Essential Meditation - Class 5 Notes

Samyama

Welcome to Class #5! We are moving into the depths of the interior aspects of meditation. From last class' discussion of Pratyahara, or the withdrawal from the five senses, which is the pivot into the internal limbs, we move into Samyama, which is the amalgamation of the last three limbs: Dharana, Dhyana, and Samadhi.

Samyama is really one thing, broken into three constituent parts. The reason the parts are grouped together is that it becomes difficult to separate the three of them in a practical sense. Although each part has its own particular hallmarks and identifiable features, they each bleed into one another in a seamless flow. It does still make sense to discuss them individually, however, due to the fact that once you begin to experience these states, you can experience the subtle differences and can understand how to move yourself into deeper states of absorption at will through the application of the principles existing in each part.

Dharana

Dharana, which is the 6th limb of Patanjali's 8 Limbs of Yoga, is often translated as "one-pointed concentration" or "the collection or concentration of the mind." It comes from the root Dhar, which means to bind together or hold steady. What marks this state as separate from Pratyhara is that the mind is actually silent at this point. The yogi's mind becomes solely the domain of the act of meditation (observation), along with the object of meditation (in our practice this is the breath). Concentration in Dharana becomes one-pointed, and immovable. This may seem a gargantuan feat, but as we have previously discussed, you may have already dipped your toe into this state in your practice. So the development of this practice only means that your experience of states like Pratyahara or Dharana will become more frequent, more easily identifiable, more easily achieved, and more stable.

There is a sense, as one moves closer to Dharana, of the awareness of the meditator "concentrating" to a larger degree than can be felt upon first sitting to meditate. The mind gets quieter and quieter, to the point that thoughts themselves seem more like whispers of their former selves. This is achieved by the meditator engaging a type of willpower over their attention. As the meditator withholds attention from the various other intrusive thoughts that appear in the mind, the attention can be felt as a resource to be placed at the will of the meditator. The engagement of this specific type of willpower acts to collect the attention back from various sources (thoughts, sensations, and reactions), and focuses solely on the object of meditation. The state of Dharana comes about when this concentration narrows to a single point and the other thoughts actually die out; the entirety of attention is upon the object of meditation.

Goals vs Goal-lessness

One of the more difficult concepts in beginning a meditation is how to avoid the striving of the mind to reach a desired destination. We are describing these states of consciousness which, one would assume, are desirable states. So the beginning meditator learns about these states and sits with the express purpose of achieving silence of the mind, tranquility, insight, etc. However, the mind is active with thoughts such as: am I in Pratyahara right now? I wonder if this is what Dharana feels like? It is important to remember

that this type of striving is normal in the beginning, but it can become a hindrance to the development of your practice. Therefore it can be helpful to take notes about your practice after you sit, and to periodically analyze your own practice. Look at it through the lens of the material we are teaching here in this class to determine how your practice is progressing. The beautiful thing about these states of meditation is that they are universal - if you sit long enough and with enough effort placed on maintaining one-pointed awareness and concentration, these states will naturally emerge and you will be able to easily identify them.

Craving & Aversion

There is a teaching stemming from Buddhism that can help to establish one's consciousness in the appropriate state to advance through the various meditative states more quickly - it is the teaching of craving and aversion. In ordinary, day-to-day life, one finds themselves with various thoughts and reactions to the sensory impressions that surround them. Generally speaking, the vast majority of those thoughts and reactions belong somewhere on the spectrum between craving and aversion. We are seeking pleasurable sensations and looking to avoid unpleasant sensations. This is a broad general stroke, but take a good hard look at the majority of what you think and feel throughout your day and my guess is that you will agree. It is absolutely natural. However, if you can place your awareness in a state that is neither craving ***nor*** averting, but rather in the place of dispassionately allowing *what is* to enter through your senses, you will understand what it is to establish the right state of mindfulness that will allow your meditation to flourish. Bring about an openness in your awareness, a sort of curious inquiry into the nature of things. Be curious about the thoughts that arise. Are they craving thoughts? Are they seeking to avoid something uncomfortable or unpleasant? Can you learn to be okay with what is, rather than seeking for reality to somehow different than how it is in this moment?

You might see a correlation between this teaching of craving and aversion and the Buddhist concept of the Middle Way. Indeed, they are related. This is the internal aspect of The Middle Way - placing oneself between the extremes of craving and aversion. The external (and more commonly understood aspect) of The Middles Way has to do with maintaining a life that exists between the extremes of self-indulgence and the extreme of asceticism.

To be clear, I am in no way advocating that we should be attempting to not have feelings, or that we should be repressing ourselves in order to bring about a spiritual mindset. When feelings are there, observe them. Feel them deeply, sensitively. Try not to get too carried away with the thoughts and reactions to those feelings, though. Therein lies the secret. Keeping oneself present is the essence of mindfulness and the meditative mind.

Homework

You guessed it, we are returning to our old friend Anapanasati for this week's practice. Following the breath. We will continue practicing for 15 minutes a day.

Good luck!