

Dharma Behind Bars: The Paradox of Freedom

Marilyn Buck
Tricycle Magazine Spring 2004

In confinement, what happens to the self?

I am skinny-dipping. Stripping off my clothes, running into the water, diving down naked to disappear for a few breaths from the shouts and sounds of the world. Shedding clothes, embarrassments, care. The surface breaks as I return for air. For a few moments, I am free, opened, beyond place, beyond space.

And then I am here. I breathe deeply, fully clothed in a compulsory uniform inside walls that do not vanish before half-closed eyes, seated during an officially-sanctioned time for Buddhist group meditation. My breath joins those of the women around me, travels across the walls and over the barbed wire. Freedom of breath cannot be measured, contained, or punished—as I breathe, my aliveness asserts itself, even laughs at its constraints. Yes, in this place it is an elusive joy, but I feel it now, as surely as I feel the knots of anxiety loosen in my shoulders.

The primary function of prison is to deprive the citizen of her freedom; there is no other lesson. To be excluded from society is supposedly the greatest loss one can suffer. Prison is the wall that separates and deprives, behind which the prisoner disappears from life—from family, from friends, from all that is loved. And without freedom of some kind, the human spirit shrivels, collapses into despair or bitterness. How easy it is to succumb to resignation, to gather anger to fill the spaces between the bars, between the interstices of one's own ribs—to isolate one's heart, and only then gain a perverse comfort.

In the first years of my sentence, I was awash in bitterness; every day I mourned the loss of my world. I was angry, but above all, fearful. I shut myself off, afraid that if I were to let my guard down in prison, even for a moment, I would be left defenseless; I might lose my essential self to the anonymity of concrete cell blocks. I walked the prison halls fearful, dreading collapse. The self I clung to was a rigid, fragile thing.

Peace. It does not mean to be in a place where there is no noise, trouble or hard work. It means to be in the midst of those things and still be calm in your heart.

Many prison years passed before I decided to try sitting, and only then did I really begin to breathe. My heart became less constricted; the dharma path opened. I grew less afraid of what could happen to me.

Deepening my breath, lengthening my spine, I learn to discard my preconceptions and expectations—all the many hopes and fears and attachments that have given shape to my life. I learn to lay aside anxiety about what I am missing, what I do not have, what might happen to me in here. I confront the fact that I am, in truth, uncertain about whether I really want to release my fears, my anger. I am conflicted. Without the armor of my anger and self-righteousness, I become intimate with the many forms of suffering in this prison world—and so I feel vulnerable, exposed.

Each day presents a new confrontation with reality. I want to run; instead, I breathe. One breath—the freedom to choose my response in that moment. In sitting, I encounter joy; I know that through this practice I can arrive at a place of genuine peace. The path is before me. It is my choice to follow.

Marilyn Buck is serving an eighty-year sentence in a federal women's prison in California.

© 2006 Tricycle.com □ Tricycle: The Buddhist Review

How to Meditate in a Noisy Environment

By Mike S at I Am Calmer

- Sit, stand or do whatever you can to make your body stress free (just to feel good; it's optional).
- Now close your eyes, or if you can't, just close them a bit so that you are not distracted by visuals. Yeah! You know what I am talking about.
- Now pay attention to all the noises around you.
- Don't try to interpret, and don't try not to interpret. Just let it be. Be in the moment.
- Observe the sounds, just let them be.
- Soon you will transcend them and enter the real you.
- Enjoy for as long as you want.
- Come back to walking slowly and consciously when you feel like it.

The key to meditating in a noisy background is to change the way you reckon about noise. Rather than letting the external sounds distract you from your meditation, use them in your meditation.

Try this: Sit calmly and just listen to the noise around you. Let the sounds fill your head. Focus on the tones and vibrations of the sounds rather than their origin.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –
over and over announcing your place in the family of things.

All sound—whether distracting like a television, someone yelling, a dog barking—or calming like ocean waves or a running stream—are just vibrations. If you break the noise down to its gears, you can focus on the deep underlying vibrations and really enhance your meditative state. If a sound is a sound is a sound, then this sound could easily be comforting rather than annoying.

Acceptance – You can't make the noise go away. You could try ignoring it but this is usually futile. You could try blocking it out with music but you will find that lulls in the music will allow the outside noises back in. The intermittent scenery of this can prove to be even more distracting. You may even find yourself dreading the soft parts of the music or the silence between songs.

In order to meditate in this kind of background, you have to acknowledge the unwanted sounds in your space and realize that you must coexist. If you can acknowledge them and are determined to meditate "with" them, not in spite of them, they lose the power to control your life.

Patience – Give yourself a break. Don't expect to be able to do this right away or 100% of the time. Be patient with yourself and realize that ALL meditation is about catching the mind wandering and bringing it back to your "object of meditation." If you feel you're getting frustrated with yourself because the sounds are still annoying you, pat yourself on the back instead and acknowledge that you are only human. Just smile and focus back on your meditative mind. You will eventually succeed and—believe me—it will be worth the effort.

Perseverance – Don't give up. There will be times, especially at first, when you just can't help being annoyed by the unwanted sounds. Your non-meditative mind will "know" that these sounds are distracting and it will naturally want to be distracted. Just focus as best you can for your meditation session and come back tomorrow and try again. You'll find that the meditative mind will start to learn that these sounds are part of the process, and it will become simpler and simpler to reach your meditative state.

So, if your life is full of noise and distraction, you don't have to give up on a healthy meditation practice. Try the method above and see if it works for you. I sincerely hope this information helps because I strongly believe everyone should include meditation in their daily lives regardless of their living situation.

Try the method above and see if it works for you. I sincerely hope this information helps because I strongly believe everyone should include meditation in their daily lives regardless of their living situation.