

Contemplation and the Mind that Seeks the Way

Part I

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Contemplation is an activity that requires we turn within, to the source of the Refuge. This turning within is the arising of the mind that seeks the Way. It forms a bridge, over which much can flow, between formal seated meditation and the training of daily life. Regular meditation gives us an anchor of stability in the midst of life's ever-changing conditions. This enables us to see more clearly what is revealed by the awareness that deepens as we train, in a steady grounded way, throughout the day. Contemplation enables us to receive, digest, explore and learn from those invaluable insights by providing a broader eye, the eye of the 'heart-mind.'

This 'heart-mind' could be called a union between the hara (our internal sitting place situated in the lower abdomen), which connects us with the Refuge (all that the universe has to offer), and the thought processes of our conscious or cognitive mind. It is based in, and facilitates, the natural harmony of body and mind and responds generously to our longing to seek out and know the truth and to find the deepest reality we can be aware of. It helps us to understand all that has gone into making us the

being we are, clarifies what we need to do in order to resolve our karma, and is also a means by which we can both offer ourselves to the source of all existence, and be called forth.

Ultimately we see that the heart (of meditation) and the ordinary everyday mind (our conscious thought processes), are different aspects of one whole and not separate entities, but it is helpful to begin by clearly discerning the difference between thinking about spiritual issues and reflecting upon them. From my own experience, I would say that the unhelpful way in which we may have been used to using our minds could be said to be a thought process based in suffering because it has the illusion of a fixed sense of ‘self’-consciousness or ‘me’ (rather than the Refuge) at its centre and at its reference point. Fundamentally we could say that thinking in this way takes place in the head using our brain and intellect. We rely upon a store of knowledge that comes from memories and experiences processed by a mind that cannot see clearly (because it is disconnected from the source of true insight) and thinks it has only its own limited resources to rely upon. When we feel that we have to be our own Refuge this places great stress upon the thinking mind, it does its best for us but cannot resolve spiritual issues without its deeper aspect, the heart. Most of all, the confused mind wants to protect itself and continue its own existence, so it seeks out pleasure and tries to run from pain (anything which touches on its unresolved confusion). This activity deepens the confusion, it limits our ability to see the whole picture and keeps disconnecting us from the source of true insight and help. Thus we create, and impose upon our own minds, the illusion of ‘self.’ This could be described as trapped confusion that thinks it is a fixed entity and wants to stop hurting, but ends up holding onto and

continuing its own phantom existence by clinging to misguided mental habit patterns and the activity they produce.

In contemplation (which is based in and relies upon that which is free of confusion and suffering) the thinking mind is both able and encouraged to follow its natural inclination, which is to turn towards the hara, or one could say the Master in the Heart of the sitting place. Freed from the stress of being disconnected (by us) from the Refuge, the mind rests in the Heart and becomes a relaxed receptacle, open to whatever insights may come. As our mind, in its natural pure state, has no sense of personal identity, of ‘me’, so it has no corner to fight for, or against, and is therefore able to see, hear, and understand more clearly.

My own journey with contemplation began many years ago as a young novice at Shasta Abbey. The days were long and we worked very hard. When the renewal days came I was exhausted and wanted to rest but could not do so. When I sat down I felt so stressed I would get up and do something, anything other than be still with myself. One day it struck me that there was something here that I needed to explore. Why couldn’t I relax, why did I find it so hard to be with myself? I then began to spend one hour each renewal day sitting down and ‘just being.’ At first it was very hard and brought me face to face with all the anxiety and tension that was within me. I began to realize that the part of me that could clearly see the distress was not distressed or anxious or confused. This brought relief and a sense that in seeing this I was seeing the way forward. From the inward looking gaze, step by step, would come the means by which all the turmoil could be resolved. I was in safe hands.

Looking within and acknowledging that there is a great deal of work to be done on oneself may not be easy at first, although it is always easier than turning the other way and not looking. Training shows us that within us is a pure place of clarity and insight upon which we can rely and the path of training is the path of relying upon it. Contemplation confirms and deepens our ability to do this.

If you are new to training and think you would like to try contemplating then begin by establishing a steady grounded daily practice. When we sit in formal meditation we entrust all that we are to the heart of the sitting place. Trust in the sufficiency of this and of the practice of calling the wandering mind back to the activity of the moment.

There is also a need to pay great attention to the Precepts which offer a guide in how to live in harmony with our true nature and all that surround us. In *Rules for Meditation* it says “The body must make no violent movement.” To go against the Precepts is to make a violent movement that causes mental agitation and physical distress. This clouds our mind, distorts perception and makes it more difficult for us to reflect within, see clearly, make wise choices and break old habit patterns. The invaluable basics of our practice will help us to find a stable base. They will also deepen our faith in our inherent completeness and in our ability to connect with the Refuge and benefit from all that contemplation has to offer.

When you feel ready, begin by setting a time of ten or fifteen minutes (this can be extended later on). We can contemplate sitting, walking, or lying down but I would suggest beginning in a comfortable chair that offers good support to the spine. Keep both feet flat on the floor, never contemplate with

crossed legs. Relax into the chair, yield to it, feel how it holds you. Have hands and arms in any relaxed and supported position that suits you and gently restrain any urge to fidget, day-dream or chatter.

Lower the eyes, keeping them open, exactly as you would when meditating, then take a moment to see if you are holding on to tension in any part of your body. If you are, then relax that part of yourself and let the tension fall away; if it cannot then don't see this as a problem or a fault, just be glad to sit with it. Take a moment for body and mind to come together and settle down so that you feel at ease, breathe naturally, then let yourself 'just be.' You are not trying to do anything at this point other than just getting used to being still, relaxed, and quiet with yourself in a contemplative way, aware of what this reveals.

It is said that reflecting within is like looking into a jewelled mirror because it reflects the truth of what lies within us. At first we may feel bored or stressed, or perhaps we are comfortable and at ease with ourselves, either way you can just take note of what you see, there is no need to judge it, there is no right or wrong here, just an awareness of what the 'heart-mind' reveals and getting used to abiding in that place of just being. If you find this distressing, accept that and resist the temptation to either escape from the discomfort or to try and create stillness or peace of mind. We cannot self-manufacture these things, nor do we need to do so, for they are already within us waiting to come forth as we resolve the issues that block them. It is enough to be still with what is there and to entrust it to the 'heart-mind' of contemplation. When the time limit that was set is up, quietly move on to the next activity of your day.

When you have got used to just being with yourself and feel ready, then move on to the next step, which can be done sitting in your chair, as previously described, walking, or lying on a bed.

To contemplate lying down, rest flat on your back with head, arms and hands comfortably supported. A pillow behind your knees can help the back and spine to be relaxed. Keep the eyes open and lowered, as previously mentioned and do not worry if you occasionally fall asleep; this can sometimes happen when you are lying down and deeply relaxed, there is still great value to doing this and much can happen beneath the surface. If you are regularly falling asleep this could be because the mind is trying to protect itself from something that is hard to look at, in which case use the will to wake up and refocus. Without frustration or despair, gently reassure the mind that all is well and continue to reflect within.

I would like to look at walking and contemplating out of doors in detail in part two of this article, and for now will just say that we should walk at a natural steady pace which does not make the heart beat faster as it does when we walk to exercise. The heart and lungs, like our body and mind, will naturally come together in relaxed harmony. Although it is best to do this away from cars and roads, that may not always be possible and we should maintain an awareness of what is going on around us so we can be safe when crossing a road.

You can begin by calling, or inviting into your mind, whatever you wish to contemplate and understand more clearly, for example “Why do I keep getting impatient, how can I help this part of myself?” This should be done with genuine care and respect for ourselves. We can then lower the eyes, as in medi-

tation and let the inward gaze (our awareness) be drawn to the hara. You could say we are making a well within us into which anything that wants to can flow. I then let my eyes move where they want to (this is only a problem if you find it distracting). Our body may occasionally readjust its position and we should give it the freedom to do so. The spirit of contemplation is to look within, let go, open up and relax and there is no need to keep ourselves on a tight leash. When contemplating we are genuinely seeking for the truth and every part of us knows this. We can feel our senses turning within, establishing their own connection with the Refuge, and we can trust that our entire being is working for our good.

We can also trust that our question has been heard and nothing will be lost by our not consciously holding onto it. We need to relinquish the urge to control, resolve or ‘sort out’ the issue by thinking about it in a way that excludes the Refuge, because these are all activities which create mental agitation and physical distress that hinders the inward looking gaze and can block the flow of clarifying insight. They create tension because the (understandable) inclination to grab at a quick fix answer is based in fear and doubt and serves only to continue our sense of lostness. When contemplating we are not trying to get rid of something as quickly as possible because we don’t like it. We are seeking, within tender stillness, to understand it, to see its root, so that we can resolve the issue in a real way. Knowing this may not be a quick process, we willingly train with it and give ourselves all the time we need so that no corner is cut, no stone left unturned. Contemplation is an act of love, it draws everything into its heart and doesn’t push anything away because to do so would be to exclude it from the only place

where its transformation can take place. Pushing it away would guarantee that we continue to suffer.

Our patience and the willingness to be content if nothing comes to mind, to not insist that we have all the answers right away, also deepens faith and hones our ability to listen deeply and receive the real insights that are worth waiting for and can be life-changing.

Another reason why it is so helpful to let go and not rigidly hold on to our original question, or to any form of expectation, is that what comes forth and is presented to us by the 'heart-mind' may, at first, not seem to be related to the issue at hand and can therefore be missed or discarded.

Contemplating can be like being given bits of a puzzle that take a while to begin to form a picture, so it helps to let go and allow the investigative mind, which could also be called our longing to know reality, to surprise us and take us where it will.

Anything that we want to explore can be contemplated. Perhaps we feel nervous when around a particular person or have a dread of being inadequate that seems to permeate our life. Maybe we are afraid to look within because there seems to be too much fear and pain to cope with. Perhaps we want to deepen our training or know what it is to truly bow. We can reflect upon and learn from anything that life presents us with as being the training of the moment.

Sometimes there are areas of unexplained stress or tension within the body that we wish to understand more about. If so we can direct our awareness (the tender eyes of the inward looking gaze) to the area concerned and, welcoming it into our

heart, just be still with it. I find it sometimes helps to also place a gentle hand upon the tense area as a way of reassuring it that I accept it is part of me and am glad to train with it. This conveys the message that all is well and whatever needs to be resolved can be, so there is no need to worry.

As training deepens we sometimes encounter a blank, an unknown within us. For me this was like looking into white smoke. I sensed, correctly, that there was something within that space waiting to reveal itself. Rather than trying to fill in the blank ourselves, which is like pulling a bud apart before it is ready to open, we can contemplate it. By sitting with it in a patient and deeply trusting way, content not to know until all conditions ripen, the contemplative mind enfolds that space and conveys a sense of “Take your time my friend, when you are ready, I am ready.” Contemplation helps us to trust our karma. If we cannot trust it then we cannot help it, it is not the enemy and the karma needs to know that we clearly recognize both its pain and its fundamental purity. This will reassure that part of ourselves that we neither fear nor judge it, just we recognize its suffering and will never turn away from it. This encourages and helps the unfolding process.

If there are decisions of the “Shall I do this or shall I do that?” variety and we cannot see which way to go, or if there is uneasiness between ourselves and another person, or indeed anything that we cannot understand, I find it helps to reflect upon “What is the deepest reality I can see?” concerning this situation. Rather than having a limited range of options, which can pull us into circuitous thought patterns, this opens everything up and it feels like I am casting out a net of contemplative

stillness into the vastness of the sitting place. I then sit quietly, without expectation and just be.

In contemplation our mind has the freedom to be open and to work in harmony with the heart as we explore and investigate the issue at hand. Our human intelligence and the memory bank of all that lays waiting to unfold within the physical fabric of our bodies and minds is also fully available and is harnessed by, and readily serves, our willingness to learn, change and do the right thing.

We should not be afraid of pursuing any line of enquiry or reflection that the mind presents us with. Sometimes there are things we find hard to acknowledge or give voice to because of a sense of shame or fear of what others may think of us. There is no such thing as a ‘silly’ question and in the privacy of contemplation we can listen to ourselves with the same generosity of spirit that a loving parent listens to their child. Sometimes this enables us to see that the issues we had repressed or hidden had no real substance and they can simply fall away. Or perhaps those ‘silly’ questions came from, or lead us into, complex and deeply rooted unresolved issues and this gives us the opportunity to learn and see where and how help is needed.

Few things can be more important to reflect upon than what is the purpose of our life, why were we born, what does life ask of us and are we doing it?

Is THE IMPORTANT THING being taken care of? Don’t be put off by thinking, “There is no point in doing this because my life is set, I am married with a family, job and mortgage and I cannot just go off and do something else.” You do not have to. There is nothing within this practice that will hurt us or anyone else.

Each one of us has an essential basic lesson that we need to learn from the life that has come to us. This is the spiritual work we were born to do. For one it may be to trust themselves, for another to be content. The kōan (the central issue of unresolved confusion) arises naturally in our ordinary daily life, which is also our training ground. Within that arising is the work we need to do, the lesson we have to learn and the means of doing it.

How we do something is as important as what we do and contemplating what it means to be a spiritual adult and how we can fulfil our responsibilities, both to ourselves and others, is of great value in doing this spiritual work. “Are my thoughts speech and actions coming from, and leading me deeper into the heart of stillness, or are they coming from and leading me deeper into unresolved confusion?” “Am I bringing harmony or disharmony to this situation? Are my actions helping or hindering?” Contemplating these things can show us how to live our ordinary daily life in a way that Rev. Master Jiyu once described as “sanctifying the mundane.”

It is also well worth reflecting upon what we really want. In every human heart there is a True Wish. If asked, “What do you want?” an initial response may be—a happy family life, good health, no financial worries, but there is something deeper than this type of universal surface response. We can be so full of ‘wants’ that, from my own experience, it can take a long time to even know what our True Wish is because it has been buried beneath a tangle of confusion and pain. Eventually we see that much suffering was caused because we lost sight of that Wish. As we reconnect and begin to live in harmony with it, layers of stress and tension fall away. Our life changes, a stillness settles in the depths of our being. We become content.

If there are things you wish would ‘just go away’ or cannot accept and do not want to look at, then that is a very valuable area for contemplation. The key to success is being completely honest with yourself, this always keeps the door to going forward open. Settle down and let the feelings of fear or resentment at what life is asking of you into your mind and into your heart. Rest the contemplative gaze upon them, relax and just be.

Keep it real, don’t try to ‘be positive’ in a false self-conscious way by pretending that things are other than they are, because this will only create more tension. To sit down and contemplate IS to be positive, this is enough. There is nothing within us that does not have the heart of Buddha and we can train with dignity knowing that our value and worth are not in question. Just there is a job to be done, a mystery to be unravelled, a path waiting to be walked.

When we fear looking within there can be a tendency to brace ourselves against thoughts and feelings we don’t want to look at and then throw ourselves into some form of escapist behaviour. Unfortunately this only deepens the fear and increases our distress. Within us lies the knowing of both the cause of the feelings we are trying to escape from and exactly what is needed to resolve them. We can begin by entrusting ourselves and the feelings of resistance or fear to the ‘heart-mind.’ If you can, turn towards them, look them straight in the eye and simply ask for help—a much underestimated activity. If there is just a blur of panic, anxiety, fear or resistance, begin by relaxing in a comfortable chair and allowing yourself to feel the fear. If you can stay with it for one minute then you have taken a noble step which will lead to another and another. It doesn’t matter if you don’t seem to be calm or still (that will come later) or if all you can feel is fear, the great heart-mind is deeper than those

feelings, no matter how dreadful they may seem to be. Our ability to meditate and to train is the same in both darkness and the light, it is only we who think it is not so, perhaps because of the mistaken importance we place upon feelings. Rev. Master Jiyu used to say that a sword is strengthened by being placed in the fire. As confidence grows and the inclination to run or resist begins to fade it can help to think of the distress as a huge soft bed. Rather than turning away give yourself to it in full surrender, sink into it, be at ease with it, offer yourself to that fire. This makes much possible because turning towards a challenging issue always helps us to resolve it whereas turning away from it always increases our suffering.

If looking at the feelings is too much for you at the moment there is no need to worry or feel a failure, just contemplate (let into your heart) your reluctance to look and reflect upon that. Do not try to rush things, just ask, “How can I help this part of myself?” or “What is needed here?” or even “I am afraid, please help me.” That help will come.

In the monks’ ordination ceremony it says, “Our minds are hard and set and cannot be broken.” We are very complex creatures and the unfolding of deeply rooted spiritual issues takes time, faith, patience and steady daily practice. Within the contemplative flow of inner reflection, that which we find hard to accept and the being we are, will be gently drawn together within the stream of compassion as it gradually dissolves the hardened confusion and reassures our mind (which was only trying to protect itself) that it is safe to release its tight grasp—it is safe to open up. Step by step, we will be able to look, accept and lovingly care for that part of ourselves. From this will come a deeper, fuller and sympathetic understanding of our situation, and of how to move forward.

When we turn within to contemplate, the universe gives us Its eyes and what flows through them is the tenderness that has a revolutionary impact upon all that it touches. This gaze not only sees what the mind that does not reflect within misses, it knows us to the core and sees nothing that is not of Itself. Barriers of fear and doubt begin to respond to what only the eyes and ears of inner reflection can bring, and all that lies within us, waiting to unfold, begins to stir.

As we rest the eyes of the 'heart-mind' upon the issue being contemplated, the flow of meditation and compassion which rises up the back, over our heads and down the front of our being draws these issues into the hara, the well of clarifying insight. We begin to see the situation in a different way, we cease to feel so lost and sense that the path forward lies within the midst of the very thing we were trying to avoid. Most significantly of all, we find we WANT to do it (because we sense we can), we want to walk this great pilgrimage that is our life and we are grateful that the help we need is there.

Contemplating can be rather like cooking. A cake does not look like flour, eggs, milk or sugar and yet there is nothing in it other than these things, just they have been through a process which has transformed them. Buddhist practice is a process of transformation. Our job is to sit still and that grounded stillness forms an open pipe through which anything that needs to can flow. By never turning away from anything, all the confusion within us (grasping, anger, fear, etc.) can rise up and reveal itself, and the help that is needed to resolve and transform it flows in and the two are drawn together within the hara. By contemplating this, the 'cooking' is able to take place as the

great mystery of the universe does the work of transformation within our hearts.

Even our mistakes can become Dharma when we look, without blame or excuse, at what happened and let the jumble of confused thought, misguided actions and regrettable consequences all settle within the stillness of contemplation. “What happened here?” “What can I learn from this?” It can become the compost from which our life blossoms. Nothing need be discarded, it is all the raw material of enlightenment. If we turn away from, or despise any part of us then we rob ourselves of our own completeness, our own Buddhahood.

The time will come when each one of us will be able to look back with genuine love and respect for the person we used to be, even when we are at our lowest ebb, and for the beings whose karma we have inherited. Neither we nor they were bad or useless, just confused, or what Buddhism calls ignorant. The only difference between then and now is that we have the benefit of practice. This enables us to see how, step by step, choices were made, based on inaccurate perception and misguided thought that made things worse. Now we can make other choices and benefit from the clear insight of the ‘heart-mind.’

We need to understand, in detail, where the confusion comes in and how it can affect our thoughts, speech and actions. That insight has to be made real by how we live in the everyday world. The understanding is not complete until it has changed us.

Buddhism tells us that mind is the forerunner of all activity and the teaching and the practice offer us a great deal of

guidance in seeing how we can use our bodies and minds in ways that either draw us deeper into that tangled web of confusion or free us from it. Contemplating the human condition can save us much grief because the broader eye of inner reflection offers a comprehensive overview of all that goes with having a human life. For example, the law of karma (cause and effect) tells us that the way things are now is the result of what happened in the past and how we act now conditions the future. It is easy to forget this in the heat of the moment when strong impulsive feelings arise, or when life seems to be unfair, or we resent having to do the work of training. The broader eye of the heart-mind can see beyond the immediate situation. It compassionately reminds us of karma and other basic fundamental and inescapable truths, like the first law of the universe which states that ‘The physical world is not answerable to my personal will.’ Contemplation reminds us of impermanence and the vulnerable nature of our life on this planet and shows us how to use the time we have well. By digesting these insights, painful or difficult situations can become not only more bearable but the gateway to a deeper form of understanding and acceptance. Instead of feeling like victims of circumstance we can become volunteers on the great pilgrimage that is our life.

By making the choice to spend time reflecting within, to seek out the teaching, to offer our thought processes, perceptions and memories to the contemplating process for clarification, we enable ourselves to be “one who can be taught.”¹ However, contemplation should not be thought of as just a means of getting something that we want, like an answer or an insight. The act of turning within, the giving of time and of oneself to the Master in the Heart, is as important and as helpful as the insights themselves. Indeed, it is what makes those insights possible and

I would like to look at this more closely in part two of this article.

As with meditation, we may begin by thinking that contemplation is something that we ‘do’, eventually we see that our natural state is a contemplative one. It is not by any means just a thought process, the ‘heart-mind’ of contemplation is the essence of the ‘all is one.’ It draws together body and mind, dissolves barriers between internal and external, connects us with all things and expresses itself through the way we live our life. Just as we periodically sit down to meditate so we have time for contemplation but the great ‘heart-mind’ never ceases. It is always working for our good.

Buddhist training is a journey that takes us from an acute sense of ‘me,’ ‘my world,’ ‘my hopes,’ ‘my fears’, to knowing that we sit in a place where we no longer exist, where there is ‘nothing from the first.’ Strange though it may seem this is what brings the greatest joy and gratitude. It is what enables us to ‘live in the world as if in the sky’ by showing us that every part of us is impermanent and every part of us is not only of the sky (Buddha nature), but already one with it. Contemplation helps us to fully receive, digest and be transformed by this insight. It awakens our senses, illumines our minds and offers us detailed intimate teaching tailored for our individual specific needs by the ‘heart-mind.’ This enables us to understand the Dharma of our own existence, to cherish and nourish the being we are, to accept that which is hard to bear and to see the way forward in every situation.

Notes

1. From *The Lotus Ceremony*, in *The Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity* (Mt Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press, 1990) p. 184 - 206.