

# A SECULAR DHARMA TALK

## What is secular meditation

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I would like to suggest that secular Buddhist meditation would be based on multi-choice and complementary elements. It would be practical and consider what works for a person. It would be ordinary in the sense that one could do it while washing the dishes and taking care of the children. It would also be creative and adaptable, helping us to creatively respond to the conditions we encounter in our lives.

I have taught meditation for the last twenty-five years and I realised over time that no single method works for everyone. Most techniques seem to suit 60 percent of the people. This is why I prefer to be a multi-choice teacher. I give different things to do, and each in different ways so that any person can find a method that suits them.

Often one is told that one should not consider meditation in terms of progress. But people are not meditating because they have nothing better to do. They do it because they aspire to wisdom, to compassion, to peace and to clarity. The question then becomes: Does meditation achieve this? Does meditating make them more tense or calmer, kinder or more detached?

A secular meditation is a meditation for this world and time, not for future lives, or merits for other people in past or future lives. It is not metaphysical, neither is it about the meaning of the universe, but about helping us lead more meaningful and valued lives. This kind of meditation involves all our life and cannot only be done on retreat in a secluded environment. In the Pali canon the Buddha talked again and again about improvement in terms of real lives, not future ones.

In the Kalama sutta he said:

*When you know for yourselves that ‘These qualities are skilful; these qualities are blameless; these qualities are praised by the wise; these qualities, when adopted and carried out, lead to welfare and to happiness’, then you should enter and remain in them.*

Nowadays most practitioners are people with families and responsibilities. It is essential to develop forms of meditation that are adapted to this modern environment, that can be done anywhere, and any time. The kinds of meditation we encounter have been developed over many centuries. Some come directly from the Pali canon, while other techniques come from creative developments by ancient practitioners through their encounter with the Buddhadharma, their own capacities, and their own saeculum. The same things will happen with us as we practice and make meditation our own.

I was a nun in Korea for ten years. While there, I practiced *Hwadu Sŏn* or what you could call Korean style ‘questioning Zen’ for ten hours a day, six months of the year. Relentlessly I asked silently, ‘What is this?’. This is one of the new techniques developed in the 11th century by the Chan tradition in China, when Master Tahui found a way to make it compact and simple for everyone – monks and lay people. During my ten years in Korea there was no talk of awareness, and no practice of meditation on compassion as such. However, within a year of asking ‘What is this?’ meditatively so often, I became more aware and more compassionate.

In 1985, I disrobed and went to live in England in a Buddhist community that was based on insight meditation. I did a few *vipassana* retreats, and when I heard about *samatha* and *vipassana* I was able to put it all together. I finally understood that the techniques did not matter as long as one was cultivating *samatha*, calmness, and *vipassana*, experiential enquiry, together.

This is what I had been doing all these years in Korea. My main teacher, Master Kusan, often repeated that we had to cultivate equally what he called *song song jok jok*, which means ‘bright bright calm

calm'. Basically, he was telling us to develop concentration and enquiry equally – samatha and vipassana.

So I would suggest that secular meditation is not based on one traditional technique from a specific Buddhist tradition, but on samatha and vipassana, and the different ways they can be cultivated.

Samatha refers to the cultivation of concentration and the development of calm. Vipassana is a practice of looking deeply, and it helps us to develop brightness and clarity. When we concentrate, we have a tendency to become tense in body and mind. This is the way we have been educated.

When we are told to 'concentrate!', we tense and narrow our focus, and this defeats one of the purposes of meditation, which is to help us become calmer. In this context, the term anchoring would be more useful. When we try to meditate, we need to have an anchor in the foreground to stabilise us, such as the breath, the body, sounds, a question, or the phrases of lovingkindness. This allows us to develop in the background a wide-open awareness of what arises and passes away in our experience.

The aim of focusing in meditation is not so much to stay with the breath at all cost, but to return repeatedly to the anchor. This is what will help us to develop calmness and spaciousness. Returning regularly to the breath will allow us to, for example, not feed our mental habits.

This will enable people to return to their creative functioning of thinking, planning or reflecting. This in turn will give us more freedom to think certain thoughts if we need to, and not if we don't. Moreover anchoring makes us come back to our full experience in its multiple conditions instead of our comment of it or our distracting from it.

By looking deeply into the changing nature of our experiences and cultivating questioning, we start to dissolve our strong habits of self-centredness, amplification and making things more permanent than

they are. We become clearer, dissolving grasping and misperceptions. So when we meditate we develop quietness and clarity at the same time, which in turn manifest as creative awareness in our daily activities. Creative awareness is the product of secular meditation.

**A**s I practiced as a lay person, the more I saw that we are not aware for its own sake, or to become more self-conscious and judging. Meditation helps us release our hold on our limited sense of self, dissolving greed, anger or confusion. If these go to some degree, we are not left staring at reality or detached from it. On the contrary, we are more aware of ourselves and others, but in a creative way. If fixing habits disappear, something new and fresh can appear instead.

Reading about the Pali canon, I learnt about *sati* (mindfulness), *sampajanna* (clear comprehension) and *yoniso manasikara* (skilful attention). This made me wonder if instead of trying to find states that correspond exactly to these terms, it would not be more useful to use the catch phrase of ‘creative awareness’.

I made this suggestion to a Pali scholar, and his answer was firm and non-negotiable: ‘there is no word for “creative awareness” in the Pali canon’. So I decided to forget about these difficult Buddhist terms and instead use creative awareness, which seemed more appropriate in these secular times. This new term could also act as a reminder of the importance of creativity for meditation and a Buddhist way of life.

Another theme that we have to look at in terms of secular meditation is the leitmotif of ‘just be with things as they are’. I discovered recently that it is found in the Pali canon as *yathabutam* (which generally comes together with *nanadassana*). This is often interpreted as either do not do anything, bear with it, dig deeper, or that there are metaphysical ways things are that we have to find out. The full expression, however, means ‘to see and know things as they come to be’, or in a secular way – creatively engage!

The Buddha is not telling us to just be with whatever arises without doing anything. In the Titttha sutta he talks about people he feels remain stuck in inaction and tells us that this is not his way. His dharma is involves with being aware of cause and effect and their exploration. As he states:

*‘There are these eighteen explorations for the intellect’ is a dhamma taught by me that is unrefuted, undefiled, blameless, not faulted by knowledgeable brahmans and contemplatives’. Thus was it said. And in reference to what was it said? Seeing a form via the eye, one explores a form that can act as the basis for happiness, one explores a form that can act as the basis for unhappiness, one explores a form that can act as the basis for equanimity.*

*Hearing a sound via the ear... Smelling an aroma via the nose... Tasting a flavour via the tongue... Feeling a tactile sensation via the body... Cognising an idea via the intellect, one explores an idea that can act as the basis for happiness, one explores an idea that can act as the basis for unhappiness, one explores an idea that can act as the basis for equanimity.*

Secular meditation could be also about desacralisation. This does not mean that nothing can be sacred and important to us. Rather, it points out that we have a tendency to make certain things more sacred than others, and often this leads to fixation and a stopping of creativity. For example I often encounter what I would call ‘sacred sitting’. The Buddha, in the Pali canon, repeatedly talks about the four meditative postures: sitting, walking, standing, and lying down.

But when I talk with people, I have the feeling that they believe there is only one posture that can bring awakening or be true practice, and that is sitting cross-legged on a cushion. So if for whatever reasons you are not ‘sitting’ regularly at home, you are not meditating. This is terribly restrictive. If you are sitting all day long at work, it might be better to do walking or lying down meditation.

Another sacred meditative object is the breath. ‘The breath is it!’ ‘One must use the breath when meditating, otherwise one is not meditating properly!’ No, there are *four* foundations of mindfulness: breath and body, feeling tones, mental events, and dhammas. The breath is just one possible anchoring device among many. What’s more it is not suitable for everyone, as I would not necessarily recommend it for asthmatics, unless they have found it helpful for their condition. Very often, people with asthma find listening to sounds with awareness more fruitful, calming and opening.

There is also sacred silence. I teach seven-day retreats in silence more for practical purposes than spiritual ones. Silence on retreat is a skilful means. It is not an end in itself and it might not be suitable for everyone. In Korea, the three-month retreats in winter and summer were not silent, which meant we had plenty of opportunities to be annoyed with each other, and learn from that. Moreover, when we left the retreat there was less disconnect between the retreat and worldly life.

**F**inally, on the horizon I see the ‘sacred raisin’ appearing... In MBSR and MBCT, one of the exercises is to eat a raisin slowly and mindfully. Once I was teaching and someone was looking for raisins in the meditation hall. I had to let that person know that, regretfully, I did not use raisins when teaching meditation. There and then, I had a vision of people worshipping The Golden Raisin 200 years hence.

❖ *This is a lightly edited version of a talk that Martine gave during the colloquium on secular Buddhism at Insight Meditation Society, Barre, Massachusetts, in 2013.*



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Martine is interested in meditation in daily life, Buddhism and social action, religion and women's issues, as well as Zen and its history, factual and legendary. She involved with the Silver Santé Study, teaching meditation,

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She is the author of a number of books including *Meditation for life* (1996, reprinted 2016), *The path of compassion* (2004), *Women in Korean Zen* (2005) and *Let go: a Buddhist guide to breaking free of habits* (2007). With her husband, Stephen Batchelor, she is co-author of *What is this? Ancient questions for modern minds* (Tuwhiri, 2019).

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