



# **Attending without Attending**

## **Meditation during lockdown.**

**By Dhiraka**

There have been days that are full of inspiration, days that are full of deep peace and gratitude. Then there are days that are bleak with loneliness and oppressive with worry. The ongoing crisis that we are living through is throwing up some challenging experiences, some dark experiences and some profoundly joyful ones too. This combination itself is slightly unnerving.

It's a difficult time for many of us, and if Buddhism is about anything it is about seeing things as they really are. My experience, your experience, these fleeting thoughts, these surging emotions, these strange physical sensations, all of this arising in our heart-minds is exactly how things are.

Like everyone I have more time on my hands lately. Lockdown is generally more spacious. There is more time for reflection. There is more opportunity to notice the constant play of the mind. I've been meditating more than usual but what I'm doing is less and less like most meditations that I do. The metaphor that came to me today was of driving a car. Mostly meditation is taught and practiced as if it were like driving a car. You take up the controls and you steer the practice in the way you want it to go, or think it ought to go. You take your mind on a little drive in the hope of seeing a better view, of getting out of the polluted inner city and arriving in the clear air and wide-open landscapes of the countryside. This is one way to meditate but there are other ways.

For instance, you can let go of the wheel. In these times the play of the mind seems more vivid. The content at times very strong. There are, for example, often strong bodily sensations with associated strong emotions such as fear or loneliness or boredom and frustration. It is such a relief to be able to attend to all this - without attending. I don't have to be at the wheel - experience rolls on whether I'm at the wheel or not.

Experiences are just right there in such an immediate way that there is no question of having to pay attention or having to attend to the experience. There is an open field where the heart-mind plays out in its own way and I can sit and just be open to it. I notice without noticing, I listen without listening to the murmur of the inner landscape. This landscape has a life of its own just as the landscape around Dhanakosa has a life of its own. Just as this crisis is teaching us that we, as a species, are not the masters of the universe, so we are not masters of our mind. Awareness is just there, inseparable from what is perceived. In such aimless meditation I can truly rest. The only effort is the subtle intention to relinquish control, or at least the perception of control.

I have found that when I identify as the 'controller' and try to meditate in that role it becomes a struggle, a wrestle, a fight. Whereas in truth the 'controller' is just one aspect of a much more diverse landscape populated with many other valuable characters, leading characters and cameos both. The whole cast and chorus are putting on a grand old show during this lockdown and it seems to me ridiculous to do anything but let them be heard, give them the space that they need.

In the open field of my sense experience (including mind, heart and body) nothing is wrong, nothing is right. Rather everything is exactly just so. Judgement doesn't come into it. But I'm aware that this way of meditating perhaps sounds confusing when we spend a lot of time in 'Bhavana' practices cultivating certain states and qualities. Well perhaps the difference is more apparent than real. This open and uncontrolled attending (but without really making a distinct effort to attend) is perhaps just *another kind of bhavana*. In taking this stance towards our own heart-mind we are cultivating an intention to release, to relax and give up. More positively, we are cultivating the intention to allow unfolding, positively valuing all sides of our character. Indeed, I feel like saying we are cultivating freedom.

I have certainly felt a great freedom in my meditation as result of practicing in this way. But freedom is always freedom from something. In this case freedom from having to be productive. Bhavana practice can so easily become just another means by which we fulfil one of our culture's cardinal virtues - productivity. Meditation can easily become yet another rod for our backs. In the lockdown the rod has been lifted from our backs. Yes we are having to work from home, but it isn't quite the same, at least not for me. Work is not so pressing, much of my livelihood has actually fallen away completely. As in life more generally - so in my meditation practice. I've dropped the rod that drives my meditation practice and it feels like such a goodness.

There is this great breathing out in the ecosystem going on. The air is clearing, and the spring is bringing life back to our aching planet in new ways. Likewise, our body and minds are similarly yearning to exhale from the deep depths. Muscles and minds are yielding tensions that have perhaps been held for years. Sit as your being unfolds - attending to it without attending.