Essential Meditation - Class 2 Notes

Establishing your practice in daily, lived life

This week we are discussing the first two limbs of the 8 limbs: Yama and Niyama. These two limbs represent an ethical grounding upon which your practice is built. In my opinion they aren't intended as just a list of ways to behave (although they are often called do's and don't's), but rather they represent a way in which to begin to shape your mind and awareness in a way that is more conducive to a meditative life. When we live life in a normal, mundane way with not much worry of how we comport ourselves, we can, unbeknownst to us, create chaos and agitation that can make sitting difficult.

So here we begin to see that meditation isn't solely about the time we sit with our upright posture, observing our breath, but also how we are living our life day in and day out. As your practice deepens and develops, you begin to see that time spent in meditation influences your life (which is why we're here), but also that how you are living your life dramatically impacts your meditation practice. So let's examine the list!

Yama and Niyama:

Yama and Niyama are the first two limbs of Ashtanga, the 8 Limbs of Yoga. They are ethical guidelines, meant to help guide one's consciousness toward a state of deeper absorption in meditation. They are, respectively, the 'don't's and do's.' They are rules, not to establish a moral superiority (although that might be an unintended side effect!), but are rather goals to work with, and in doing so, one's mind becomes calmer, more at ease, with much less internal chaos that threatens to disrupt a meditation practice. Let's get into them.

Yama:

Yama is the Sanskrit word which translates to 'restrict' or 'restrain.' So in the 8 limbs of Yoga, Yama is a list of 5 aspects in your life, be they behaviors or thought patterns or habits, that one should learn to restrain in order to attain a deeper state of meditation. There are 5 of them.

Ahimsa - nonviolence, non-harming other living beings

Most of us are very familiar with the concept of non-violence thanks to the beautiful souls of Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr. There is so much to be said about non-violence - so much so that many entire books have been written about the topic. As for the purposes of our course, the importance of considering how violence plays out in our own life - not just in action, but in thought and intention is critical for developing a mindset that is less likely to be agitated, and more likely to find equilibrium.

Satya - truthfulness, non-falsehood

The concept of speaking truth is a many-layered problem. Are we always truthful? Do we bend truths to not hurt people's feelings? Do we ever present ourselves in ways that might not actually embody what we are feeling inside of ourselves? Do we hide things from our closest people to preserve relationships? The simple answer Satya is "don't tell lies," but I believe that Satya is a pursuit, and for me to circle closer and closer to *authenticity* is the aim.

Asteya - non-stealing

This one also seems simple. Don't steal things from other people. In some ways, if you can just manage to do this, you will not experience the inner tumult of someone who is addicted to stealing. As with many of our topics today, I believe the real aim involves not only the simpler exterior behavior, but also subtler levels of interior processes. Are there ways in which you deprive others of that which belong to them? Attention? Time?

Brahmacharya - chastity, marital fidelity or sexual restraint

This Yama might be the most commonly argued-about restraint. It has been translated as celibacy, but restraint of excessive sexual passions is more common. In developing a meditation practice, one is looking for ways in which energy is wasted due excessive behaviors in general. One's sexual appetite, if out of proportion with the rest of life, can be draining, like it or not. In my opinion, moderation is the key here. A healthy sexual life is physically healthy, emotionally nourishing, and positive. Sexual energy is exceedingly potent, however, and restraining oneself even a little bit can reap rewards in overall energy levels and also rewards in ability to maintain concentration. This is the basis for many tantric practices. It is also important to recognize that the restraint of energy that is being referred to here is not just energy of a sexual nature. Brahmacharya implies the correct usage of our energy, and though sexual energy is important, one can understand this to mean all of our creative forces: our mental energy, our emotional energy, and our attention. Brahmacharya implies that one is seeking out the ways in which energy is wasted and restraining those impulses within us that waste it.

Aparigraha - non-avarice, non-possessiveness

Aparigraha is the imperative to restrain greed, or stinginess. Aligning one's consciousness with an overall sense of generosity can help to invite an openness of the mind and helps to create a space in one's self that is ripe for insight and tranquility. A giving mind tends to be one that is also receptive.

Niyama:

As one might expect, Niyama refers to aspects in one's life, both internal and external, both thoughts and behaviors, that one should encourage. In Sanskrit, the prefix 'Ni' is a negation, so since 'Yama' means to restrain, these are literally things to not restrain in one's life in order to encourage depth and progress in one's practice.

Saucha - purity, clearness of mind, speech and body

Purity is a very loaded term. I think cleanliness and clarity are much more approachable terms, and can encapsulate what is intended by the inclusion of Saucha in the 5 Niyamas. There is definitely a connotation that Saucha refers to physical cleanliness firstly. Perhaps there is an analog here to our saying about a clean house equalling a clean mind. Or cleanliness is close to godliness. Being tidy and orderly can help with meditation - a clean space invites a sense of openness and expansiveness. Cleanliness and purity here can also be applied to the body. Maintaining proper hygiene is included, but also examining how we are eating and drinking. Maintaining physical cleanliness inside and out can greatly impact your clarity of mind and awareness. There is also, within Saucha, the idea of cleanliness of speech and mind. This is not something that I personally can lecture anyone about, but it bears reflection: how do the things I think or the words I say affect my mind in the long term? Is there a way to achieve a greater degree of purity of thought and speech? Thinking and behaving in a way that leaves one feeling 'clean' at the end of the day can absolutely lead toward a quieter internal mental space.

Santosha. - contentment, acceptance of others, acceptance of one's circumstances as they are in order to get past or change them, optimism for self

There is a lot to unpack in Santosha. Optimism, contentment, acceptance of circumstance - these are all things we are looking for, and if they were easy to drum up, why wouldn't we?? That being said, Santosha is in the lineup because to undertake a meditative practice is an act of optimism. It is an act that says: "I believe I can help my mind to be a better place, which will alleviate my own suffering and the suffering of those around me." This might not be the altruistic reason that you personally have as your motivation, but like it or not, meditation is a beautiful, yet enigmatic stand against chaos. It invites contentment and equanimity, and one has the possibility of achieving a higher degree of happiness as its reward. When one seeks to bring about optimistic states of mind in one's self, their practice will aid them in achieving these states in turn.

Tapas - persistence, perseverance, austerity, asceticism, self-discipline

Persistence and perseverance are traits that are fairly commonly associated with a meditation practice. So much so that it seems redundant to include them in a list of observances. But it bears saying: the more you put in, the more you get out when it comes to meditation. Practicing every day takes perseverance and discipline. Austerity and asceticism? They are included in the connotation here, and to know what those ideals look like in our modern world is an exploration in itself. Maintaining a meditation practice does take a good dose of denial of laziness and indulgence. Perhaps that is a start to a modern-day asceticism.

Svadhyaya - study of Vedas, study of self, self-reflection, introspection of self's thoughts, speech and actions

Svadhyaya implies the study of sacred text. In the Vedic traditions, however, this is not meant in order to indoctrinate devotees, but rather studying as a means of introspection, of self-study. I would posit that study of any sacred text, regardless of tradition, has its root in the reflection of one's self in the words of wisdom written by sages. These words are like poetry that help us to access higher states of mind - ideals, ethical views, and contemplation of existence in the face of an endless Cosmos. This type of study is HUGELY helpful in establishing a mindset of curiosity, of expansiveness, and of wonder.

Ishvarapranidhana - contemplation of Ishvara (God/Supreme Being, Brahman, True Self, Unchanging Reality)

This last Niyama, Ishvarapranidhana, is in line with the previous one. Contemplation of the that which is essentially unexplainably vast and ineffable is almost like a Zen koan. It helps to stun one's mind into a state of wonder and awe. How then, to proceed if one is atheist or agnostic? Ishvara literally translates to "Lord," and is most commonly associated with Shiva - one of the three primary Hindu deities. Not to worry, it is my believe that there is an appropriate amount of wonder to be found simply in contemplating one's own consciousness adrift in an endless sea of stars. The creation of an ever-changing, ever-evolving, ever-moving Universe and the emergence of a unique consciousness that is an infinitesimally small inhabitant on a dust mote in this expanse should do the trick. But if you happen to be open to the possibility that there might be a vast sea of consciousness that exists on higher planes of existence, all the better.

Meditation as the grounding for Mindfulness

The application of these ethical guidelines is obviously helpful in maintaining a clearer, less chaotic state of mind. Many of you may already be adhering to more than one of these guidelines, just by the nature of who you are. Is this all we have to do to make meditation easier? As one's meditation deepens with

regular practice, one begins to see that there are deeper layers to these teachings - they may not be as simple as they seem. It is through not only meditation, but the correct use of mindfulness in our daily, lived lives that we begin to observe our understanding of these ethical issues deepen and broaden. Things about which we were previously unaware begin to make themselves known in our observation of ourselves. So what is mindfulness? Doubtless you have heard a lot about it, but many people don't know how to apply it with regularity and depth. It is commonly said that mindfulness is solely about "being in the moment." This is partially true, but I think it is better said that mindfulness is the translation of the meditative awareness applied to your daily life. Seen this way, meditation begins to become a way to prepare your consciousness and your mind to live a mindful life. And your mindful life begins to inform how deeply and easily you achieve concentration and absorption in meditation.

As your meditation progresses and you begin to identify less and less with every thought that comes through your mind, you begin to identify more as a point of awareness that has the power to observe the external world, but also your own internal world: your thoughts, your emotions, your instinctive impulses, with a bit more detachment. This is the basis for mindfulness. We will discuss this more fully next week, so stay tuned!

Homework!

This week's homework is much like last week's - just more of it! We are going to be meditating for 10 minutes at a time this week.

Again, we will be practicing Anapanasati - observing the breath. There is a 10 minute guided meditation on the website for those who would like to utilize it.

Mettabhavana - this is a new practice. For this week, add in a short Metta practice, most easily found on the website guided meditations. There are others out there, but I recorded a short one for you to follow along. You can do this at the end of your regular meditation, or at another time during the day. It's particularly nice right before bed!

Keep practicing every day!

Keep up with your journal!

Bring any questions, comments, or feelings about your burgeoning practice to class next Wednesday, I'd love to hear your experiences.

See you next week!