

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WHY MEDITATION RETREAT

A closing talk on the final day of the six-day intensive meditation retreat.

FORMAT

This six-day retreat is a short one but it has some unique qualities of its own. The timetable has been arranged in close consultation with devotee Dr. Leo K. Thinn, in whose residence we have been holding this retreat, to fit within the six days you are on holiday. The set-up of the retreat is based around my experiences in London. It is not meant to be over-ambitious, but relies on gradual but regular practice. The emphasis is on being a regular meditator. The aim is to reduce anxiety at work and in daily life.

The sitting session on the first day was only twenty minutes. Since then, you have gradually progressed to thirty and then forty-five minutes without feeling too much pressure from the duration of the session. In the majority of meditation centres, alternate sessions of sitting and walking meditation of one hour at a stretch is standard practice. Some even have two and three hours as a standard session. Here, however, we have started with thirty minutes of sitting meditation alternating with thirty minutes of walking meditation. I have purposely made this retreat quite different from the other

retreats in which I have taken part. One significant difference in this retreat is the interviews held with the meditators. These individual interviews have taken place four times a day because one of the main aims of taking part in a retreat is to learn the techniques of meditation.

Completing a ten-day retreat once in your life is hardly sufficient. A ten-day or one-month retreat will not produce a miracle. Applying the techniques that you have learnt during the ten-day or one-month retreat to your daily activities is what is important.

MEDITATION RETREATS IN BURMA

In Burma, Thailand Sri Lanka, it was only after the World War II and in the second half of the 20th century, that the ten-day retreats gained popularity. Before that, few retreats like these were organized. It was through the encouragement and managerial abilities of learned and lay people, for example, in Burma like Mr. Than Daing from the Mogok Meditation Centre and Sir U Thwin from Mahasi Meditation Centre, that these ten-day retreats came within the reach of many people. Similarly, successful business people from middle class background in Thailand and Sri Lanka brought their business management skills to help the top meditation teachers organize retreats for lay people. When they started, they were not very widespread. However, now, even young children will attend short retreats during their school holidays. They have become rooted in modern Buddhist culture just like temporary ordination of boys and girls in the summer.

There are over ten major techniques of vipassana meditation currently in practice in Burma. And there are a few in Thailand as well. So, you should consider ourselves lucky to have been born in Burma, Thailand and Sri Lanka because of the commonly availability of meditation teachers and centres. However, it is up to individual whether he or she travels *from the light into the dark*. Since we are born lucky, we have to live lucky, enjoying all the benefits of the Dhamma.

FLEXIBILITY

Given the number of proven Vipassana meditation techniques, to get yourself affiliated to only a particular technique and to shut yourself off from the rest, is really a shame. All those techniques are excellent. They have been proven and accepted by many generations. If they were not valid, they would not have survived this long. In my opinion, we should select and adopt what is good from those techniques, and use them to our benefit, in a flexible way. It is not helpful to become attached to one particular technique and start degrading the others. It is actually harmful to look down on other techniques. If one becomes dogmatic, one begins to cause damage to all of the techniques including the one to which you are affiliated.

Flexibility is one of the main principles in the set-up of this retreat. I did not seek to impose a single technique on anyone. Even the technique in breathing can vary and it is so in Mahasi, Mogok, Sun Lun and Ajahn Chah tradition. The type of meditation, which I would like to but has not been possible to be included in this six-day retreat, is the meditation on the four elements also known as the *Ka-thit-wai* technique. To be

able to practise this technique you would need in addition to time to acquire some basic knowledge of the four elements first.

THEORETICAL & PRACTICAL UNDERSTANDING

Theoretical and practical understanding needs to be in balance as well. I have given priority to this in the set-up of the retreat. In some retreats, the individual may only have the opportunity to discuss with the instructor just once or maybe three times in a whole week or ten days. There may be some doubts requiring some discussion. Many discourses are record of the discussions, which took place between the Buddha and the meditators. Some meditators do not progress because they lack this opportunity for discussion although they may have many opportunities to listen to Dhamma talks. Listening to the Dhamma talk and experiencing what is said in the session are very important. The late Mogok Sayadaw, Venerable Aggamahapandita Vimala, explained the Paticca-samuppada, *the Law of Dependence Origination* every single day in his meditation retreats. This is because he wanted people to gain the basic right views and attitudes

The four times a day interviews are based on that experience as well as my understanding of the importance of the two blessings (*Mangala-sutta*) in search of the true Dhamma — listening and discussing (*Kalena-dhamma-savanam* & *kalena-dhamma-sakaccha*). You have been blessed with these two crucial factors during this retreat.

MINDFULNESS EMPHASISED

I have given first priority to *sati* (mindfulness) and secondary status to *samadhi* (concentration). Mindfulness and not concentration is emphasized in vipassana meditation. Concentration is to be acquired with unbroken and advanced mindfulness. I mentioned this in my letter to Dr. Leo K. Thinn. If we wish to practise vipassana Meditation, we have to base it on the Satipatthana-sutta, the *Discourse on the Foundation of Mindfulness*. Of the many Discourses, this one is a most complete. In the Satipatthana-sutta, priority is given to *sati*, awareness because it forms the basis as well as the principle of the practice. You will know whether effort and concentration are in balance through awareness. Whether or not confidence and understanding are in balance, you will find out through awareness. That is why you require *sati*, mindfulness all the time. There is never a surplus of mindfulness.

In *Satipatthana Vipassana meditation*, *sati* is the foundation. Although using the term the *Satipatthana*, people often emphasize more on the development of *samadhi* rather than *sati*. In fact, this perhaps should be called of *Samadhipatthana* rather than *Satipatthana*! We may not even realise what is happening because of the lack of adequate mindfulness. In order to realise the correct path we require *sati*.

The Buddha as the Ascetic Gotama studied under Alara Kalama and Udaka Ramaputta, two teachers who had developed the Sankhyayoga philosophy. The Ascetic Gotama, before becoming enlightened acquired *Arupa-jhana*, the third stage, with one teacher and the fourth stage with the other.

These were the stages he reached through development of *samadhi*. These stages are very high attainments in themselves, no doubt. That was why Alara Kalama and Udaka Ramaputta, together with their followers, were quite satisfied with their attainment, which provided them with peace, tranquillity and bliss. However, the Ascetic Gotama realised that, although he had attained a high level in his meditation this was not the answer to the problem he had determined to solve. Having made this judgement, he left these two teachers and tried a different technique. He tried self mortification which was and is still practised by Jainas in India. He had a great deal of *samadhi* and meditated with a minimal intake of food, and later without eating at all. That also did not help him reach the goal of cessation of *dukkha* (suffering). Eventually he discarded this practice as well.

The unique character of Buddhist meditation, which is different from meditation practised by other religions, is that *sati* (mindfulness) is given priority over everything else. The reasons for this are not only academic but also logical. That is why my intention was to emphasize *sati* throughout this retreat and not use a meditation practice, which directly develops *samadhi*. I know that at times it can be very difficult to sit and meditate without building up *samadhi* first. Nevertheless, as we realise the difficulties and our reactions to these, this leads us to understand that these reactions are conditioned and exist when being conditioned, and that it is possible to stop the conditioning process.

Within these few days, I have also explained and instructed you on the other types of meditation such as metta meditation, Buddha-nussati meditation, meditation on

impersonality of the body and meditation on death. However, this is not all. It is merely the beginning. I have taught all these methods so that you will be able to continue with the meditation practice, in your own time. Although you will not be able to see me every now and then, you can still contact me by telephone if there is anything you wish to ask or discuss.

MEDITATION IN DAILY LIFE

The last aim of this short retreat was to introduce meditation into your daily life. You can meditate while leading a normal lay person's life. Some people like to meditate when in the meditation Centre or a temple, but as soon as they return home, they stop everything. This cannot be right. The temple should be regarded as the place where you study the Dhamma and your home the place where you practise it. What usually happens is just the opposite. People practise the Dhamma in the temples where they stay for only a short period. They should practise the Dhamma at home, with their family, relatives and friends and in the work place, applying the principles that have been taught.

Another thing, which I would like to remind you about is the Noble Eightfold Path (*atthangika-magga*). The Pali word *magga* means path or a way, which is the pathway of life. A businessman, a professional or a skilled worker who walks along this pathway will become successful and prosperous. The word *magga* is usually translated as the Buddhist way of life and is composed of eight parts. The human body is composed of various parts such as the heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, skull, arms, legs, etc. and just one part does not make a human. Only when all these parts combine, does it

form a human being. Likewise, just one component of the eight factors does not form the Path. Both mindfulness and concentration are part of this path. Only when all eight components are present does it construct the path, and become the true path (*magga-sacca*).

This *magga-sacca*, "the truth of the path" may be simply divided for practical purpose into *dana* (sharing), *sila* (ethical morality) and *bhavana* (meditation). Usually people practise *dana* and *sila* but leave out the *bhavana*. They tend to choose what they want to do, sometimes saying, "Oh, the time is not yet right for me to do *bhavana*." What happens then is that because they pick and choose, this practice no longer becomes the right path (*magga*) and no longer meets the criteria of the Four Noble Truths. Unless you are on the Noble Path (*ariya magga*), you are not practising Buddhism. You may be giving *dana* but this cannot be regarded as "*Buddhist Dana*." Although you may be donating something to a monk, it may not be deemed to be in accordance with the Eightfold Path. That is why it is very important for you to know and understand the Eightfold Path. So please read books on the Noble Eightfold Path and listen to sermons on that. Put into practice what you learn from the books and sermons, such as right understanding, right attitude, right effort and right mindfulness.