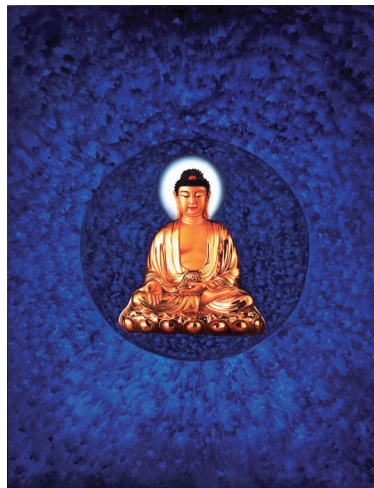


The modern face of meditation

Sandra Kimball learns how to clear her mind



MANY COME TO JAPAN WITH AN eagerness to experience meditation. But unless you have an introduction, usually through academic channels or from a Buddhist centre from another part of the world, you may be left standing outside the closed, heavy wooden temple doors. With a little investigating, though, you'll find that Buddhism has shed its priestly robes and is travelling outside the temple walls. The opportunities to practice meditation are flourishing, and one doesn't necessarily need to be inside the monastery or a Buddhist to experience the benefits.

Even though Buddhism is embedded in the hearts and minds of the Japanese and permeates ethics and traditions, most people who say they are Buddhist don't meditate, whereas 99.9 percent of those who practice Buddhism in Western countries do. Lately, Buddhist meditation practices from other cultures have taken root and are flourishing in Japan. For many foreigners and Japanese as well, the imported methods are oftentimes their first introduction to meditation.

Of all the variants of Buddhism within Japan, the most well known is Zen. Zen found its way to Japan over one thousand years ago. The Soto School employs an intensive meditation practice called "zazen," whereas the Rinzai School adds an aspect of reflection with what are known as "koan," a kind of unanswerable question meant to be grasped intuitively. The aim of both methods is to empty the mind and wake up to the essential identity of all things. Zen became popular with the samurai class due to its emphasis on rigid self-discipline. Over the years, its popularity declined inside Japan and boomed in the West. On a visit to one of the few Japanese Zen temples open to foreigners, one can expect to learn some basic meditation techniques and possibly sample a small taste of temple life. Devoting a life to Zen practice and study is a serious commitment.

The historical and philosophical hub of Buddhism originated in Northern India, and spread by two main pathways – the Mahayana and Theravada traditions. The Northern Path, Mahayana, travelled from India to Tibet, Mongolia, China, Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. In the formulations of the Mahayana tradition, there is a tendency to express our responsibility for the welfare of others and often inspiration is drawn from archetypal luminaries.

The other pathway, Theravada (sometimes referred to as Hinayana), is loosely translated as the "School of the Elders." It is more classical, orthodox, and pragmatic. Theravada Buddhism traversed mainly through Sri Lanka, Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, and Laos.

Several years ago, two prominent Burmese teachers began a movement to take meditation out of the temple and make it available for everyone. Vipassana means "seeing things as they really are." The meditator aims to discern the three universal characteristics of experience according to Buddhism: its unsatisfactoriness, impermanence, and impersonal nature.

Mahasi Sayadaw was a leading figure in the revival of Buddhism in Burma post-independence, a movement that established many centres for teaching Insight or Vipassana meditation. The Mahasi method is specifically designed to allow lay people in the modern world to attain the experience of enlightenment, or *nibbana*. Vipassana meditation is also known as "mindfulness meditation," for its practice of continuous and unremitting attention to mental and physical phenomena as they appear to the meditator.

In the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin, S.N. Goenka and his assistant teachers offer Vipassana meditation at non-sectarian, ten-day residential courses during which participants learn the basics of the method, and practice sufficiently to experience its beneficial results. The technique is slightly different in that it investigates the deep interconnection of mind and body by focused attention to physical sensations in the body.

There are many Tibetan meditation centres and small groups burgeoning throughout Japan.

In Tibetan Buddhism, great importance is placed on the way in which the Buddha's teachings have been transmitted from master to student in an unbroken lineage down to the present day.

All Buddhist meditation methods can be regarded as a means of developing serenity and insight or clarity about experience. They are a re-introduction to the ancient wisdom of inner mental development. With continuous practice, meditation shifts our perspective from one of sitting in the middle of our personal chaos to bearing witness to it. Once we awaken the witness consciousness, nothing is ever the same. We see ourselves differently and experience more energy and clarity. This energy can be likened to the energy of electricity which can be utilized in numerous ways. However it is used, the nature of the electricity stays the same.

At the same time that we become aware of this energy and clarity, we notice that something stands in the way, like a cloud blocking the sun. Upon investigation, we may think it is the fault of the other people in our lives or other external circumstances. But that something in the way is nothing other than ourselves and we're confronted with our past, our psychology, countless fears, and our opinions about how we think life should be. If we start looking for a way around this, we can get stuck. As the saying goes, "the only way out is through," and meditation becomes a purification of our problems, tensions, and obscurations from the past. It is a mental training that helps us build better habits to pay attention to the laws of our internal energy.

Although meditation techniques will differ and certain temperaments will be attracted to one or another, they share something. Both require us to get honest with ourselves, pull away from the illusions of our world, and follow a clearly laid-out pathway that nourishes and leads back to the heart. At the heart of the matter, there is a direct experience of spaciousness that holds the understanding that all does not appear as it seems. There is a recognition that your life and mine are unfolding within a paradox of veritable aloneness and complete intimacy.

It's evident we've entered into a new cycle in time. For example, we're no longer confined to television or newspapers to get the news. We can get instant information from the sources we choose on the Internet. Meditation is undergoing this same quiet revolution. Although still in the sanctuary of the temples, meditation and its merits are seeping into the lives of people from all over the world, making us better workers, partners, and parents. Eventually, meditation becomes the lining to the coat that is our life and each day becomes more liberating, each day more joyous. And what better news for the world can there be than this. **KTO**

Resources for meditation in Japan:
www.internationalcounselling.com
www.buddhanet.net