

NEWSLETTER
December 26, 2003
Revised December 2005
Number 9

CHOOSING TO MEDITATE

In continuing my thoughts on meditation, I would like to discuss choosing to meditate. I do not mean the initial choice of deciding to learn to meditate, or even of the daily choice of actually sitting down to do it, although those choices are, of course, important. I mean the constant choice that we must make in the practice of Serene Reflection Meditation to just sit, to try to be willing to let go of, to disengage from, our deliberate involvement with anything that may have captured our attention. Ultimately, in our daily lives, we work on making a similar choice, trying to be willing to let go of anything which distracts us from single-minded attention to all our daily activities.

Early in our meditation practice we come to see that we are continually enmeshed in, fascinated by whatever goes on in our minds and bodies. The first step in developing our practice is to choose to be willing to let go of our entanglement in all this stuff. That doesn't mean that we are always successful, or even that we always remember. It simply means that we willingly choose to try, whenever we notice that we have once again been caught by our perceptions, feelings, memories, opinions, justifications, etc., to come back to just sitting, even when we don't particularly want to. It is just that letting go is easier said than done. Our mental habits go very deep. Continuous practice is the only antidote that I know of. By letting go, I do **not** mean ignoring anything or pushing anything away, but simply disengaging from our obsessive involvement with all of it; of no longer allowing it to control us. We are aware of whatever is there, we accept and embrace it, and then simply sit still in the midst of it.

It can be hard—at least it has been for me—to see that we need to let go of some things in particular. Certain things seem **IMPORTANT!** They seem different. They feel good to dwell on. We feel that we need to solve a problem; plan our day, or some project; examine our actions; rehearse a conversation or confrontation; remember some detail; or we are concerned about our health, or the health of someone close to us; or... Sometimes it is good to consider these things, but we should know that doing so is not Serene Reflection Meditation. And if you are anything like me, it can be very difficult to remember, or even to be willing, to choose to let these things go. Until we are willing, however, to let them go, willing to continually make that choice, our meditation practice will not deepen.

It is important to know that choosing to let go of something does **not** mean that it necessarily goes away. The same type of thing, e.g. fretting about plans, may arise repeatedly and we may repeatedly do our very best to let it go. Nevertheless, it continues to come up. What are we doing wrong? We are not necessarily doing *anything* wrong. However long we train, our old karma, our old mental habits, may continue to work upon us, and the desire to dwell on planning, or whatever, may continue to arise. Our job is to no longer allow it to control us, to no longer feed it, but just to sit still with(in) it.

Our scriptures teach us that we need to let go of everything. In Serene Reflection Meditation, we allow whatever is there to arise, and we allow it to pass; we don't hold onto it, or push it away. To be willing, during our meditation, to let go of those arising ideas, thoughts, plans, difficulties, etc. can make us feel that we are losing control. It can make us feel that we are deliberately abandoning control of our lives. In other words, it can be scary.

It may not be particularly comforting to know that, ultimately, we are not, can not be, in control, anyway. As my Master would often say: "The universe is not answerable to my personal will." And to think that you can make it so is a delusion. At some point in our training, to be able to continue, we have to give up the idea that we can be in control. At some point we simply have to trust. Trust in what? Believe it or not, that is not important. We simply have to trust, to let go of our idea of controlling the destiny of ourselves, or our family, or our possessions, or our nation, etc. This is not, of course, to say that we abandon our responsibilities. We must do our best to meditatively, Preceptually take care of all of the above to the best of our ability, but that is all that we should try to do, and then we should try to be willing to let go of our anxiety and simply trust.

As for doing our best, that was another thing that I often heard my Master talk about.

Training is always just doing our best. It took me a long time to understand that doing our best was not either doing as much as we felt like, or doing the best that we could imagine. It simply meant doing the best that we could, and then letting it go—trusting. It is important to understand that it is fine to plan ahead, examine some action, try to remember some detail, etc. It is just not helpful to dwell on it, to "wallow" in it. Do what needs to be done to the best of our ability, and then let it go. Don't fret over it. And when it comes up in meditation, if we truly need to look at it, we must be willing to trust that it will come up again at a more convenient time. Occasionally, however, something just won't leave us alone. If this occurs after we have had some time to develop our meditation practice, it may be good to pay attention to this "distraction." It may be trying to tell us something. It is still best not to deliberately follow this thought, or feeling, or sensation, etc. during formal meditation—unless the "distraction" is the smell of smoke! Just do the best that you can. Your meditation will deepen with practice, and your questions will tend to get answered with time. If you would like to read more on dealing with "distractions," I suggest that you click on the link on our web-site home page on the right, under **Teaching** entitled **The Eightfold Path of Buddhism**, by Rev. Daizui MacPhillamy. See **Section 7. Mindfulness**.

Rev. Rokuzan
Copyright © 2003, 2005 Columbia Zen Buddhist Priory