

BIMS January 2013 Practice Period

Introduction to the Practice Period

Jean LaValley, January 8th, 2013

Welcome all to this first evening of the first practice period that Bell Ins has sponsored. Tonight I'll give a brief overview of what a Practice Period is, and then review some foundational teachings that can support us during this one month time. There will be a chance to discuss these ideas in small groups. And we'll end by coming back together as a large group. And all that in just 1 hour?

Story from Ajahn Geoff's teacher: listen with your body, see what sticks. If 3 % sticks that's a good dharma talk.

So...what is a Practice Period? It is a time to deepen and clarify our practice, both on and off the cushion. Historically, the practice period originated in the rains retreats of the early Buddhist monks and nuns when they could not travel due to heavy rains. During that time, the sangha lived together & practiced together. So..during 9 months of the year, monks wandered and mainly practiced alone. During a Practice Period, they practiced together. So we want to recognize that we are both practicing as individuals and practicing within this community and build in some sangha support .

The TC thought that the first of the year was a good time to ratchet up our practice. There are many ways to ratchet up. You might want to start or deepen a daily practice. And/or to start coming to one of our usual meditation periods (AM, Tuesday & Th evenings). The twice a month Saturday (morning) Sit-in. Ajahn Santi will be coming up in February to lead a Saturday retreat day. The TC will be giving dharma talks on Tuesdays at 8 PM for the next month. The dharma talks will be on dharma topics that we think are interesting and illuminating for practice. We'll be including chances to meet and talk with each other about dharma topics. We'll be happy to help you connect with a dharma buddy, if you want...And to suggest resources to help you explore any topic that you are interested in. The names & emails of the teaching corps are at the bottom of your handout. And there are other suggestions on the flyer posted in the lobby.

(Teaching corps introduced)

With that overview of a Practice Period in mind, I want to talk briefly about 3 teachings that can serve as the basis of our time during this next month and as a support for our practice always.

The Three Refuges

I take refuge in the Buddha- the awake nature in myself and every being.

I take refuge in the Dharma- the teachings, the true nature of things.

I take refuge in the Sangha- the community of those on a spiritual path.

Refuge: a shelter or protection from a storm; taking the refuges indicates our intention to live with, live by and trust in these 3 gems. We often “take” the refuges and precepts at the beginning of a retreat. And we thought about doing that at the beginning of the Practice Period, but we decided that it would be a better idea to introduce these ideas at the beginning and let people investigate them and get to know them. So...we will be taking the refuges and precepts at the end of the Practice Period and at the beginning of the rest of our lives:) – at which point we should all have a better idea if we really do want to take this on.

Everyone needs places of refuge. When a boat takes refuge from a storm in a cove, the waters are calmer, there is a chance to regroup and catch your breath. But looking out you can still see the storm and to some extent feel and hear it. You are not hidden, just protected. In the same way, taking refuge in the BDS means connecting with the strength of these protections but not hiding from anything. The refuges serve as guides and reminders about core teachings. As we ponder the refuges, one question we might ask our selves is “What do I consider to be the primary guide to my life and how & why?”

Buddha: Buddha means “one who is awake”, so taking refuge is an affirmation that awakens is possible for each of us. And it is also a reminder to recognize those moments when we *are* awake. Those moments of spaciousness, non-clinging, non-identification. On a practical level, taking

refuge in the Buddha is a commitment to and appreciation of mindfulness in all aspects of our lives.

Dharma: is not only the overall teachings of the Buddha, but a more general word meaning the truth of the way things are. The way things are. NOT necessarily the way we want them to be. For me, taking refuge in the dharma means seeing in as many ways as I can that my desire for things to be a certain way is delusion. The dharma is a touchstone – a grounding, a reassurance.

Sangha: I think of sangha as “the supportive community of practitioners”.

Within our sangha we are all *supported* by others living the precepts, *supported* by living the practices of compassion and lovingkindness. *Commitment* to mindfulness and honesty. *Supported* by the knowledge that others in this room share similar pains and similar joys

In the next month, coming back to these refuges – at the start of the day or a meditation period or whenever can be a significant support to practice.

The Five Training Precepts

Sila (morality) guidelines for sane and happy living. Principles to action so we can live without regret.

1. I undertake the precept to refrain from taking the life of any living creature.
2. I undertake the precept to refrain from taking that which is not given.
3. I undertake the precept to refrain from sexual misconduct.
4. I undertake the precept to refrain from false and harmful speech.
5. I undertake the precept to refrain from consuming intoxicating drink and drugs, which lead to heedlessness.

No specifics. Big topics with lots of sub topics and nuances.

Training...different than thou shall or shalt not. There will be mistakes.

There will be confusion. Fine. Keep coming back. To live without regret!!

Intention

A practice period is an opportunity for us as participants to clarify our spiritual intentions AND to work with them. In a practice period we are encouraged to identify a practice intention that will open us up to opportunities and activities beyond our current level of commitment, while keeping in mind what is doable *and* respects our family, health and work. So what is intention and what produces a good one?

The dictionary defines intention as “the stretch or bending of the mind in a direction.” So the small intention might be to focus on the breath or on eating or on walking. But there is a larger piece to intention. What is your deepest wish for yourself - to become quieter? To know yourself? To be kinder to yourself? To be free from suffering? What are you “inclining” towards? Whatever your answer, you have a better chance of getting where you want to go if you purposely “intend”/bend AND point yourself in the right direction.

On a mundane level, we can say we want to go to NYC but if we live in Bham and then head west, it’s going to be a LONG trip. In the same way, I’ve been thinking about my “very busy days”, filled with so much activity, and I have rather painfully seen that much of my activity is NOT based on conscious intention – my activities are based on duty, momentum, obligation, responses to other people, reactions to events, etc.

And yet, the Buddha said that our intentions are the main factors shaping our lives and that they can be mastered as a skill. Ajahn Geoff starts his essay on intention by saying “there’s an old saying that the road to hell is paved with good intentions, but that’s not really the case. The road to hell is paved with intentions that are careless, lustful, or mean.” Vague, unnoticed.

So how do we more skillfully work with intention? “The most basic step in this process is to make sure that we stay off the road to hell. We do this through the practice of generosity and virtue, consciously replacing unskillful intentions with more skillful ones.” That’s why we wanted to introduce the refuges and precepts at the beginning of this Practice Period, because they are basic supports for staying off the road to hell.

Another way of working with intention is pay attention to our actions (physical or mental) in 3 stages – before we take an action (), during the action () and then after we are done (). IF we were to do this, we would a) learn a lot and b) probably slow down, because this takes some time.

Another support for working with intention is to meditate – to slow down and pay attention to the mind, which is your tool OFF the cushion to figure out whether you're on the road to heaven or hell.

So intention is about both about the direction you want to take to realize your deepest wish for yourself AND about a commitment or leaning towards specific actions that will help you realize this wish.

We'll sit for a minute and let these words flow through and around you.

Small groups

Coming up:

- a) Saturday Sit-in Saturday morning 9-noon
- b) Next Tuesday dharma talk on practicing with the 6 sense doors
- c) Check in with TC member if you have a question or want to connect with a buddy