

SUMMER 2006: Invigorating the Practice in Everyday Life

QUESTION: There are lots of Buddhist resources available for the beginner or the person with modest experience (and a good income). But one can only read so many books and attend so many retreats. How does one get through that middle-to-later phase if one can't go live in a monastery or sit with a teacher for several years?

NARAYAN LIEBENSON GRADY: The process of awakening is ongoing. It doesn't come about because of a resume - living in this or that monastery, sitting with this or that teacher. Monasteries and teachers can be extremely helpful. However, to be overly dependent on the conditions of a monastery is to miss the point of the practice. Sitting with a teacher can also be invaluable. However, to be dependent on teachers instead of on your own experience also is to miss the point of the practice.

We can deepen our practice in our daily lives if we understand that we need to keep applying the practice under all conditions, even those that are very difficult. This requires making the full commitment, over and over again, to be aware of whatever situation we are in, and to practice with it.

Perhaps your question is a wake-up call to yourself. How can you enliven your practice? Inquiring in this way doesn't mean you have to abandon the forms and ways of practice that have benefited you. It may mean you need to practice with a different perspective. The way you relate to the practice is fundamental, because out of wise view arises wise effort.

In essence, our practice is to let go of the torments of the heart. If an activity is basically wholesome, the quality of our hearts matters more than the activity itself. Paying attention to the quality of our hearts means being aware of moments of greed, moments of aversion, and moments of confusion. In being aware, we can begin to let them go.

There are many ways to incorporate practice into your everyday life. One way is to choose an aspect of the dharma to focus on for one week at a time. At the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center, we are very fond of assigning mindfulness exercises. These exercises can include awareness of how we speak, mindfulness of reactivity in relationships, and practicing compassion while driving. By taking up a particular aspect of the dharma for a week, a month, or a year at a time, we allow for a deeper investigation to take place.

I also want to comment on what you said about needing to have a good income to be able to practice. I would encourage you to investigate whether this is really true. Most Buddhist centers with which I am familiar offer those with limited finances ways to participate. Even though every

center needs funds to keep running, it is essential that all yogis who want to practice are able to do so.