



Our speaker for March 10th, 2010 was Jennifer Block, a Chaplain at the Zen Hospice Project, and one of the teachers with the Chaplaincy Training Program at the Sati Center for Buddhist Studies in Redwood City. She has a passion for spirit, the arts, adventure travel, and a deep abiding love for dogs. Jennifer is rumored to be from New Jersey.

Jennifer observed that when she first started on a spiritual journey, life would get easier, and the things that gave her difficulty would drop away. She found that life continues to be difficult, no matter how much she practices. However, even though life is painful, suffering is optional. There are things that reduce the suffering. For example, when she encounters unfairness at work, or some other situation that tends to cause her to react, there are several practices that ease the suffering:

- Don't complain. Just wait, the situation will change.
- She can't stay angry unless she feeds it. One way of feeding it is to play a mental tape over and over that obsesses about it. Another way is to find the wrong person to discuss it with – some people will jump on the bandwagon and say "They can't do that!" Don't do this.
- Wait. Don't send out an email or voicemail when you are reacting. Just wait until you can figure out what is really bothering you.
- Watch out for hope. Hope is an expectation that things will be different than they are.
- When things are difficult, the starting point is awareness. Mindfulness is a nonjudgmental, present moment awareness.

Eleven Attitudes for Success in Mindfulness Practice

From Mindfulness in Plain English, by Venerable Henepola Gunaratana

1. Don't expect anything. Just sit back and see what happens. Treat the whole thing as an experiment. Take an active interest in the test itself. But don't get distracted by your expectations about results. For that matter, don't be anxious for any result whatsoever. Let the meditation move along at its own speed and in its own direction. Let the meditation teach you what it wants you to learn. Meditative awareness seeks to see reality exactly as it is. Whether that corresponds to our expectations or not, it requires a temporary suspension of all our preconceptions and ideas. We must store away our images, opinions and interpretations someplace out of the way for the duration. Otherwise we will stumble over them.

2. Don't strain: Don't force anything or make grand exaggerated efforts. Meditation is not aggressive. There is no violent striving. Just let your effort be relaxed and steady.

3. Don't rush: There is no hurry, so take your time. Settle yourself on a cushion and sit as though you have a whole day. Anything really valuable takes time to develop. Patience, patience, patience.

4. Don't cling to anything and don't reject anything: Let come what comes and accommodate yourself to that, whatever it is. If good mental images arise, that is fine. If bad mental images arise, that is fine, too. Look on all of it as equal and make yourself comfortable with whatever happens. Don't fight with what you experience, just observe it all mindfully.

5. Let go: Learn to flow with all the changes that come up. Loosen up and relax.

6. Accept everything that arises: Accept your feelings, even the ones you wish you did not have. Accept your experiences, even the ones you hate. Don't condemn yourself for having human flaws and failings. Learn to see all the phenomena in the mind as being perfectly natural and understandable. Try to exercise a disinterested acceptance at all times and with respect to everything you experience.

7. Be gentle with yourself: Be kind to yourself. You may not be perfect, but you are all you've got to work with. The process of becoming who you will be begins first with the total acceptance of who you are.

8. Investigate yourself: Question everything. Take nothing for granted. Don't believe anything because it sounds wise and pious and some holy men said it. See for yourself. That does not mean that you should be cynical, impudent or irreverent. It means you should be empirical. Subject all statements to the actual test of your experience and let the results be your guide to truth. Insight meditation evolves out of an inner longing to wake up to what is real and to gain liberating insight to the true structure of existence. The entire practice hinges upon this desire to be awake to the truth. Without it, the practice is superficial.

9. View all problems as challenges: Look upon negatives that arise as opportunities to learn and to grow. Don't run from them, condemn yourself or bear your burden in saintly silence. You have a problem? Great. More grist for the mill. Rejoice, dive in and investigate.

10. Don't ponder: You don't need to figure everything out. Discursive thinking won't free you from the trap. In meditation, the mind is purified naturally by mindfulness, by wordless bare attention. Habitual deliberation is not necessary to eliminate those things that are keeping you in bondage. All that is necessary is a clear, non-conceptual perception of what they are and how they work. That alone is sufficient to dissolve them. Concepts and reasoning just get in the way. Don't think. See.

11. Don't dwell upon contrasts: Differences do exist between people, but dwelling upon them is a dangerous process. Unless carefully handled, it leads directly to egotism. Ordinary human thinking is full of greed, jealousy and pride. A man seeing another man on the street may immediately think, "He is better looking than I am." The instant result is envy or shame. A girl seeing another girl may think, "I am prettier than she is." The instant result is pride. This sort of comparison is a mental habit, and it leads directly to ill feeling of one sort or another: greed, envy, pride, jealousy, hatred. It is an unskillful mental state, but we do it all the time. We compare our looks with others, our success, our accomplishments, our wealth, possessions, or I.Q. and all these lead to the same place--estrangement, barriers between people, and ill feeling. The meditator's job is to cancel this unskillful habit by examining it thoroughly, and then replacing it with another. Rather than noticing the differences between self and others, the meditator trains himself to notice similarities. He centers his attention on those factors that are universal to all life, things that will move him closer to others. Thus his comparison, if any, leads to feelings of kinship rather than feelings of estrangement.

Breathing is a universal process. All vertebrates breathe in essentially the same manner. All living things exchange gasses with their environment in some way or other. This is one of the reasons that breathing is chosen as the focus of meditation. The meditator is advised to explore the process of his own breathing as a vehicle for realizing his own inherent connectedness with the rest of life. This does not mean that we shut our eyes to all the differences around us. Differences exist. It means simply that we de-emphasize contrasts and emphasize the universal factors.

*"If your mind is peaceful it will be just like still, flowing water ...
Your mind will be like flowing water, and yet it's still.
It's almost as if it were still, and yet it's flowing.
So I call it 'still, flowing water.' Wisdom can arise here."
(Ajahn Chah: Living Dhamma)*

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