

Meditation and Human Development

*Ms. Ivana Zivkovic, Psychotherapist
Manger, Association Vipassana Serbia
Belgrade, Serbia*

In the western educational system, we are taught to look in the outside world, to observe what is out there, to study the outer world. Almost never or very rarely, we are taught to look inside, to what is actually happening in us. And without this looking inside, there is no real development. To get to know how things really are, we have to look both, inside and outside. We have to know ourselves. Buddhist meditation gives us excellent means to manage this. Using the same method we shall then get to know the outside world. For:

*“In the boundless Without
find thyself, oh man!*

*In the innermost Within
Find the boundless worlds!*

*So will it be revealed:
Nowhere the Riddle of Worlds is solved,
Save in the being of Man.”*

These are the poetic words of an unknown western philosopher. Indeed if we look carefully into ourselves, we can find that both heaven and hell are in us, and all the six realms of existence, that we know from the Buddhist Wheel of life. So within us we can meet Gods, fighting warriors, greedy ghosts, beings tormented in hell, animals and (hopefully) humans. Maybe occasionally, if we are lucky we may also meet a Bodhisatta of compassion or the Buddha himself.

When I was young and first started practicing Buddhist meditation, I thought that I don't have any enemies, that I almost never get angry, that I am good to others. Then I had my first meditation retreat. During this retreat, we did also walking meditation. A young woman, only a few years older than me, walked in front of me

during these sessions. She was actually ill, tired and exhausted, and moved extremely slowly. I got impatient and irritated as I walked behind her. At some point fortunately, on Sunday (it was a weekend retreat) I suddenly realized: this is what it is all about. Here it is: anger, impatience, intolerance, irritation...it is all in me. Am I actually healthier than this girl? Gradually compassion started arising. Later in life, as I got ill myself, I always remembered this young woman and how she taught me my first lesson in compassion in such a simple way. This was one of the most important lessons in my life. It helped my development much more than any amount of abstract grammar lessons or history I learned at the university. I experienced it directly, with my whole body and mind.

In our school of meditation, Vipassana, as taught by S. N. Goenka, meditation is taught on 10 day retreats during which we maintain the complete noble silence. Beginners meditate together with people who already have some experience and who have decided to walk the path of Dhamma. These people, so called “old students”, come back to these retreats once or twice a year in order to deeper purify their minds and strengthen their practice. For us, as we all otherwise live lay lives, it is like going back to the monastery once or twice a year. One other method which we use is *adhitan* – strong determination not to move during certain meditation periods that last 1 hour. These two rules – noble silence and *adhitan* – I find very precious and helpful in one’s meditation practice, hence personal development. These two are methods that I think could be applied in any schools or educational institutions for a certain period of time, in an appropriate way. Children and young adults could have great benefits from them. This is actually an important question which I would like to put here:

How do we teach Dhamma, the basics of Dhamma, at schools? Especially in the West. And by teaching Dhamma, I actually mean helping children live on the path of awareness, inner peace, love, wisdom, compassion... and to act out of these.

Maybe we don't necessarily have to talk about Buddhism as religion, but we can start with Shila – morality, through telling Dhamma stories.

I have a friend who has founded a Buddhist Internet site in Serbian language. Every day he sends in a short Dhamma story, that he calls a Flower of the Dhamma. In the meantime, we have received lots of Dhamma flowers. Among them is this little story and the metaphor I would like to share with you and you may share them further, with younger and older people alike.

Transient

A famous spiritual teacher came to the front door of the King's palace. None of the guards tried to stop him as he entered and made his way to where the King himself was sitting on his throne.

"What do you want?" asked the King, immediately recognizing the visitor.

"I would like a place to sleep in this inn," replied the teacher.

"But this is not an inn," said the King, "It is my palace."

"May I ask who owned this palace before you?"

"My father. He is dead."

"And who owned it before him?"

"My grandfather. He too is dead."

"And this place where people live for a short time and then move on - did I hear you say that it is NOT an inn?"

Taming a wild elephant

Ancient Pali texts liken meditation to the process of taming a wild elephant. The procedure in those days was to tie a newly captured animal to a post with a good strong rope. When you do this the elephant is not happy. He screams and tramples, and pulls against the rope for days. Finally it sinks through his skull that he can't get away, and he settles down. At this point you can begin to feed him and to handle him with some measure of safety. Eventually you can dispense with the rope and post altogether, and train your elephant for various tasks. Now you've got a tamed

elephant that can be put to useful work. In this analogy the wild elephant is your wildly active mind, the rope is mindfulness, and the post is our object of meditation--breathing. The tamed elephant who emerges from this process is a well trained, concentrated mind that can then be used for the exceedingly tough job of piercing the layers of illusion that obscure reality. Meditation tames the mind.

May these Dhamma flowers help the Dhamma blossom in our hearts.