

## Settling in the Midst of Change: The Gentle Process of Meditation



J u d i t h L i e f

Usually we do not like feeling vulnerable. We prefer to patch any chinks in our armor as soon as they appear, so that we can project an aura of certainty and professionalism. Like used-car salesmen doctoring cars, we putty over our cracks and flaws, repaint, and try to pass ourselves off as solid. But such solidity is not real. Instead of creating an aura of phony invulnerability, it would be better to relate with our genuine vulnerability and uncertainty.

Being vulnerable means being willing to face life's pain. If we try to run away from our pain, we only make it worse in the long run. It is like reaching for a bucket of water to put out a fire but by mistake grabbing the gasoline can instead. The Buddhist tradition distinguishes the pain that is simply a part of life from the suffering that we ourselves create by our response to that. If we understand the distinction, we can learn to accept the pain of life rather than struggling with it. At the same time, we can work to alleviate suffering in ourselves and others.

Throughout our life, we encounter the four basic facts of life: birth, old age, sickness and death. Birth is the experience of being thrust into new situations and forced to cope with them. Illness is the experience of trying to keep our life smooth and predictable but finding that it keeps falling apart and breaking down. Old age is seeing our freshness and enthusiasm for each new experience growing stale, arthritic, and routine. Death is the experience of finality, of continual losses and endings. On top of this, we are repeatedly caught in the disparity between our dream worlds and our reality. Our life is constantly changing, and we are fundamentally unsettled.

With all this change, is there any hope of settling down? Is there any possibility of working with change rather than constantly fighting it, working with our discomfort rather than covering it up? Can we learn to accept our own life as it is? Looking into the nature of change and the interplay of life and death is a start, but theoretical understanding only goes so far. We need a practical method of working with our life, a way of settling in the midst of change, a way of dealing with our pain. The method that I have found most effective, simple, and direct is the practice of sitting meditation.

When I first encountered the practice of meditation, I had no theoretical background at all for what it was about. I had read no books on it, and it had never been a part of my world as a young Midwestern American. As a traveler in India, I had seen wandering siddhus and yoga practitioners, but my own interests lay elsewhere, with social and economic development. Although I had been raised in the Christian tradition, I had no particular religious affiliation when in 1971 I was introduced to meditation at the Tail of the Tiger (now Karmá Ch'ling) Buddhist community in Vermont.

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The first program I attended at Tail of the Tiger was entitled "Work, Sex, and Money." Those three topics greatly interested me, but not necessarily in that order. On the very first day, a member of the program staff announced that the next day would be an "all-day sitting" outside on the lawn under a tent. Being a generally game sort, I showed up with the other forty or so people and tried to follow along. To my surprise, although it was not at all dramatic—rather boring, in fact—my experience that day changed the course of my life. Amid the shifts and turns, the aches and pains, the speculations about what I should be doing and if the other folks in the tent were more clued in. I felt a deep relief, as though I had finally come home after a very long journey. Along with that sense of relief, at one and the same time, I realized that I was painfully estranged from myself, as though I had lost track of who I was or where I belonged. It was clear to me that there was more to meditation than meets the eye. So I changed course, uprooted myself from New York, and went to Boulder, Colorado, to study with the Tibetan meditation master Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who seemed to know something about it.

The basic meditation I learned has two aspects: mindfulness and awareness. Mindfulness is calming and focusing the mind, and awareness is paying attention. Mindfulness and awareness are complementary. It is difficult to pay attention if our mind is restless. So first we quiet the mind, and then we expand out. Through meditation practice, or the combination of mindfulness and awareness, we learn how to be both grounded and alert. The great Zen Buddhist teacher Suzuki Roshi used the term *readiness* mind to describe that state of relaxed alertness.

Our mind is constantly settling and expanding. For instance, if we look at a beautiful jet-black calligraphy on white paper, first our mind is drawn to the shape of the calligraphy. It focuses on the precision and elegance of the brush stroke and the rich, black ink. As we continue to look, our mind expands beyond the brush stroke to the expanse of white paper surrounding it. Eventually our mind expands even farther—beyond the white paper in its frame to the wall and beyond the wall to the sky. There is no limit to how far it can expand. Over and over, our mind settles down and expands out.

Meditation practice does not have an end point when we can say, "OK, now I'm mindful. I can move on to the next thing." It is the *ongoing* process of bringing our wandering attention back home. Whatever we call it—"mindfulness," "bodyfulness," "soulfulness," or "heartfulness"—meditation has to do with bringing our body, our thoughts and emotions, and our breath into harmony.

Without mindfulness, it is difficult to do anything properly. Without mindfulness, physically we are in one place, but mentally and emotionally we are someplace else entirely. Psychiatrists used to talk about "split personality" as a pathological condition, but we are all *split* personalities, and we all hear voices. It is as though we had a permanent committee meeting going on inside us, with one member wanting to go this way and another wanting to go that way, and everyone making comments and suggestions. But this committee never seems to adjourn or break for lunch. It can get pretty annoying, maybe even dangerous. If we are about to crash our car, for instance, we may not have time to call our committee to order to decide what to do. Meditation practice is a way to work with such a distracted and divided mind and gradually tame and focus it. It is a slow, step-by-step process.

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Mindfulness is gentle. It is not a battle. Meditation practice is a way of making friends with our mind. We could try to take our unruly mind and whip it into shape, but when we fight our mind, we invariably lose. We could try to stop our thoughts. But the harder we struggle to get

rid of our thoughts, the more thoughts there are. It is like the story of the Scythian soldiers in Greek mythology. Each soldier you kill produces many new soldiers. The instant one soldier's blood falls to the ground, more soldiers are born. So the more you kill, the worse off you are. In meditation practice, we let the thinking process wear down on its own instead of fighting thoughts with thoughts.

"Nothing is left out: we have what we need, and we work with what we have."

The nice thing about meditation is that it makes use of what every one of us already has: our breath, our thoughts and emotions, and our body. We have everything we need in order to practice. You may think, "All I have is a foggy and wandering mind, intense and unpredictable emotions, and an unreliable and restless body." But those three are all you need. With them, you are very well equipped to practice meditation. In meditation, nothing is left out: we have what we need, and we work with what we have.

The heart of meditation practice is the breath, which flows in and out of us constantly and is the force of life itself. It is to this heart that we return over and over again as we practice. The breath serves as a link between our inner world and the world outside. The physical sensation of breathing reflects our state of mind and body very simply and accurately. Working with the breath is a way of synchronizing our body and mind.

To begin the practice of meditation, we need to take a break from our ceaseless activities. We need to give ourselves a protected setting in which to learn how to practice. The goal of meditation is to develop greater mindfulness and awareness as we go about our daily business. However, it is difficult for most of us to do that if we do not first learn to practice formally, alone or with others, in a quiet setting away from the pressures of daily life. Later, we can extend our meditation practice into all our activities, even the most challenging and demanding.

Meditation is a practice, something you do. The difference between reading about meditation and practicing it is like the difference between reading a menu and eating a meal. It may be mouth-watering to read about all the tasty dishes that are available, but if you are hungry, you need to eat.

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Meditation practice is very simple, but it is also very subtle. That is why, in times past, it was handed down carefully from one human to another, directly and fact-to-face. Nowadays you can learn the basics of meditation practice from a book, but as you develop your meditation practice, it is good to work with a qualified meditation instructor, if possible.

If you are interested in starting a meditation practice, try to set aside a spot in your house or apartment for regular sitting practice and set aside some time each day for meditation. Meditation, like most endeavors, takes time and effort. Try to practice regularly, if only for a short session each time. Regular practice is like dripping water on a stone. Each drop may seem insignificant, but over time, that water melts through the toughest rock.

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**Judith Lief** will be one of the meditation presenters at the 2005 Authentic Leadership Core Program. She is also leading a Pre-Program workshop entitled "Cultivating the Roots of Compassion."