present situation and its needs. This is true whether it is a particular task or a more complex situation which may call us to respond to a variety of different needs in a short space of time. Such more complex situations really test our willingness to let go of each aspect at the appropriate moment, and to continue ‘listening’ for what is needed. We learn more quickly when we have compassion for our mistakes. What we ‘come back’ to can be varied—it could include planning and assessing our priorities, or honouring a nagging sense that we need to offer quiet space for a while to what is going on inside us.

In this process we may catch glimpses of long-time habits of mind, resistances, attractions, pulls, anxieties; one example may be how we compare ourselves with others. I sometimes notice a tendency to become goal-obsessed. Whilst getting an overview of the task in hand can be helpful, I find it doesn’t help me to ‘glue’ my eyes too much on the goal at the expense of tripping over my feet. We may notice a tendency to want to squeeze

just that last bit in, to push, to finish off, past what is good, at the expense of the next activity. It is important to be honest with ourselves and at the same time, kind, when we notice we are doing this.

I find that certain working bases for trust really help to point me to the bigger picture in meditating in daily life. These include: that regular sitting practice will itself naturally help me to ‘feel out’ what meditating in daily life needs without my striving or agonising (if I am willing); that I am meditating in daily life unless I notice that I am not (and when I notice I’m not it is sufficient just to make the effort to ‘come back’); that I can give others the benefit of the doubt unless they show me otherwise.

### **Supporting practice**

Some other practical aspects which encourage my practice include:

- Remembering that training includes the informal: sitting in a chair relaxed and gently focused; taking a quiet walk in trees, countryside or along the street; reading a book which encourages me to practise. There is a world of difference between pretending to be informal through laziness, and following similar activities when our sense is that, at that moment, those activities would be creative ways to encourage our practice.
- Sitting with others when we can manage it—for example, going to a local meditation group or temple. When we are struggling, we find others are enthusiastic; at other times things are reversed. We experience the quiet dignity

of people. We help. For everyone there are times of great enthusiasm in training and times of great difficulty. Training with others<sup>4</sup> can be a very helpful way to regroup us and to bring us to balance more quickly within the lows and the highs.

- Talking with someone who we trust, and who has experience of meditation practice. This could be ringing a monk for spiritual counselling or chatting with someone at the meditation group. I have found it very helpful in my own practice to keep contact with a monk once I have got over the initial awkwardness of speaking on the phone. Though asking seriously, I have found it unhelpful to make my idea of spiritual counselling too lofty, or to judge whether I have a good enough question (or sometimes even a clearly formulated question at all). A judging attitude can act like salt on a snail, shrivelling it into its shell, and helps no-one.

- Listening to the wide range of downloadable Dharma talks from the various OBC temple websites, or subscribing to this *Journal*<sup>5</sup> or reading some of its articles online, all of which reflect the experience of those practising this style of meditation.

- Going on a retreat from time to time. I have found for myself that, gradually, there has been a movement from a view that the monastery or temple is the place where we do real practice, to appreciating that wherever we are, right now, is actually where we do real practice. Retreats then are a way of stepping out for a while from our normal routine, and later stepping back in, re-invigorated and

inspired to practice more deeply: they provide an all-round environment where our practice is nourished, embraced and supported.

### **Not over-monitoring**

Meditative awareness and our capacity to analyse and evaluate can be complementary to each other when used appropriately. But it can really stifle things if we keep monitoring and judging how we are progressing, and whether we are meditating properly or not. An ‘answer’ to this seems more to come through our deepening trust and conviction in meditative awareness and the process of meditation. Such trust and conviction arises from our willingness to practise and to persevere. It seems we need a working basis of trust to find a natural and deep trust that is already here.

I find it helpful to view ‘coming back’ (gently) as an integral aspect of meditation itself rather than as a ‘hauling back’ from not meditating to meditating, with all the negative judgements that the latter implies. We learn to trust that the meditative process continues whether we see this or not. Perseverance seems more important than self-judgement or cleverness.

Particularly when we meditate at home, many of us may have a sneaking suspicion that everyone else meditates better than we do (but this can’t be true when you think about it). A few people may think that they meditate better than others (many of them may have a real problem!). It is a mistake to think that good meditation means always having a blank, ‘peaceful’ mind and bad meditation means its opposite. Thinking in this way makes us feel needlessly unhappy and probably like giving up. On busy days we *will* feel sleepy sometimes when we medi-

tate in the evenings. On days involving much intellectual work there *will* be thoughts swirling through. On family crisis days there *will* be emotions arising when we sit. This is life. Such things need not get in the way of meditation, which has more the flavour of being present to whatever comes, without obstructing or clinging. And, even as we get distracted or caught up, we can right then notice the ‘gluey’ quality of following trains of thought or in getting caught up in streams of emotions. We learn gradually to be content just to ‘come back’, and that being still and present is not the same as having a blank mind.

We can’t ever be someone else. When we truly start to understand this (which is quite sobering) we find that to be truly ourselves is something to be honoured and appreciated, rather than denigrated or ‘puffed up’. We learn from others and, equally, we need to feel out compassionately how to practise with our own body and mind in our life situation as it is. Only we can make the contribution we are called to make. This is humbling *and* wonderful.

#### *Notes*

1. The Precepts used in Sōtō Zen can be found, for example, in the introductory leaflet, *Serene Reflection Meditation: The Sōtō Zen Tradition of Buddhism*, downloadable from <http://www.throssel.org.uk/uploads/srm2.pdf>
2. Great Master Dōgen, in his search for a true master, conveys to us that he learnt so very much about the depth and profundity of meditation from observing the everyday activities of old monks in their daily functioning as the chief cooks of monasteries—see, for example, *Zen is Eternal Life*, Rev. Master PTNH Jiyu-Kennett, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, (Mt Shasta: Shasta Abbey Press, 1999) pp 152-154.

3. There are very helpful and comprehensive discussions of meditating in activity and daily life, for example, in the section on ‘Mindfulness’, in *Buddhism from Within*, Rev. Master Daizui MacPhillamy, (Shasta Abbey Press, 2003) pp 57-62, and in the chapter on ‘The Life of Practice’ in *Sitting Buddha*, Rev. Master Daishin Morgan, (Throssel Hole Press, 2004) pp 41-49.
4. OBC temples and affiliated meditation groups worldwide are shown on [www.obcon.org/temps.html](http://www.obcon.org/temps.html) . There may also be newer meditation groups in formation which are not on this list, so it may be worth your contacting your nearest temple for further information if none of these are close to you.
5. For example there is a range of talks given by monks of the Order on [www.obcon.org/Dhrmatk/DharmaTalks.htm](http://www.obcon.org/Dhrmatk/DharmaTalks.htm), from Shasta Abbey in North America on [www.shastaabbey.org/teachings-introductory.html](http://www.shastaabbey.org/teachings-introductory.html), from Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey in Europe on [www.throssel.org.uk/dharma-talks](http://www.throssel.org.uk/dharma-talks), and on other temples’ websites on [www.obcon.org/temps.html](http://www.obcon.org/temps.html), and articles are written by both monks and lay trainees in the Journal of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives, some of which can be accessed online, on [www.obcjournal.org](http://www.obcjournal.org).