

Questions from Students...

February 2007 newsletter

Q: How can I control my thoughts? My mind seems to be always busy and when I try to meditate it doesn't get much better. How can the "Embodied Meditation" that you teach help me?

A: First, it is important to know that your experience is not unusual, as most people, upon beginning a practice of sitting meditation are surprised by the wildness of their minds. As Zen teacher Uchiyama Roshi would say, "just as your stomach secretes acid to digest food, your mind secretes thoughts. That is its function". Our practice is not to get rid of thinking but to see "who is thinking"? and "What lies beyond thought"?

True meditation is not about 'mind control'. While there are techniques that work from this goal, in my view they are shortsighted and often destructive because they assume a divided self: a controller and the controlled. This is not a prescription for deep peace, harmony or wisdom.

Embodied Meditation is based in the Zen practice of 'just sitting' where we cultivate an atmosphere of friendliness toward all that arises. You can imagine that you are in a rowboat floating down a wide, safe river with a gentle current. You don't need to control the boat from moment to moment, you will be carried by the river itself. Your 'job' is to enjoy the scenery and occasionally to steer the boat so that you don't get too close to shore.

Your life will unfold from moment to moment without 'your' control. As soon as you assume an attitude of control there is a basic separation from the flow of your life. How sad it is for me when I see people treating their life as a dangerous enemy that must be tamed!

Q: But what of all the wild thoughts and emotions that pull me around, making me feel crazy, anxious and unhappy? Are you saying that I should just passively let them happen and that by some miracle I will find peace?

A: In "Embodied Meditation" our emphasis is to gently orient the mind toward the basic reality of the moment which is the fact that we are sitting and breathing. There are numerous, ever changing sensations that can ground us in the living truth. Without fighting the thoughts and feelings, we gently and consistently return to the most basic, fundamental reality of life: our bodily sensations.

While you are meditating (and throughout your day) you will often come awake to the fact that you are lost in thought. This 'coming awake' is the spontaneous functioning of our wisdom or "True Self- we want to encourage, welcome and invite this natural occurrence. In the moment of coming awake, you can sense the residue from the previous mind state that has hijacked you. This moment is critical. Without judgment or analysis, sense what is alive in your body as you come back home to yourself. After a moment or two, gently guide your attention back to something that is alive, the sensations of your bottom on the seat, the breathing, the sounds-something that an expression of the living moment. Don't try to hold onto the living moment just gently steer your boat in that direction and let go into the flow of the river. If, in the moment of returning to presence, a judgment immediately forms ("why are you thinking so much", "what's wrong with you", "my mind is crazy"), sense this in your body, briefly say hello to this thought even if you really dislike it and let go.

Alternatively, when your thinking is very strong, at the moment of awakening to yourself, you can intentionally sense the next three breaths from beginning to end. After focusing the attention in this way, once again let go and enjoy the scenery of your life.

Amazingly, you do not need to meditate 'well' for there to be great benefits. Simply sitting each day for at least twenty minutes with the attitude presented here will transform your life. Practice daily for 3-4 weeks and I am sure the change will be very apparent to you.