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Meditation and Monastic Life - Vehicles for Liberation **Ajahn Candasiri**

In this article I will try to explain the extent to which monastic life is important in the Theravada tradition of Buddhism, and ways in which meditation is a support for our monastic life.

The primary aim of the Buddha's teaching is to free the heart from the bond of ego-centred desires, arising through greed, hatred and delusion. His essential guidance was simple and direct: do good, refrain from evil, purify the heart. Another formulation is the Eightfold Path: right understanding; right intention; right speech, action and livelihood; right effort; right mindfulness and right concentration. It is a very complete and practical training for lay disciples as well as for monks and nuns. The first section points to an appreciation of the nature of our existence; more specifically suffering, its causes and what enables its cessation; the middle sections relate to our lives in community and in society; while the final sections concern the training of the mind - meditation being a primary means for this.

After his enlightenment, the Buddha spent the remaining forty-five years of his life guiding others towards perfect liberation; he encouraged his disciples to do the same. At first there was no formalized monastic rule; the people attracted to and living close to the Buddha already had a clear understanding of the means and purposes of his teaching and were able, as far as we can tell, to survive supported by lay practitioners, without difficulty. Later, as the Order grew, it began to attract people who lacked that understanding, so behaviour that was less congruent with the ideals of simplicity, renunciation and ethical principles began to be manifested in the community. At this point the Buddha decided to lay down the Patimokkha, a rule of training that, together with the stories behind each rule, fills several volumes. This is still the basis of our monastic life.

The Buddha gave ten reasons for establishing the Patimokkha. Some were practical - it provided guidelines for maintaining the welfare of the community (Sangha) and its members. Also it promoted conduct that gave rise to faith in those who drew near and acted as a mirror for reflecting aspects of individuals' practice in need of attention.

One time, Ananda, the Buddha's attendant for many years, exclaimed that good companions constituted at least half of the Holy Life. The Buddha's response was, "Say not so, Ananda, noble friendship is the whole of the Holy Life" - because it supports the cultivation of the Eightfold Path. Later, at the time of his demise the Buddha told his disciples that he was leaving them the Dhamma Vinaya (the body of

teaching and training structures) as a guide and support. Nowadays monastic training and community are very much emphasized within our own lineage but in fact this is unusual - most ordained people preferring a more independent lifestyle, even though it can mean considerable adaptation to the rule.

Sometimes people ask: "How much meditation do you do each day?" At first, when I tell them, "One hour in the morning and one hour in the evening", they seem surprised it's so little. Then, when I say, "But we try to make our whole life a meditation," they brighten - gladdened both by the wholeheartedness and accessibility of such an approach. Having lived as a nun in Buddhist monastic communities for more than twenty-six years, daily life is now inseparable from 'meditation'.

So what, actually, is meditation? Clearly there are many styles of meditation. Some are technique-based - applying a clearly prescribed method to bring about a state of calm; others involve contemplation of an aspect of the teaching, or passage of scripture. For me, it is the cultivation of presence. Sometimes this includes a technique of contemplation but, above all, it implies a willingness to notice and attend carefully to whatever is happening in the mind or body.

Some examples from my own practice may be helpful. One time a novice had been taking food from the kitchen for a sick nun, without permission. It was during our winter retreat and I began to worry about this. It became an obsession. Every time I sat down to meditate it would arise in my mind; every time I did walking meditation it was there - along with the voices of self disparagement: 'You wimp! You should speak to that novice about it, but you don't dare!' (She was a powerful lady). I tried to be aware of my feet on the path; I tried to calm the mind with the breath, but the monotonous refrain continued: 'You wimp! This is what you should do - but you can't!' Eventually I hit upon a strategy:- to name it - 'Worry' - and to deliberately fill the mind with this word as I stomped up and down: 'worry, worry, worry.... WORRY, WORRY, WORRY!' - I began to enjoy the rhythm; turning it into a game - and the power of the story line was dissipated... I no longer remember what happened about the food, the novice or the sick nun - I guess it all worked out in the end.

Another time there was to be a difficult meeting. I was dreading it, but rather than allowing the mind to anticipate and plan, I focused on my feet touching the ground (as in walking meditation) while walking to the meeting room. It was magical. By cultivating presence, rather than following the temptation to be drawn into compulsive planning, the mind remained clear - free of ideas of what might happen - and I was able to participate constructively in the meeting. It was, of course, quite different to anything I might have anticipated anyway.

One final example comes from my early monastic life, when I was still very much an individual with my own ways of doing things. A group of us were visiting a respected elder monk. Eager to impress, I hurried in and bowed to the monk - not noticing (or caring) that the other nuns were struggling to keep up. I received some feedback about this, and noticed - on the next occasion we were to bow together - the voices of selfhood screaming inwardly: 'I can't bear this, I won't do it!' But then I did - I did bow, beautifully, in time with the other Sisters - and the voices went wonderfully quiet. It was all right. All that had died was a tiny bit of 'me' - the construction that is the cause of so much personal conflict and suffering.

I have found that the insights arising from regular meditation enable monastic life for, without appreciating the limitations of our humanity and the ultimate absence of selfhood, it would be too hard. Try as we might, we can never be 'perfect' - for more

than an instant. Through meditation we learn to love, or at least to forgive, our failings and those of others. We learn to restrain harmful impulses and cultivate a place of inner ease from which what is good can flow forth. As a result we feel more at ease, and others too are affected by that sense of peacefulness. It's catching - just as a sense of strain and irritability can leave everyone feeling agitated and miserable! So, for me, sitting still in meditation is not an idle indulgence, it's a necessity - the very essence of religious life. *f*

Sister Candasiri was one of the first four nuns to join Ajahn Sumedho's newly established monastic community at Chithurst in 1979. Since then she has helped establish an order of nuns (Siladhara) both at Chithurst and at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery.



The nuns in a shrine room at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery