

Robert Cusick 04-14-2010



Robert has been practicing Buddhist meditation since 1997 and is a student of Gil Fronsdal. He trained as a Buddhist monk, under the Venerable Pa Auk Sayadaw, at Pa Auk Forest Monastery in southern Myanmar (Burma). He also trained in the Soto Zen tradition at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center and with A.H. Almaas (Hameed Ali) in the Diamond Approach (DH6). Before leaving for Burma, Robert participated in the second Buddhist Chaplaincy training offered through the Sati Center for Buddhist Studies and he completed the first Dedicated Practitioners Program (DPP1) at Spirit Rock

Meditation Center. He subsequently served there, upon his return to the U.S., in the role of Retreats Program Manager. Robert is a certified Kripalu Yoga teacher.

Learning How to Practice Skillfully

This talk was inspired by a teaching given by Ajahn Pasanno, the co-abbot of Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery, in Redwood Valley, CA

From time-to-time it's good to reflect on how we practice and what we use the practice for. There are ways to practice which are wholesome – these, of course, are the most effective.

Ways we practice:

1. Through development of *sila* (ethics).

Keeping the precepts and practicing *dana* (generosity) are the foundations of developing *sila*, but *sila* also includes opening our hearts and really listening to others. Without the foundation of ethics, our practice is on shaky grounds.

Unlike the West, in Asia practice does not include meditation until after many years of practicing *sila*. In Asia, meditation is considered an advanced practice, while in the West it tends to be what we start off with.

The classic approach to ethics is in following the precepts. Lay practitioners have only five precepts to follow, while monastics have hundreds. The precepts are not commandments, but are training guidelines. The more closely the precepts are followed, the more wholesome the practice.

The five precepts are:

1. *Abstain from harming.* This means that one must not kill any living creatures, instruct others to kill living creatures, nor to approve of killing. Respect life. Try to protect life whenever possible, and cultivate *metta* (loving kindness) to all beings by wishing that they may be happy and free from harm.

2. *Do not take what is not freely given.*

Respect other's property. If something is not given, do not take it by force or fraud.

3. *Do not engage in sexual misconduct.*

Although moral standards have varied in different culture and different times, rape, adultery, child molestation, or any sexual behavior that involves physical and mental injury to others should be avoided.

4. *Abstain from false or wrong speech.*

In the Anguttara Nikaya (10.176), the example is given:

There is the case where a certain person, abandoning false speech, abstains from false speech. When he has been called to a town meeting, a group meeting, a gathering of his relatives, his guild, or of the royalty, if he is asked as a witness, "Come & tell, good man, what you know": If he doesn't know, he says, "I don't know." If he does know, he says, "I know." If he hasn't seen, he says, "I haven't seen." If he has seen, he says, "I have seen." Thus he doesn't consciously tell a lie for his own sake, for the sake of another, or for the sake of any reward. Abandoning false speech, he abstains from false speech.

Abstaining from false speech not only includes avoiding lying, but also abstaining from harmful speech or gossip.

5. Abstain from intoxicants.

This not only includes abstaining from alcohol, but also from any substance that causes one to become heedless. Intoxicants not only interfere with our ability to have clarity, awareness, and attention, but may also lead to committing unwholesome deeds, harming ourselves, or harming others.

2. Developing mindfulness and clear comprehension

We can develop clear comprehension by learning to avoid destructive emotions, such as shame, guilt, anger, jealousy, resentment, and fear. We practice not judging others, and learn how to see things as they are.

3. Developing *samadhi*

Samadhi is often translated as concentration. Samadhi is a state of rest in the mind. *Sam dhi* is "*sam* " (even) and "*dhi*" (intellect), or a state of total equilibrium ("*sam* ") of a detached intellect ("*dhi*").

A mind that does not have *samadhi*, jumps from one thought to another, is controlled by moods, emotions, and other distractions. In the Samadhi Sutta (SN 35.99), the Buddha says "'Develop concentration, monks. A concentrated monk discerns things as they actually are present."

Once the mind develops *samadhi*, it ceases rushing around, and become tranquil and calm.

4. Cultivating wisdom and insight (*vipassana*)

Vipassana means insight, clear-seeing, or seeing deeply. Vipassana meditation teaches us to experience mind and matter directly, seeing that they are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not the self. Vipassana meditation teaches us moment-to-moment mindfulness of the inconstancy of events as they are directly experienced in the present. This mindfulness creates a sense of dispassion toward all events, to release us from suffering.

The purpose of practice is...

The four practices above are not the goals of practice, they are the tools. Use of these tools brings us to a place of opening, or what Ajan Chah calls "the sure heart's release."

The purpose of the practices is to come to a place of letting go of everything that causes, creates or leads to suffering, restriction, contraction, and discontentment.

This doesn't mean we abandon the practices of keeping the precepts, developing mindfulness and clear comprehension or *samadhi* or cultivating wisdom and insight. It means rather that we understand those are the *tools* we make use of in order to realize and directly experience letting go, relinquishment or release.

So, how do we learn how to make use of these 'practice tools?' How do we come to recognize and acknowledge their limitations? How do we use them skillfully?

Different people use different combinations of the methods, or use different methods at different times in their life. There is no one right ordained way. The Buddha encouraged us to be open, investigate, and see what works. There are different aspects of practice and times when different practices are appropriate for working with or accomplishing a particular purpose or objective. We need to understand what each practice is for and in what context its use is appropriate.

One way to do this, the Buddha tells us time and again, is to reflect on the unsatisfactory or stressful quality of suffering, *dukkha* in Pali. These different practices are each helpful (i.e., skillful means) for relinquishing *dukkha* in particular ways. What leads us to freedom, and what leads us to entrapment?

Until we see what's going on, we don't have choices, we just react.

The Pali word '*dukkha*' is often translated into English as 'suffering,' Its meaning, however, ranges from the gross suffering of "sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair" to the very subtle sense of 'being' or 'becoming' conceiving or believing that there is an 'I' or a 'me' or a 'mine.' While this habit of self-identification seems natural, it is actually the source of a constant feeling of discomfort, frustration or difficulty. So, another translation of *dukkha* is "dissatisfaction."

It's, therefore, useful to understand the nuances of *dukkha* – from the most coarse to the most subtle – in the context of our *lived present-moment experience*. Likewise, it's useful to know what practice is appropriate to engage, in any given moment, to let go of *dukkha*, to relinquish suffering

Sometimes it's the restraint of *sila* – composure, virtue, living from integrity – that can be the antidote to suffering. Other times sharp, continuous mindfulness, balance, composure and 'sense restraint' will do the trick. Concentration brings a steady, spacious quality that settles and unifies the mind. This steadiness of mind gives rise to the clarity we need to see through suffering and let it go.

At other times it's appropriate and necessary to cultivate wisdom and insight through the practice of intentional investigation, reflection, questioning, analyzing – using the mind's innate capacity to discriminate, in order to see through suffering. In this way, we can investigate what's true, what's really of value, what is freedom vs. entrapment, and we can come to know the myriad ways in which we get caught. By cultivating wisdom, in this systematic way, we can often neutralize and let go of the experience of suffering. Sometimes we're even able to let go of the potential for suffering -- before it turns into a firestorm.

Ajahn Chah, the great Thai Forest Meditation Master, emphasized to his monastic and lay students that when practice is 'going well' what appears in the mind is really only a perception of things according to their nature and that none of these perceptions are not worth clinging to. So...

- We see the truth of ***anicca***, that all things are *impermanent*, constantly changing, uncertain, therefore not worth clinging to.
- We see the truth of ***dukkha***, that what is impermanent is unstable, unsatisfactory, complicated, often painful and, therefore, not worth clinging to.
- We see the truth of ***anatta***, that this is not self, not me, not mine, that this 'self' is merely a construct arising out of delusion and is, therefore, not worth clinging to. We see that all phenomena, both *external* (that is, the things happening around us) and *internal* (our own perceptions, feelings, thoughts, ideas, moods, etc.) need to be relinquished and let go of.

What this means is that we need to see dukkha clearly, in order to let go of it. Seeing the nature of suffering clearly brings us to the point of really being ready to let go. Sometimes we just can't hold on any longer!

Consider how easily we all attach our hopes and desires to that which we conceive of as pleasant, delightful, comforting or secure. We do this with our external experience (with the things and people in our world) and our internal experience (with our thoughts, feelings, emotions). Naturally, we want things to be pleasurable, satisfying, pleasing in every way. Even when they aren't we nevertheless keep moving on from one experience to another hoping that eventually things will get better. *This is dukkha.*

Dukkha is seen as the very nature of how we experience sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, mental formations; the experiences of our body, our feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness.

When through reflection and investigation we come to know and see that this is all really dukkha, it then becomes possible for us to relinquish our clinging and let go.

By constantly trying to manipulate our experience so we're comfortable, so everything is pleasing and satisfying, so that we always get our way, we inadvertently create our own suffering. This is what the world does. This is what we've been taught to aspire to. This is how we look for happiness.

Through these various core meditation practices we come to discover that it's actually dispassion, *not* striving or manipulation, that brings us release from our very real and ever-present suffering.

1. With dispassion it's fine when we get what we want. It's also fine when we don't. If things are painful, OK. If they're pleasurable, OK. Letting things simply be the way they are without trying to manipulate or change them in hot pursuit of our preferences is dispassion. Dispassion feels cool. It nourishes us. It brings with it a sense of freedom (from stress or suffering).
2. In our meditation practice we discover that all phenomena come into being because we invest interest in them. We breathe life into them. When there's a spark of an idea, a thought or an emotion, instead of fanning it, through dispassion we can just let it be. When we do this, it may cease to be – and go out instead of turning into a wildfire that consumes us. *This can be learned.*
3. In our meditation we can also practice paying attention to how we create the sense of a 'self' until we really can feel what possessing a 'me' actually 'tastes' like. Applying the quality of relinquishment to this sense of 'me, mine, my personal preferences, my way, my ideas, my sense of self,' brings us a qualitative experience of spaciousness, of freedom. We experience a deeply felt release by letting go, by putting things down, by no longer clinging. This can be described as freedom or peace.

When we work in this way, we begin to recognize the tendencies of the mind and the mind's habitual inclination towards sense desires or desire for being or becoming. In this way we see how we create our suffering, where the suffering is and where the possibility for relinquishment is.

It's important to look into this deeply. These various meditation practices all work together. But beware: They aren't meant to be formulaic. We have to learn how to appropriately engage these different types of

practices for ourselves. We have to be willing to explore and experiment to find out what works or doesn't work at any given moment or point in our Path of Practice. We can't rely on somebody else to tell us what to do or give a magic formula. In the end, it's up to each of us to develop the wisdom to practice for ourselves. This means it's really up to each one of us individually to learn how to practice. This is the challenge, our challenge – not to cling.

What we invest our energy in, creates our karma, and determines our lives and future. When we can see the truth of things, see things clearly, we cease to fan the fire,