

A message from Cindy

Dear fellow Winter Feast of the Soul members,

If you have made it this far with the Winter Feast, you are well advanced into your meditative journey. Maybe you have found a routine of practice, or maybe you are still finding it difficult. Keep on practicing. Like exercise, any amount of meditation can bring unforeseen results. Expect the unexpected.

Perhaps you have discovered the good things that meditation brings. Maybe your mind is filled with questions. Maybe painful thoughts have visited you or experiences of ecstasy. You might have noticed changes in your behavior, or in how others perceive your actions. Don't get attached to results. All the possible experiences that may come from your practice are your teachers, and everything that you need resides within you.

There is an old Tibetan saying "you cannot get butter by squeezing sand, no matter how long you try." A person could keep squeezing sand for a thousand years. When you ask him "what are you doing?" the answer is "trying to get butter". We all know that he will never get butter, because sand is devoid of butter.

Our rational mind tries to understand ultimate truth, but it never can, because it is the wrong tool. Our mind is always trying to figure out things that are beyond it.

How do we realize that which is beyond our ordinary mind? We go inside ourselves and realize what is keeping us from opening our heart - doubt, resistance, guilt, fear, and shame. We shine the light of awareness on those feelings and thoughts and they usually dissolve. Love, courage, trust, and bliss are available to us when we lose our defensiveness.

Meditation is the primary tool for providing us this opening. How do we take meditation into our daily lives when we get up from our sitting meditation?

Here are some methods I have found useful.

SETTING AN INTENTION: As you get up in the morning, maybe even before you get out of bed, set your intention for your day. You might intend to observe your daily meditation, feel gratitude, keep your temper, or notice the beauty around you. You might intend to develop clarity and insight, love and compassion for your self and others. Whatever it is, define it to yourself, and visualize how you might use this intention as you go through your day. Repeat it in your mind until you remember what it is, and remind yourself of it as you go through the day.

PAUSE: # 1 This is a mini meditation that I find most useful. It came about when my teacher Anam Thubten suggested that we pause and meditate every 2 hours during the day for a short period of time, just a pause, really. I don't time these meditations or do them on a schedule. I keep a little chime and whenever I pass it, I ring it and pause as long as it takes for the sound vibrations to fade away completely. When I am away from the chime, I often just play that vibration in my mind and stop whatever I am doing a moment. This has been a great thing for me; it puts a little distance from whatever stress I might experience, giving me a different perspective immediately.

PAUSE: #2 Something or someone bugging you? Wanna say or do something mean or unwise? Pause for a breath or two or three. Look at the emotions and thoughts you are having. Let go of them. Look at the actions that you might take, and their consequences. Is there really a need for you to follow your emotions, or are they leading you into trouble? You can make a choice here, just from putting a pause between yourself and your actions.

JUST BREATHE: Relax. Breathe deeply for several breaths, then normally. Feel your breath coming in through your nostrils and traveling down the body, filling the stomach. Feel the air returning up the body and leaving the nostrils. Feel the vitality that your breath brings to your body, and feel gratitude for your body and your breath. You can stay with the breath and gratitude for as long as you would like.

GRATITUDE: Reflect on all that you have to be grateful for. Notice the person who does you a kindness, the people that love you for who you are, people who are difficult for you (they are your teachers), the beauty of the earth's sights and sounds in nature, the blessing of a whole body, sufficient food, and shelter, all the blessings of this precious human existence.

WALKING MEDITATION: Start with an erect and easy posture, hands folded in front of you, clasped behind your back, or hanging loosely at your sides. Take a slow step forward, paying attention to the set of your heel and toe, the movement of each of your muscles, and your breath. Breathe naturally. Put your foot down slowly, gently but firmly, and take another step, and another, each step slow and reverent, mindful of the whole incredible workings of your body that make walking possible. You may do this inside or outside.

Buddha covered hundreds of miles alone or with his followers doing walking meditation. You may want to imagine you are walking with him, or some other teacher who has guided you.

BLUE SKY MEDITATION: Who knew that our childhood play activity of watching clouds was a meditation? You can meditate on the blue sky and the clouds. Sit or lie down in meditation and look up. Let your gaze fall softly on the sky. Watch the clouds as they appear and disappear. Let your thoughts and feelings arise and dissipate naturally.

The heart of meditation is awareness that is like the vast sky. All arising thoughts and feelings are like clouds which arise and vanish into it. The sky does not reject or claim them. When you abide in sky like awareness, love, wisdom, and compassion shine forth from within like the sun, the moon, and the stars.

Buddha said "Don't go back over what has passed, nor yearn for what is yet to be. What has passed has been abandoned, and the future is not yet here. The state arising here and now - See it with insight as it is."

All Blessings to all Beings,
Cindy (Crain chaplaincy volunteer)