

REALIZING THE MIND

By: Ven. Sumedho

Many people think that to be called a Buddhist one must come adept at meditation, don yellow robes, shave one's head, be prepared to sit for hours in the lotus position, chant suttras and so on. These people are somewhat disappointed to discover that to be a Buddhist, one doesn't have to undergo any initiation or "baptism" or some exotic ritual to proclaim to the world that he has suddenly "seen the light" or some such phenomena. He is not even required to adopt some unpronounceable foreign name if he doesn't want to. Buddhism is not concerned with external show and as a practical religion it does not demand that one seek emancipation overnight or even in one lifetime. What is required is for the human being to cultivate his mind by practising Morality and Concentration and by gaining Wisdom (Sila, Samadhi, Panna).

The following article presents this view in a very engaging manner. To practise meditation is to seek realization "to journey inward" not through some grandiose ritual, but by paying attention to simple things, by being clear-minded about what one wants to achieve and by knowing one's limitations. This article appeared in the Sydney University Buddhist Society Publication. Ven. Sumedho is an American who spent many years in Europe and many other countries.

--Ed.

In giving talks on meditation, one is really saying the same things over and over, but it's necessary to do so because we keep forgetting over and over and have to keep reminded. Remember: what we remember we forget; if you have nothing to remember, you have nothing to forget; so in meditation we are moving towards where there is nothing to remember and nothing to forget. Which doesn't mean 'nothing', but a centering: a realization of the ultimate reality, of that which is not conditioned.

Realization is not gaining, is it? You don't 'gain' realization. You realize something which you had all the time and yet never noticed. Meditation is not gaining process either. We are not here to make ourselves Buddhas or Bodhisattvas or Arahants or anything else, nor to try to just condition our minds into being Buddhist. You might think you just have to have a religious brainwash, throw away all your Christian habits and simply train yourself to think like a Buddhist – wear the robe, try to look like a Buddha image, use all

those Pali words and call yourself a 'Buddhist'. Another costume isn't it? Another act; another role to play. So the purpose of our meditation is not to become 'Buddhist' either.

Realization is what? Think of the word 'real' – realizing, recognising, knowing, direct knowledge of ultimate truth... Now what do we mean, by ultimate truth? We can say, 'Ultimate Truth', 'Dharma'; we can use the Pali word, Dhamma, or the Sanskrit word, 'Dharma'; we can say, 'The Absolute'; we can say 'God'. Whatever word one happens to be conditioned with is the word which one prefers. 'Ultimate Truth' might sound a bit intellectual or not have the pull of the heartstrings that 'God' has, but we are not quibbling about terminology anymore. We don't care exactly what word you use. We're not here trying to find the perfect word to describe something which doesn't need description, cannot REALLY be described but can only be realized. We just do the best we can with whatever language we happen to have, because the point is not to decide which terminology is most accurate but to get beyond the term to the actual realization! Of 'Ultimate Reality' or 'God' or 'The Absolute' or whatever!

On the level of religious symbolism and convention we can spend our time quibbling about the 'Buddhist view', 'Buddhist Dhamma', 'Christian God' or get caught up in all kinds of interesting little differences and comparisons. For what? For something one hasn't realized yet, like the blind men describing the elephant. It's not that we need to have the perfect word or the most accurate description, but we need to have the intention to get to the reality – have that one-pointed intention, that sincerity, that kind of earnestness that takes you to the realization of truth, Dhamma. So, if it's already here now, then you don't have to go around looking for it. They have all these nice stories about religious pilgrims, religious seekers going off to the Himalayas looking for some saint living in a cave or looking for some mystic, some hermit, some Arahant, who lives off in some remote valley or mountain crag, who knows the truth. We must find that person because he is our teacher and he is going to give us that truth. We have romantic visions of ourselves suddenly meeting our teacher: we climb up some remote Himalayan mountain crag, breathing hard, the air getting thinner, and he's standing there with eyes bright, radiant with love, saying, "At last you've come!". We can, on that fictional level, create interesting visions and fairy-tales about religious seeking; but the journey is an inward one. So how do we go inward, journey outside ourselves?

We start looking for something, the ultimate reality, as something we're going to find by looking within. So we think: "Meditation is the way. I don't need to go to India. That's foolish, rubbish; I don't need to go to the Himalayan mountains. I can just meditate and find the truth within myself". And that's a very good idea – but what is the truth and what are you looking for?

Is the truth something?

Does it have a quality that we would be able to recognize?

Now, the religious journey is what we call “inclining to Nibbana” , turning away, inclining away from the sensory world to the unconditioned; so it’s a very subtle kind of journey. It’s not something you can do just as an act of will – you can’t just say, “ I’m going to realize the truth” , and do it. “I’m going to get rid of all my defilements, hindrances; get rid of lust, hatred, all my weaknesses and I’m going to get there!”. People who do that usually go crazy. One man I met years ago who had been a bhikkhu was in a mental hospital. This man had been a “maha” , meaning he had taken all the Pali examinations. He went off to a mountain top, went into his little hut and said, “I’m not coming out until I’m perfectly enlightened” – and came out stark raving mad! So if it’s just an act of will and ego then, of course, it takes you to madness. You keep bashing away, knocking about in your mind. With the ego you just get caught in a trap. It seems a web of madness, hard to see beyond or even extricate yourself from. So meditation isn’t something we do to attain or achieve or get rid of anything, but to realize.

So, what can we realize now? What can we realize right now?

“Well, I’ve been looking for the Ultimate Reality the whole time I’ve been sitting here and can’t find it”.

What can you realize or know now, whatever it is, whatever your state of mind is; whether you are agitated, if you’re having bad thoughts; if you’re angry, if you’re upset, bored, frightened, doubtful, uncertain, or whatever? You can recognize that that’s what is going on now. It’s a realization that now there is THIS condition: of fear, doubt, worry, some kind of desire, and that it is a changing thing.

If you’re frightened of something, try to hold onto that fear, make it stay so that it becomes a permanent condition in your mind. See how long you can stay frightened; see if fear is the ultimate reality, is God. Is fear God, the Ultimate Truth? You can see fear. When I’m frightened I know it. There’s fear, but also, when I truly realize there’s fear, its power to delude me diminishes. Fear only has power if I keep giving it the power; and how does fear have power? By deluding us, by making it seem more than what it is. Fear presents itself in a big way and we react: we run away, and then it gains power over us. That’s how to feed the fear demon: by reacting in the way that it wants you to. The fear demon comes – ferocious, nasty-looking demon – scowls and frowns, show its fangs and you go, “Ooh! Help!” and run away. Then that demon thinks, “This really is a sucker!”.

If you realize the demon, you recognize that the demon is a condition; nothing more than that. No matter how ferocious or nasty it might appear, it's nothing really. Simply recognize it as a condition that looks fierce and nasty. Fear, the feeling of fear – you begin to recognize that fear is just an illusion of the mind and is conditioned. Desire, any form of desire, in the same way has its appearance, it seems to be more than what it really is. Meditation is breaking down, breaking through the illusion of the way things seem to be by recognizing and realizing conditions as they are: as changing, as unsatisfactory and as not having any personal quality, not any personal self or soul, as just something that comes and goes, changes. You begin to stand back, you feel a space, a gap in yourself. After a while things that used to completely overwhelm and demolish you seem more distant; you have a way of looking at them as if they were something separate rather than what you are: “what I am” .

Meditation is a constant realizing. Realizing the conditions of the mind as just that: as conditions of the mind. Ignorant people do not understand this. They think the conditions of the mind are themselves, or they think they shouldn't have certain conditions and that they should have other kinds of conditions. If you are a very idealistic person you would like to be good, saintly, intelligent, noble, courageous, the finest quality of a human being. “That's what I want to be. I want to be a very noble and fine person”. Well, it's all very good that you have this ideal: “That's what I'd like to be,” “the noble heart”, “the courageous man”, “the gentle, compassionate woman” ; all these wonderful ideals, but then you have to face the realities of daily life. We find ourselves being caught up in getting angry, getting upset, jealous, greedy, thinking all kinds of unpleasant things about people who we know, thoughts and feelings that we would never think or feel if we were the perfect human beings we would like to be. So then we start thinking: “I am so far removed from that ideal human being, that wonderful man, that perfect woman, that I'm a hopeless, useless, worthless BUM!” Why? Because the conditions of your mind are not always fitting the ideal; sometimes you might be very courageous, very noble-hearted. At certain moments we find ourselves doing the most wonderful things, acting in a most courageous way. But at other times, the opposite is the case. We wonder, “How do such ugly thoughts come into my mind? If I were really good, I would never have such evil thoughts or feelings”.

Now, what we can realize, without trying to become anything, is that these conditions are just that. Whether they are noble, brave and courageous or weak, wishy-washy, ignoble and stupid, they are still only conditions dependent on all kinds of factors that we can't predict or control. Begin to realize that on the conditional level of samsara everything is affecting everything. There's no way that we can say, “I am going to isolate myself completely from everything so that nothing is affecting me”, because everything is affecting everything all the time. So on the conditioned level, there's nothing much we can do except

recognize and realize; although we do have a choice. We can use our bodies for good action rather than evil; that's where the choices comes. If you're mindful and wise then you skilfully use your body and speech, that which goes out, relates to other beings and to the earth you live on – you use it skilfully for that which is kind, compassionate, charitable, moral.

What goes on in the mind could be anything; maybe the desire to kill somebody. But that is something you don't act upon. You just recognise. You can recognize it's only a condition and not a 'self', not a personal problem. Now have any of you ever had any murderous impulses? Wanting to kill somebody? I have. I can understand murder. I never murdered anybody, never came close, but I have certainly have murderous thoughts. So where do those come from? Is there something really rotten inside me that I should start worrying about, or is it just the natural tendency of the mind – that when you feel totally repelled and averse to something you try to annihilate it? That's natural enough. Murder is part of nature; it goes on all the time. Animals murder each other. Just listen some nights in the forest. You hear murders going on all the time: rabbits screaming as foxes grab their throats. Murder is a natural inclination, it's nothing abnormal: but for the moral, responsible human being, the religious seeker, we might have murderous impulses but we do not act on them. Instead, we fully recognize these impulses as that: as impulses, as conditions. What I mean by recognizing is the realization, "They are just that"; not creating a problem, not making it complicated by saying, "We shouldn't have such impulses", or "I am a bad and evil man because such an impulse came through my mind", and so start creating a neurosis around it. Just that clear realization of it as it really is, because that's what we can know directly, without speculation, or belief.

So that's a realization isn't it? Realizing the conditioned as the conditioned.

Now as we are more at ease with the conditioned, rather than deluded, helplessly reacting to conditions, absorbed into them, rejecting or annihilating them, we begin to be aware of the unconditioned, the space of the mind. You think that conditions are everything. Conditions have to come from something, don't they? Since they are impermanent, where do they come from and what do they disappear into? As you watch you begin to feel or experience the emptiness or the wholeness or the unconditioned – whatever word you use isn't quite it. We say 'the unconditioned', that which is not born, does not die.

So that's a realization too, for those of you who have realized that. That's reality. The conditioned is reality, but the quality or appearance of a condition is not reality, ultimate reality. It's only a conventional appearance, the way things seem to be on a habitual, conventional level. Buddhist meditation is the practice of being awakened, being Buddha by recognizing, by realizing the way

things REALLY are as you experience directly whatever it is: pain in your knees, a feeling of happiness, any sensation, thought memory or emptiness; without grasping, without selecting, picking or choosing. We develop the equanimous heart, the mind that is balanced, full, complete and whole, seeing things as they really are, no longer deluded by anything, by no-thing or by nothing.

When I talk about realization, do you see what I mean? It's realizing. It's not a searching for 'God' or 'Ultimate Truth' as if it were some 'thing'. Look at the word itself. You say 'God', and it makes it sound like some 'thing' doesn't it? It does to me anyway: the word "God" sounds like something, somebody, as if it were a kind of condition. So, at the intellectual level, you can only go so far on the religious path, only as far as a belief. If you believe in words or ideas but never get beyond that, you're still caught in an attachment to an idea about the truth rather than KNOWING the truth. That's why the Buddha did not teach any kind of doctrine or belief system. "Dhamma" also, I hear Buddhists say, "Buddhists don't believe in God and we don't believe in the soul; if you're a real Buddhist, you don't have any of that stuff, souls and gods; soulless and godless is what we are". But that's an annihilationist teaching. Isn't it? That's pure annihilationism. Disbelieving in God and a soul is just the opposite of the other, of believing; it's not a realizing of truth. It's only the believing of a negation rather than the believing of an affirmation. I meet Buddhists who were Christians at one anger – someone telling you to do something – that's a condition of mind! Keep recollecting rather than getting caught up with trying to figure out whether this outfit is the best one for you; whether all the monks are wise, enlightened people, who have any right to tell you what to do; feeling guilty because you get angry and you think you shouldn't – and all the other complex mental creations around anything that happens during the day! We weave all these complexities around things. Some monk says, "Do the dishes!" and you think, "How dare he talk to me like that. I've been meditating many more years than he has. I've written books on Buddhism, I have a degree from the University of Wisconsin, a Ph.D in Buddhist Studies... and that nincompoop tells me to do the dishes!"

It's not an affirmation, saying what Dhamma or the truth is, saying "It's male", or "The Dhamma is a man", or "The Dhamma is a patriarchal figure", "The Dhamma is nothing", "The Dhamma is an impersonal essence" or "The Dhamma is the essence of everything", "The Dhamma is everything and all", getting into these philosophical positions, intellectual positions that people like to talk about things they haven't realized yet. We're not trying to define that which is indefinable but to KNOW, to realize that which is beyond definition, beyond limitation.

So, our Buddhist practice is just that. We have to keep reminding ourselves because the force of habit is so strong – we so easily absorb into our thoughts and memories; so easily absorb into habits of looking for something or trying to get rid of something; so easily believe all the opinions and views we have about ourselves and others and the world we live in. We so easily believe because some of our opinions and views are so sensible, so rational, so practical, reasonable, intelligent, brilliant – “The brilliant views and opinions that I have”. We are not trying to say that you shouldn’t have brilliant views and opinions either. It’s all right to have brilliant views and opinions, as long as you recognize that that’s what they are. They are impermanent conditions of mind: don’t exaggerate their importance. Also don’t feel bad if you’re not very intelligent and have really stupid views and opinions; don’t worry about it, because that is just the same as the other. As far as we’re concerned, realization rather than affirmation or negation is the aim.

This way of realizing is what we call The Middle Way. It’s mindfulness, meaning the mind is open, full, complete. You’re no longer taking just a fragment and attaching, obsessing yourself with one little bitty condition, saying “This little bitty condition, this tiny little insignificant opinion that I have is the Ultimate Reality”.

If you’re looking for something, if you hate authority, if some monk says, “Do this, do the dishes”, and you feel resentment or time and somehow they have been very disillusioned and they have become very anti-Christian. Because of that they use Buddhism as a justification. They put down Christianity and they think, “Those Christians believe in God. They’re stupid. But we don’t. And those Christians believe in an eternal soul, but we don’t; we don’t believe in that stuff. We believe in Anatta, no soul!” But that is not what the Buddha was teaching. That is also a trap of the mind, limited, deluding us. It’s a realization when you find out and know directly.

Don’t make problems out of life’s conditions, but keep recollecting. This way of realization, is more important than trying to make everything just right... trying to straighten out all monks and all the anagarikas, or trying to make Chithurst into a perfect place where you feel that everybody is exactly what they should be. It’s like trying to make everything in the world perfect – just an endless, hopeless job; you cannot do it. Recognize, as long as things are adequate, use your life here for this kind of practice. Don’t waste it on unnecessary complaining or fantasizing, projecting all kinds of things onto other beings or feeling guilty because some of your reactions and feelings aren’t what you think they should be. Do you see what I mean? The important thing is not trying to think perfect thoughts or to act like saints but to realize the way things are. What can be realized now is whatever is going on in your mind you’re your consciousness. So it’s an immediate practice also, here and now.

Our form is always moral, which means not to use our physical conditions, verbal abilities for harmful, cruel, selfish, exploitive activities, but to relate to each other in an active way with kindness, compassion, love – relating to each other in gentle ways. If you can't love someone, just be kind to them. If you feel a lot of hatred and anger towards me, at least refrain from hitting and killing me. That's all I ask: Practise metta for those you can't stand and want to kill. It's alright to have those feelings but just keep realizing them as feelings without acting on them. You are not expected to never have any unkind thoughts. So we do keep within that limitation, always within the impeccable form of sila. Also, we actively help each other: with dana, being charitable, kind, considerate, generous with each other, that helps us get along in a pleasant way. When we share and are kind to each other life is much more enjoyable than when we don't. It's really much nicer when people are kind and generous (at least I find it so) than when they're not. However, if you can't be kind and generous and charitable, at least refrain from being evil doing nasty things.

Realizing that everything that arises passes away and is not self. A constant refrain, isn't it? A realizing. Whatever your hang-ups are, let them become fully conscious so that you begin to realize them as conditions, rather than personal problems. Let go of the identity of yourself as having problems with this or that and realize the problems we do have are conditions that come and go and change. They are not 'me', not 'mine', they are not 'what I am'. You are continually recollecting until you begin to break through; until, as you develop in this way, the mind begins to clear, because you are allowing things to cease. You're not reinforcing habits all the time; you are allowing habits that have arisen to cease, to end, and you begin to find a calm, a peace – an unshakeable peace within yourself.

