

# Spiritual Practice in Everyday Life

## A handbook for spiritual people everyone

by Kaspalita

### Preface

In 2010 Kuvalaya approached me and asked if I'd like to run a workshop with her at *The Buddhist House* in Narborough. We had a few conversations around what we might be able to offer, thinking about our own experience and also what might be useful and appealing to others.

I had just moved out of The Buddhist House, having lived there as a monk for four years, and was just settling into the householder life. Kuvalaya, an ordained Buddhist priest, also has a full-time day job. The question of how to balance these different parts of our lives, the Buddhist and the householder, was one that was and is important to both of us. We guessed that the question of how to be a Pureland Buddhist in the world would appeal to other members of our sangha too. We settled on a workshop title *Pureland Practice in Everyday Life*.

In January 2011 Kuvalaya and I ran this workshop. This document comes out of conversations during that weekend, and the conversations and thoughts that Kuvalaya and I had in the run-up to that weekend. A special thanks to each of those workshop participants; Aramati, Elise, Richard, and Adrian, and to Ray, whose emailed thoughts about practice in everyday life sparked off the discussion for the weekend.

### Introduction

Many people have a sense of something spiritual in their lives. For me this manifests in my Buddhist practice, which is an expression of my personal spiritual feelings and also connects me to a tradition with forms and practices going back over two thousand years.

The style of Buddhism which I practice has at its core the relationship between, on the one hand, me as an ordinary human being enmeshed in the trials of the world, and on the other, infinite love. In the style of Buddhism I practice this love is characterised by Amida Buddha, the awakened measureless one who is filled with wisdom and compassion.

This relationship between an ordinary human and something transcendent seems to me to be at the core of all religions, and at the core of all spirituality. I believe that at some point in our lives everyone experiences a longing to connect with something beyond our ordinary lives, and that sometimes we are blessed with a deep experience of this connection to spirit.

The ideas in this document came out of thinking about my own spirituality, and from conversations with others about what it means to be spiritual or religious in our ordinary lives. Although many of the ideas come from my own spiritual tradition, given my sense of a universal 'human spirituality', I hope these ideas might be of some value to you whatever your own religious or spiritual background.

## The transcendent light & the spiritual life

A few years ago my teacher, Dharmavidya, wrote *Who Loves Dies Well*. It describes his spiritual sense of the world and woven throughout is the story of his mother's death. It's a beautiful and moving book. In it he describes some qualities of the transcendent light that resonated with me and I'd like to share them here.

"Encountering the light may take a variety of forms... However we can loosely classify [them] into two types. In the first type the person experiences the world as complete and perfect just as it is. This corresponds to the mystic "All is well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well," of Julian of Norwich. Paradisiacal descriptions... hint at the nature of that experience...

"In the second type the person experiences being unconditionally accepted by the universe or by a transcendent being. This is the experience of unconditional love (*maitri*). This second type, therefore, takes the form of an encounter with a being rather than with a land." (p127)

"We encounter a sacred realm. It is different to ourselves... It affects us. It's effect upon us is a grace. It is freely given. It is not earned. One might be a sinner or a saint... It is living in relationship to grace that makes a life religious, whether virtuous or not." (p128)

The spiritual life, whatever form it takes, is living in relationship to this light. The light goes by different names in different traditions, but to me it is simply love. The Buddha characterised this love with four qualities: loving-kindness, compassion, joy in or for others, and equanimity.

Very holy sages and saints might have extended periods of feeling a strong connection to this light. The rest of us might get a glimpse of this every now and again and this might be enough to sustain us, or we might have trust that it is there even if we never 'feel it'. Or we might have a sense that maybe there's something there, maybe not. Doubt is completely normal and healthy. Everyone has their own long dark night of the soul.

Spiritual practice, meditation prayer and so on keep us plugged into this relationship with the light whether we think there's really anything there or not. The spiritual life is being alive to the possibility of love.

In this document we're going to explore some of the practical things we can do to keep plugged into this relationship, to keep ourselves alive to the possibility of love, and ask what that means in our ordinary lives.

## A model of spiritual practice

In Buddhism the three jewels are the three things we consider to be most precious. These are the Buddha, the teacher who points to the light; the Dharma, the teachings about the light; and the Sangha, those people committed to following those teachings. In the Amida-Shu, the tradition in which I'm ordained, we add two more jewels. These correspond with the two types of spiritual experience mentioned above; The Pureland, the experience of "All is well", and Amida, the being which loves unconditionally.

These five jewels might provide a way of thinking about spirituality more generally. If you are living, or aiming to live a spiritual life – how do you relate to each of these five points? I find reflecting upon this in my own life a valuable exercise.

### **An awakened immeasurable being**

This corresponds to the second kind of spiritual experience that Dharmavidya wrote about. This is when one has an experience of being completely accepted, or touched in some way by a transcendent being.

What is a transcendent being? It is someone who completely embodies the qualities of wisdom and compassion. In this model, it is the completely perfected being who does not exist – in a material sense – in this world.

Where does this being exist then? For a long time I struggled with this question. Before becoming Buddhist I had rejected the Christian religion of my youth in favour of a hard atheism. I arrived at Buddhism hoping that my atheism wouldn't be challenged. I was wrong and I struggled to match my personal convictions to descriptions of fully enlightened beings that existed somewhere beyond this world.

Eventually I realised that I was asking the wrong kind of question.

A religious answer to the question 'Where does this transcendent being exist?' might be "in the Pureland", or "in Heaven" or "somewhere beyond human perception". A secular answer might be that this being is an archetypal figure who exists in our imaginations, an archetype which embodies the qualities of this perfect light.

Sometimes I go with the first answer, sometimes the second. What's important is that there does exist, either in the realm of thought, or in the spiritual world, someone who is an undefiled beacon of light. Regardless of the nature of their existence I can place my thoughts upon them, I can put myself in relationship to them and allow myself to be affected by them.

In *my experience* of the world, this being exists. It exists in the various representations of Buddhas around my house (some of them emphasising one aspect of the light over another) and it exists in my experience of spiritual practices. They are real, in that they can and do affect my heart.

Have you struggled with similar questions? Do you need to come to some kind of resolution? Which figures do you find inspiring, from religion, from myth, from the people around you? How can you make a place for them in your life?

### **The teacher**

We can think of "The teacher" in a number of ways. It might be an historical figure who has some religious or spiritual importance, someone whose own lived life was a teaching in itself, or someone who left a body of written teachings. It might be someone we encounter only once in person, but who continues to inspire us, or someone living that we have never met. Or it might be someone we have an ongoing relationship with.

I believe that it is possible for some special people to lead a spiritual life, and to have spiritual awakenings without any kind of support. They place themselves in relationship to the transcendental and that's enough. For me, and for most of us, having teachers is vital.

For me having a real person that I can relate to has been, and still is, very important: someone who is able to have confidence in me when I have no confidence in myself; someone who has my best interests at heart, and someone who has their own deep experience of the spiritual life.

Dharmavidya has written about some of the essential qualities in a spiritual teacher:

- Provides an excellent example
- Nothing is beneath him
- Is established in the Precepts
- Is experienced in discipleship
- Is experienced and stabilised in spiritual awakening
- Is experienced in life's trials
- Has disciples who are not clones
- Is not too proud to learn, to acknowledge mistakes or to take advice
- Knows his province and does not claim expertise he does not have
- Shines with devotion to the sources of Refuge
- Is a path finder, a pioneer
- Has an altruistic spirit that manifests in compassionate action

In my experience of him as a spiritual teacher, which includes my experience of him as a human being and all the folly that goes along with that, Dharmavidya's most important quality has been his own relationship with the light, and his trust that I am also always in relationship to the light, whether I see it or not.

Do you have someone you think of in this role? How often do you see them or think of them? If your teachers are more distant – how often do you engage in that relationship? Can you find more room for that relationship in your own life?

### **The teachings**

In one sense the teachings are the world of ideas and intellect that support our spiritual life. In another sense they are the spirit of these ideas which goes beyond the written word.

In that first sense teachings are things which we can study and try to understand, ideas which help our lives in some way. They might be explicitly spiritual guidance or religious texts, or they might be psychological or philosophical ideas. If you practice within a particular tradition you will have all the documents of that tradition to support you, as well as the much broader world of ideas.

In the community I lived in we held a study group for members of the public once a week, to look at the texts of our own tradition. At least once a week we also had seminars for trainees in the community and during the training term Dharmavidya or Prasada would deliver live teachings. All this, as well as a huge collection of texts in the library and time for personal study.

Now, living the householder life, I have to set my own schedule for study. Sometimes it's much easier for me not to study than it is for me to study. Sometime I prioritise other things, and those other things are important too: spending time with my partner or friends, or just having an ordinary job. The responsibilities of a householder are different to that of a monk, but equally important. Each time I do sit and read a book, or listen to a recording of a teaching, I feel like my soul is being fed and nourished in a very special way. I'm lucky that my community do use the internet to broadcast audio and video teachings and, if I make the time, I can still participate in some of those same seminars that I used to.

What teachings nourish you the most? Where do you find the teachings that help you? How much time do you make for them in your own lives? Have you got the balance right?

### **Other people**

It's wonderful to be connected to a spiritual tradition, but it can also be a struggle in an increasingly secular society. Having other people around me has kept me returning to my practice when I might not otherwise have done, and given me a rich experience of sharing ideas and thoughts and feelings. From other people in my spiritual tradition I have had the experience of being loved, of being accepted without judgment, and this has sustained me.

I was extremely fortunate to be able to live in a Buddhist community, with people following the same path as me. When I moved out of that community finding other real people to practice and meet regularly with was a real question for me.

My ordained peers in this tradition are scattered across the globe, and we make time to talk on the phone or on Skype with each other, as well as staying in touch by email. Last month some of our group undertook a sustained spiritual practice together, although separated by thousands of miles each person supported the other in their chanting practice.

In the past I found solace in talking to people of other religions and traditions as much as my own. I am grateful to these people for the support they have given me. Even though the language of our religions is different we are each, in our own way, in relation to the light and we had some sense of understanding the other.

Do you have a community that you can meet with? Perhaps there is a group practicing in your tradition that you can get to. If not, can you start your own? How can you find the time and means to connect with other people journeying on the spiritual path?

### **A vision of paradise**

This can refer to the spiritual experience of a transcendent realm that Dharmavidya spoke of above, or equally it can refer to a vision of paradise in the midst of this world.

Whilst I have many images and statues of Buddha in my house when I first became a Buddhist I found the eastern imagery esoteric and off putting. The image of a world filled with light was much more appealing to me.

Many traditions have their own teachings about what the specifics of this paradise of earth might look like some of which might seem very distant from our everyday lives.

What would your ideal world/community look like? When we did this exercise at the community I lived in we came up with answers from the importance of shared meal times to listening to spiritual teachings together.

Your vision might have two levels - real achievable goals that you can bring about in the world, and aspirations which might seem more distant but can be very inspiring.

What does your vision look like?

### **Affected by the light: let your life speak**

Recently, Ray, one of my friends, sent me an email about spirituality in everyday life. He wrote:

"How am I a Buddhist? The answer has to be more than chanting and malas. What does it mean to identify oneself as a Pure Land Buddhist? What difference does it make in the way I live my life? "Let your life speak" is on a plaque outside our [Quaker]meeting house...."

The question of whether one is liberated through faith or good works is one that appears in many religions. My personal experience suggests that these two poles are not as far apart as often thought.

Dharmavidya wrote about a grace that is not earned, and this idea is at the centre of my spirituality. I also believe, like Iris Murdoch, that it's good to be good for its own sake. My experience suggests that one flows from the other. When we have an experience of being completely accepted and loved just as we are this can be transformative. We naturally long to be able to love others in this way.

### **Reflection upon one's own life**

As part of my daily practice I do a Japanese spiritual exercise called Nei Quan. Nei Quan asks us to reflect upon what we have received, what we have done in return and what trouble we have caused. I usually discover that I have received a great deal more than I can ever give back, and I sometimes discover that I have not behaved with as much integrity as I should have done.

Sometimes I learn about my failings through this exercise, sometimes through reflecting upon precepts I have taken and in seeing how far short I fall of them. Sometimes I learn about them when I am contemplating the 'awakened being' who shines a light upon my darkness.

When I look underneath the surface of these failings they all come from the same source, a lack of faith. At a superficial level this might be a lack of faith in how another person might respond, but at a deeper level it stems from a lack of faith that "It's good to do good".

### **More than just chanting**

One can do good works, from helping a neighbour to social activism, because one has been told that it is necessary, or from a sense of obligation to an authority. But one can also be drawn towards doing good works. I believe that, on some level, we *are* all drawn to do good works, it is just fear, or a lack of faith which gets in the way. If you feel drawn towards compassionate action – water those

seeds. If, like me, you sometimes fail to reach these ideals, try and understand where that comes from.

Meeting your own fears and selfishness can be overwhelming. Remember that we are all in the same boat, the person next to you is just as afraid, sometimes, and that we are all loved, just as we are.

The actions in your life will speak of your faith, where it is full of love and where it is afraid. Your life will always speak, let it speak of love.

## Things people do

During part of the discussion at the weekend Kupalaya and I discussed with the group what we actually do in our everyday life that supports our faith. Kupalaya kept track of the discussion, and her notes are below.

### Ritualised practice:

An exploration of our personal practice showed that we found time/space for:

- Sitting meditation
- Lighting a candle/incense (people love candlelight!)
- Chanting
- Prostrations (the mind follows the body)
- Nei quan/chi quan / simple reflection on the day
- Reflection on precepts/vows
- Using a rosary or mala

### Notes from the discussion around the topic:

- Precept investigation: Looking at a small number of formal precepts at a time. Renewing your vows to keep these precepts. For those of us who are ordained, we reflect upon the specific precepts we have taken. Other people might reflect on recommended precepts or ways of living, the commandments in Christianity for example.
- A commitment to regular spiritual practice over a certain length of time, i.e. 100 days of practice, 1 month etc.
  - This can also be as intense or simple as necessary for your life. You may be looking to establish a regular 20 minute daily practice. Or you may be in a situation at some point where you wish to create a more intensive home retreat for yourself for a certain length of time. Tricycle magazine published a “Commit to Sit” 4 week home

retreat guide that may be of use as a framework for your own.  
<http://www.tricycle.com/meditate>

- A commitment to a certain length of time for regular practice can be tied in with precept investigation. For example, you may wish to explore the idea of vegetarianism or refraining from intoxicants over a certain length of time.
- Creation of a sacred space where you practice. Use of shrines, statues, images and rituals to act as reminders. People love candles and candlelight!
  - Given our cultural background, everyone expressed different feelings about the use of statues and images and our feelings towards rituals. An interesting area for personal exploration and investigation!
- Practice encompassing reflecting on how we “live it out” leads to subtle changes in awareness. It challenges us but we should strive to remember to find joy in our practice.
- The strength of formal practice (chanting, praying, meditating and other formal rituals) works at a subconscious level during the rest of our day.
- “Practice is a container”
- Supporting each other in our practice
  - We can connect through Skype, joining in services via the internet.
  - Arranging a time where people in different locations are practicing/praying at the same time.
- Maintaining practice whilst living with partners who may not be the same religion as you. Dealing with the world is an important practice in itself!

### What supports us in “Everyday life”?

An exploration of the non-ritualistic things that support us in our daily life.

- Recognising our human nature: we are ordinary, fallible, people.
- Keeping journals
  - One journal for recording thoughts and wrestling with issues and keeping a separate journal for recording special moments which creates an anthology of moments to cherish.
- Support from other people in general
  - Emphasis was placed on the *recognition* of the support from others and *allowing* them to help us. Many of us have to learn to accept acts of kindness and be willing to let go.

- Creation of personal precepts that are relevant to our own life situation (this can then tie back into our formal, ritualised practice). “I vow to keep the cat’s litter tray more tidy” for example, or, “I vow to listen to my partner more.”
- Recognising grace
- Body awareness – listening to our bodies can give us clues about how we are, and learning to relax our body when we are tense can undo some of the stress we might be feeling.
- Carrying religious practice with us. Repeating a prayer, or chant, in one’s mind
- Connection with others through fellow feeling, think of how a situation must feel for them
- Doing things for others
- Doing things for their intrinsic value (picking up litter, for example)
- Finding joy and solace in dance and music
- Being in nature and having an awareness of nature
- Creating time to disconnect
- Smiling at strangers

### Sacred Space

The creation of a formal, ritualised space in our homes is important, regardless of the form it takes. Although we put as much emphasis in these discussions on where our informal practice is, there is a strength to be found in the formality of our practice and creation of a sacred space provides us with a place where this is possible.

- Shrines – some people find it supportive to create a special place to remember their spiritual tradition. We often find common features of these.
  - Statues and images: most Buddhists will usually have a statue on their shrine, but it’s worth remembering that it wasn’t until about 500 years after the passing of the Buddha that using images become common practice. In Jainism there are different sects, one which uses many images and one which uses no images. There are parallels in Christianity too, think of high and low church services, or Quakerism.
  - Representation of the teachings.
  - Traditional offerings: Light, flowers, food, music, incense and water (one offering for drinking and one for cleansing)
  - Personal offerings or reminders: placement of mementos from important places or moments that have personal meaning such as pebbles and other natural objects. The meaning of the objects is personal and should be supportive.

- Caring for the shrine and the space is also important and forms part of the practice. We can practice mindfulness in keeping the area clean and tidy and joy should be found in creating a beautiful space. As we care for the space, we also keep it fresh and prevent it from becoming ornamental.

## Carrying our space into the world

- Carrying personal reminders to help us keep our spiritual practice/the transcendental in mind:
  - Natural objects
  - Jewellery, objects on our person that we are able to touch to ground us
  - Wearing a mala or rosary, either a wrist mala or a full mala under our shirt
  - Recitations of gathas and prayers
- Reflections on the fact that most of our day will be spent in a public space, at the office or driving. As such, an “object-less” sacred space might be necessary. We try to create a space with our attitude by remaining calm in the midst of the flurry which has an effect on others. See this article in Tricycle: <http://www.tricycle.com/interview/i-feel-your-brain>
- If possible, a small demarcation of space is still helpful. If we work in an office, for example, keeping a tidy work area and placing reminder objects where we are able to can help. Again, the act of caring for the space has subtle implications on our workplace and our work itself.

## Afterward

I hope these thoughts will be of some use. I realised when reading the notes that Kuvalaya had made from the workshop that one could write a page about each practice that we talked about that weekend. Perhaps there is a whole book’s worth of material here.

If there are questions I would like each person to take away, they are: “What is my relationship with the transcendental?” and “How does it affect my everyday life?” and perhaps “What can I do to support that relationship?”

Thanks to everyone who took part in the original workshop, and to those I have had conversations with since, and to all my teachers.