

DHARMA CONTEMPLATION

Soaking ourselves in the words of the Buddha

Gregory Kramer

*A new way of
integrating study and
practice comes to BCBS.*

As interest in Buddhist teachings becomes more mainstream, many people are beginning to feel a yearning for encounters with the Dhamma that are as close as possible to the source, possibly less colored by contemporary interpretations or emphases. While it is not possible to access truly unadulterated teachings—there is much debate about what constitutes the words of the Buddha and translations always add a layer of interpretation—the spread of sutta study groups and sales of books from the early Pali Canon attest to the longing for a more direct contact with the words of the Buddha.

Study groups offer some nutrition for this hunger, but for many people a primarily intellectual approach to these teachings seems incomplete or is alien to their character. Reading the texts on one's own offers valuable contact with the words of the Buddha, but people often find themselves put off by the occasionally dense material, alien language, or cultural particulars of these ancient texts. Also, it is often difficult to find courses of study close to our homes or convenient to our responsibilities. In these latter cases, the Internet provides many resources for self-study, but few that form real communities linking participants in actual practice of the path.

The practice of Dharma Contemplation addresses the need for holistic and intimate contact with root teachings. In Dharma Contemplation we soak ourselves in the words of the Buddha—or possibly in other root texts—so we can come to some direct experience of the wisdom they carry. The practice has evolved from three primary influences: the ancient Christian practice of *lectio divina* (divine reading), Insight Dialogue, and my personal experience of steeping myself in the words of the suttas to enable some breakthrough in my understanding of the nature of things. All three of these influences are still very alive for me as I evolve the practice further.

Lectio divina is an ancient contemplative practice from the Christian tradition in which participants immersed themselves in the Gospels. Its four-part form codified in the eleventh century inspired the multiple layers of Dharma Contemplation. Also inspiring is *lectio divina's* visceral sense of living the experiences of Jesus' life and teachings. Insight Dialogue is a practice I have been developing that extends silent and individual insight practice to dialogic, interpersonal meditation. Insight Dialogue inspired this practice by revealing the remarkable depths to which people can develop mindfulness and concentration

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while engaged interpersonally. Insight Dialogue also helped me understand the power of peer-to-peer learning and the human potential for deep intersubjectivity. Most personally, Dharma Contemplation is inspired by my own experience with the suttas. As I sought to clarify my understanding of what the Buddha taught, I set aside not only contemporary Buddhist writers but even the later texts of the Pali Canon such as the *Abhidhamma* and *Visuddhimagga*. I thank Venerable Punjabi for his inspiration and example in turning to root sources. The only way I could understand and truly absorb these teachings was by pausing as I read and taking time to drop beneath cognitive experience and into a felt sense of their riches. I continue to absorb the suttas in this way and never cease to be amazed at how alive and directly relevant these teachings are in this very human life I live.

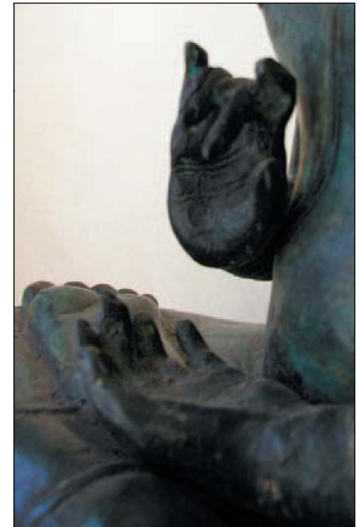
A key principle of Dharma Contemplation is that the wisdom we are contemplating comes directly from the Buddha via his oral teachings, teachings passed down in the Pali texts for two thousand years. Put another way, in Dharma Contemplation there is no teacher that interprets or otherwise mediates between us and the Buddha. Just as we can experience intimate and elucidating contact with a good friend or teacher—mind to mind, heart to heart—we can do so with the Buddha via his legacy in a remarkably direct way—human to human, Buddha to Buddha. Dharma Contemplation is designed to provide a structure to help us realize this capacity.

There are several forms of practice (for example, alone and in groups, online, and in-person) and all of them share four phases of contemplation: meaning, emotion, immediate experience, and meditation. While online practice is different from in-person group practice, the steady movement in both from understanding to direct apprehension is essentially identical.

So we see that the Dharma Contemplation group is not a “Dharma study group” in any traditional sense, nor is it a traditional meditation group. Dharma Contemplation is a hybrid practice of meditation and contemplation. It is based upon and partakes of the mental strengths of meditation such as mindfulness, inquiry, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. Bringing text to this meditative mind is like planting a viable seed in rich, warm, moist soil; growth will occur. We invoke the power of the intellect—and collective inquiry—to dissolve and restructure our conceptual frameworks. In this practice we also bring our emotional and intuitive sensibilities—and those of others—to bear on these same texts, revealing something of their depth. We directly experience our lives in the light shed by these teachings. Finally, we come back to meditation, as the practice opens the door to refined understanding. We leave each session touched by essential wisdom.

Selecting a Text

The first step in Dharma Contemplation is selecting an appropriate text. A short passage is best, usually between 50 and 250 words, so that we can retain the whole in our awareness. Obviously, it is good to select a passage with some pith, what we might call a weight-bearing or meaning-rich excerpt. We have found that metaphors and similes unfold beautifully in this practice and give the passage a resonance that lingers. Simple didactic teachings can also work well. Indeed, the lists of this-leads-to-that, and that-leads-to-this-other-thing



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type of passage, for which the suttas are so famous, can yield remarkable results as these morph from ideas to experience. I tend to be cautious with passages that emphasize revulsion or negative teachings, reserving them for use with seasoned meditators. The aversion and judgment they arouse in our culture can interfere with the receptivity essential to this practice. Finally, a text from another tradition can be workable, but it may lack the benefit of weaving itself into the vast vision of the Buddha's dispensation. I definitely recommend working with classical texts. In Dharma Contemplation the heart becomes sensitized and it is wise to honor this with excerpts from time-tested texts.

Here is an example, drawn from the *Anguttara Nikaya*, of an excerpt that has both a rich simile and an intriguing cause and effect chain. We will use this example as we unfold the practice guidelines. I will focus entirely on group practice, but individual Dharma Contemplation practice is also very rich.

...Imagine a tree abundant in its branches and leaves: its buds grow to maturity, its bark grows to maturity, its sapwood grows to maturity, its heartwood grows to maturity. In the same way, when—there being mindfulness and alertness—a person is abundant in mindfulness and alertness, the prerequisite for a sense of conscience and concern becomes abundant. There being a sense of conscience and concern...the prerequisite for restraint of the senses becomes abundant. There being restraint of the senses...the prerequisite for virtue becomes abundant. There being virtue...the prerequisite for right concentration becomes abundant. There being right concentration...the prerequisite for knowledge and vision of things as they actually are present becomes abundant. There being knowledge and vision of things as they are actually present, the prerequisite for disenchantment and dispassion becomes abundant. There being disenchantment and dispassion, the prerequisite for knowledge and vision of release becomes abundant.
(A8:81)

The Practice

A Dharma Contemplation session begins with a short period of silent meditation. During this time, participants settle together (in-person) or individually (online) in silence. We set aside our worldly desires and concerns and calm the body and mind. We nurture confidence in the teachings and open our hearts to transformation. We prepare ourselves to participate in and receive the teachings.

The Buddha's teachings were transmitted orally, and this is how we begin Dharma Contemplation. In an in-person group, the teachings are read aloud twice, preferably once by a male voice and once by a female voice. In online

practice, the participant listens to a recording of the excerpt being read. Individually, the text would be read aloud. Now we begin the first phase of the practice.



Reading—exploring meaning

Literal and figurative meaning is a foundation for all phases of the practice. It therefore unfolds in two or sometimes three layers: words as such; word and phrase meanings; and, when fitting, by the introduction to the group of commentary on the traditional interpretation of the text. Sitting in a circle (in-person) or at our computers (online), having heard the excerpt, we silently read the text to ourselves repeatedly, speaking aloud or posting those phrases that touch us or arouse inquiry. We pay attention to where the mind is drawn by interest, curiosity, or resonance. We share only the words of the text—single words or phrases, and listen deeply as others do the same. Our attention is thus called to what others notice that we might have overlooked.

Using the above excerpt as an example, we may hear (or read): “Maturity... mindfulness and alertness...abundant, abundant, abundant...conscience and concern...vision of release...prerequisite for knowledge...dispassion... abundant...” and so on, with each word or group of words contributed by a different person. Sometimes, unexpected words are brought forward or pivotal words are repeated many times in a kind of living poetry.

In the latter part of this phase, after the words have begun to soak in, we speak words other than the text. The orientation is still rigorously towards the text, but now we ask questions as to meaning and share knowledge and observations about the text. We avoid personal reactions and stories, however, and remain focused on layers of meaning in the Buddha’s words.

So in group we may hear (or read) such contributions as: “What does it mean to be abundant in mindfulness?” “Does conscience always have to lead to restraint of the senses?” “The buds and sapwood and so on all depend upon the nutrition provided by the branches and leaves. Are mindfulness and alertness the branches and leaves?” “When the Buddha speaks of knowledge and vision of things as they actually are, he usually means seeing things as impermanent, suffering, and without an abiding self.” “I don’t know if disenchantment and dispassion lead to knowledge and vision of release, and I don’t know what release means. Release from what?” “Might that be release from suffering?” “A tree has roots in the soil and is fed by sun and rain. Perhaps meditation feeds mindfulness and alertness and makes it abundant.” And so on.

The attitude in this phase is expressed by our slow and gentle reading. We savor the words and listen for the still, small voice within. We listen deeply, in a spirit of inquiry and awe. There are plenty of spaces for questions and statements to resonate and settle. What words and phrases speak to us? We dwell in and around those words and speak them into the silence of the group if they have the energy to be shared. We let the words and phrases shared by others touch us and arouse inquiry.

At the close of this phase it can sometimes be helpful, but is by no means necessary, to introduce commentary as to the traditional interpretation of this excerpt. This can help clarify meanings for some participants, particularly if no one in the group has a strong background in Buddhist thought. This type of addition, however, can also unduly influence the practice and should be used with care.

In in-person groups, a facilitator may ring a bell to signify the transition to the next phase of practice. In seasoned groups, the transition may occur

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spontaneously. In online practice, the above layers of the meaning phase may take a full week. A new message thread is started for each subsequent phase.

Contemplation—encompassing emotion

In this phase we allow the contemplation to expand to include emotion evoked by the text. As words are being slowly memorized, their layers of meaning unfold. We notice the resonances and images the words stir up in the body. This is where the cognitive meets the affective. Deep attention to arising experience ripens. As we take in sense stimuli—words and the images and thoughts they invoke—the body reacts and emotion arises. We can rest awareness on these immediately present reactions to the text. As we read and reread these words, what sensations arise in the body? What is our emotional state? Is there spaciousness and what does it feel like? Is there constriction, aversion, or confusion?

Our challenge is to deepen our relationship to these words as we experience their subtle impact on us.

These teachings arouse sensations and mind states because deeper layers of the unconscious are being touched. We attend to these messengers of meaning. As we consider these emotional and physical states we are likely to be pulled from the thoughts necessary to describe them towards a personal story aroused by the practice. Rather than share these personal stories, we simply note what the tug towards personal stories feels like. We let go and return to the text and our felt response to it. In this phase the predominant focus is on the physical and emotional experience, still in response to the words of the Buddha rather than to each other's contributions. Our challenge is to deepen our relationship to these words as we experience their subtle impact upon us.

The attitude here is rumination. This is a time to hear “with the ear of our hearts” (St. Benedict). We remain stable and aware as memories, feelings and thoughts unfold. We allow ourselves to be drawn into the present moment of experience as the words speak to us. If a single word touches us, we stay with it, repeat it, dwell in it, and go beyond the intellect to a direct experience of the word as a collection of letters, a sound, an aggregate carrier of wisdom across time.

In group, we may hear (or read): “The word *abundant* is so enlivening. It makes me feel hopeful and energized.” “When I read *mindfulness* I feel like it's an old task; I feel drained. But *alertness* feels fresh and wakes me up.” “*Disenchantment* settles in my belly. It is both intriguing and a little scary.” “*Knowledge and vision of release*—yearning.” “This whole passage, including *concentration, dispassion, and vision*, grows in abundance from mindfulness and alertness, and that abundance and vision brightens my heart. Abundance is possible—even likely.” And so on.

Dialogue—immediate experience

We join together in the deeper experience of the Dhamma. We may speak the actual, textual words, but this is also a time to speak to our present experience as drawn out by the words. What is realized in this moment? This is a personal statement, not a theoretical one. We share our mundane observations, our pain, and our insights with the understanding that our capacity for non-grasping follows us into this everyday life. We are constantly refreshed by silence. Listening to the spoken truth of other meditators, each person's experience of

the teaching becomes richer and our mindfulness and tranquility grow. In the ample silences, we soak in each and every spoken word and each nuance of internal and external experience.

The attitude now blossoms into a full openness to the transformative wisdom of the Dhamma, and that wisdom touches this moment of experience. The text has saturated our minds. We recognize our capacity for freedom and allow ourselves to be changed by the word. We speak the truth as it arises in this moment, where the Dhamma meets this human experience. We hold up our challenges and our most exquisite insights. This is also a time to accept the compassion of others and offer our own, recognizing the complexity and vulnerability of this deeply conditioned being. We listen with full presence. Speaking and listening does not interrupt the silence nor the direct experience of the Dhamma. Rather, each spoken truth is met with wise attention and draws us ever more deeply into the moment.

We may hear in groups such contributions as, “Somehow I have lost touch with the sense of abundance I felt when I began practice. In this moment I feel it stirring again.” “I try to live my life with conscience and concern. Now I’m noticing—or even feeling—how this carries in it a connection to deep truth. I experience now the mindfulness within that heartfelt conscience.” “My mind flutters now between passion and dispassion. A longing arises for coolness without coldness.” And so forth.

Meditation—indwelling ripeness

There is a movement to silence as we dwell directly with the experience of the Dhamma that has unfolded. There may be the occasional words spoken early in this phase, but ultimately silence provides the background for a meditation that is mostly beyond words. In this silence, we may naturally recall the phrases and words that now saturate the mind. We may be aware of the body as it resonates with recent arisings. We rest in the immediate experience of the truths that have spontaneously emerged. The attitude now is one of letting be. We use words when helpful, let go when unnecessary. Once again wordless, we practice silence. We rest quietly in presence as experience yields insight.

There are usually few spoken or written contributions during this phase. We may hear the occasional sharing: “Concentration is abundant,” “Ease,” or “Gratitude.” By now, sixty to ninety minutes of concentrated practice have elapsed. In online practice, two weeks have now gone by. We end in silence.



So the path above carries us along to the emptiness of itself
The house and hall at its end an oasis of love, emptiness
Like going to the ocean for its oceaness I go to the Barre Center for its “emptiness”

—Michael Selzer

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To learn more about these programs or to convene a Dharma Contemplation group in your area, please visit www.metta.org.