

Finding Stillness in our everyday lives

We are all familiar with the phrase, “Time flies”. Or, where did the day go? People today speak of being busy. . Being ‘busy’ seems to be a force we cannot control. It seems that the spirit of busyness has invaded modern life. It wasn’t like that for our ancestors. In their day life moved at a slower more gentle pace. Obviously the life of our ancestors was different and less frantic than ours. They were more in touch with the natural rhythm of the day, whereas, we live in a 24/7 society. So, how are we bring some balance into our lives. How are we to find some peace in the world in which we live?

If we are to find some peace, some stillness we must make space for it. It won’t happen otherwise. We must look deeply at how we live our daily lives. You could just practice some relaxation exercises. These would be good for you and may well lower your blood pressure. But this is not the stillness I am thinking of. I am thinking more of a spiritual practice, which in turn can lead to a spiritual transformation.

It has been said that the world’s current problems are fundamentally a spiritual crisis, created by our limited vision of our humanity, our loss of a sense of connection with each other, and most importantly, a loss of connection to our spiritual values

However, to mature on the spiritual path needs commitment and practice so that you can bring into your life a new way of seeing. A famous teacher of meditation, Yamada Roshi once said: ‘ go into your room, take your seat in the centre of the room. Open the doors and the windows, and see who comes to visit. You will witness all kinds of scenes, all kinds of temptations and stories.. Your only job is to stay in your . You will see all things arise and pass, and out of this wisdom will come.

This is the gateway to meditation. Meditation is not about blanking the mind. We can’t do that! It’s about holding what is there with compassion and without judgement. When we take our seat for meditation we open ourselves to our life. We create the space for whatever is there to arise. It may be sorrows, loneliness, regret, desire, frustration. In our sitting we let whatever is there just be there, but we try not to be carried away by these thoughts and emotions. When something comes into your awareness you can say, ‘this too’, and simply allow it to be there In doing this you are being gentle with yourself. To practice in this way can be like opening your heart to the power of the Spirit., or whatever we might think of grace to be present..

Living a spiritual life requires that we give attention to the life we are living and to those around us and the world, of which we are interconnected.

Developing a spiritual practice will enable us to be connected to our life, and to the world. I would now like to turn to more practical ways in which we bring some stillness into our everyday lives.

An essential aspect of spiritual practice is the practice of what is called ‘Mindfulness’. What does this mean?

The word ‘mindfulness’ is very much in vogue nowadays in the world of corporate business. However, although it has its roots in ancient Buddhist practice, it does not belong solely to Buddhism. Of course, sages, yogis and Zen masters and Christian mystics have been exploring this territory for hundreds and even thousands of years. It is about waking up and living in harmony with yourself and the world. It’s about examining who we are. It’s about being in touch, really being in touch. Most people are not in touch.

Mindfulness means not taking your life for granted. It means cultivating an awareness of the present moment. We can only live in the present moment. Mindfulness is the art of conscious living. You don’t have to be a Buddhist to practice it. This practice does not conflict with anyone’s faith or beliefs. In fact it is not really about religion except that it deepens our experience of being alive in this world. And of being connected to all that exists. So, mindfulness = awareness, and as the great Socrates said: “The unaware life is not worth living”

This where the practice of sitting meditation comes into play. In the stillness of our sitting we are simply present to what is. We make no attempts to escape from the present moment and fly off onto the future and into the past.

Keeping the Breath in Mind

It helps when practicing zazen to have a focus for your attention, an anchor line. This helps when we find we have wandered off and so we return to the breath, this breath, this breath, this moment, this moment...The breath is always here. It’s right under your nose. You don’t have to think about it, it is always there.

Using the breath nurtures mindfulness and stillness. In our sitting we stay with the breath as it comes in and as it goes out... Just this breath. We are not trying to get anywhere, or looking for anything to happen. We just keep returning to the breath when the mind wanders. It doesn’t matter how often we have to do this. Because that is the practice. Just coming back to this breath, this moment.

We have to keep at it. Then we begin to experience that *unawareness* is everywhere! It’s not easy to just stay with breath even though you want to. Lots of things want to carry you away. The mind has become cluttered, like an old attic or garage. But being aware of this is in itself progress. The breath is the *current* connecting your body and your mind

The heart of the Practice:

Try setting aside some time every day for just being. It can be five minutes, ten or more. Sit down and watch the moments unfold with no agenda other than simply being present.

How long should I practice?

If you are seeking balance in your life, then a certain flexibility is necessary. It’s not so much about time as about sincerity of effort. It might mean that you start with just five minutes formal practice, then ten and with time you might be able to sit for half an hour or more. It’s bet not to sit for longer than 30 to 40 minutes, as we don’t have

limitless energy, and it takes energy to sit zazen. If you find you can't fit five or ten minutes into your day, then you are too busy!

Forming an intention is what matters. A journey of a thousand miles really start with one step, as the great Loa Tzu said.. The Lebanese poet Kabir said: 'When you look for me, you will see me instantly - you will find me in the tiniest house of time'

Mountain Meditation

Mountains have a lot to teach us about meditation. Mountains are sacred places.. People have always sought spiritual guidance and renewal of their spirit among them. The mountain is the dwelling place of the God's. (Mt Olympus, Mt Tabor, Mt Fuji)

Mountains embody presence.. In meditation it can be helpful to borrow these images for our sitting.. The image of the mountain can help us and remind us why we do this practice and what it really means to take our seat in zazen.

Picture the most beautiful mountain you can think of.. Note how massive it is, how solid and unmoving.. Perhaps it has snow on its peak, perhaps there are wispy clouds hiding its summit. When we sit we can take on this mountain like form and try to embody its qualities. Invite yourself to become a breathing mountain.

Keeping this mountain image in mind we sit. Allowing this image to deepen our stillness. As we sit you might sense a subtle transformation occurring in your heart and in your daily life. Can you see the mountain in others?

The mountain image is only one of many. You could use the image of the Lake. Many find this a wonderful image to help them find stillness. We know that water is a powerful element and that its nature is actually stronger than rock. Using the image of the lake we sit in stillness. Note that the lake only reflects what is there.. The wind can cause ripples, these are like our thoughts and distractions. When they have passed it's all calm and still again.

Walking Meditation.

Walking is another wonderful way to meditate. If your mind is particularly unsettled, then walking mindfully can bring deep peace. As we have done today, so in the Zen Temples of Japan sitting meditation is always interspersed with short walking periods. In walking meditation we are not walking to get anywhere. No place to go makes it easier. When we walk we walk with awareness, slow it down and be present to the moment.. Appreciate that you are able to walk. Know that you are walking on Mother Earth. Walk with dignity.

As the Navaho say: walk in beauty, wherever you are. It can be good to walk before of after a sitting.