

Why Sit for Peace?

On Sunday, October 14, for the fourth time this year, friends of the Embodied Life School throughout the world will spend time "Sitting for World Peace". What does this mean, "sitting for peace"?

People often ask, why do you think sitting and "doing nothing" can help the world to become more peaceful? They usually concede that the person meditating might experience more relaxation but the idea that this could influence peace on the planet seems a far reach.

Some will argue that the primary ingredients for peace in the world require ending the external conditions of poverty and oppression. While these are noble and essential goals, worthy of our efforts, these conditions are not the true, deep antecedents to peace.

For me it is simple. To radiate peacefulness into the world, human beings need three interconnected capacities: 1) to be responsible for the kinds of thoughts and attitudes we radiate, 2) to become at home within our bodies and 3) to sense our deep connectedness to all of life. All of these require an ability to rest quietly within one's self. Let's explore these ideas.

What do you radiate...

Everyday we live in moments that can be upsetting. We have some hope or desire, small or large that is unfulfilled. Maybe we did not get the parking space we were anticipating, a friend forgets a date, we lose our job or a loved one is diagnosed with an illness. How we respond to these moments will be determined by the mental stories we tell ourselves about them. This is human freedom! We are not free to determine *what* will occur nor are we always free to determine the initial thoughts that arise. We ARE free to choose the thoughts and actions we will consciously cultivate about the situation. This will determine *how* we will carry the situation.

Do our thoughts and attitudes allow for a confident equanimity in the unfolding of life? Do we create mental catastrophes and generate greater upsets from our inner dialogue about what might/should/could happen? Learning to see our mind-created world is a direct outgrowth of "just sitting" meditation (this is the form of open meditation that I usually practice, description at the end of this article).

Many of my heroes are people who have endured great challenges yet managed to find a peaceful response to life circumstance. Nelson Mandela endured 27 years in prison, yet even his guards came to respect and care for this man because of his noble, kindhearted attitude. In fact, the authorities needed to keep changing his guards because they would begin to care too much for him. His inner peace and deep acceptance radiated throughout his world. His mentor, Mahatma Gandhi would respond with great purpose and equanimity to the trials given to him by the British.

Our response to situations will be largely determined by the thoughts, images and beliefs, we generate about life and our relationship to it. To be free from unhelpful thoughts first requires noticing them. Second, we must be able to rest in ourselves and notice any hijacking by our mental habits. We learn to see that thoughts are only

thoughts with no power until they are believed. To see this requires the ability to sit, alone within ones self.

Here is a story about this condition:

The disciples were involved in a heated discussion on the cause of human suffering. Some said it came from selfishness. Others, from delusion. Yet others, from the inability to distinguish the real from the unreal.

*When the Master was consulted, he said,
"All suffering comes from a person's inability to sit still, be alone and listen".
(Based on a story from Anthony de Mello)*

Learning to sit with our inner life, free from judgments, denial or self-criticism is the ground for uncovering peacefulness toward ourselves and others. Even when judgment occurs, as soon as we see this and choose to return to the next breath, we are cultivating the conditions for peace. Between the mental pattern and our response there is a gap, this gap allows for awareness to grow. This is the ground for freedom and peace to grow. Being friendly with "what is" is the essence of learning to live. When we can shine a light on our own patterns, the pattern begins to fade, like the darkness in a room when we light a candle.

This Bodily Life...

What about physical discomfort? Can one experience peace when the body is not at ease? No matter how well we take care of ourselves, how well we eat, exercise, think good thoughts, etc., our bodies will be uncomfortable at least some moments every day. For some of us chronically painful sensations are a daily companion. Part of this discomfort is the body's way of communicating important messages. Some of it is simply the fact of living in an ever-changing physical universe.

As long as we have a body we will experience discomfort. To find that we can be comfortable within a moderate amount of physical discomfort is essential for both inner freedom and for deep peace. Also, so much of our physical discomfort is connected to emotional reactivity that is not consciously experienced and therefore held in our tissues. Life is often uncomfortable; can we rest in ourselves even when that is true?

The attitude of resting comfortably within discomfort assumes: 1) we listen well so that the message from our inner life is heard, 2) that we take action to alleviate the situation when appropriate and 3) we acknowledge that our fighting with discomfort or pain actually intensifies it. The old expression "what you resist persists" is revelatory. Sitting meditation is a direct way to learn about this process and cultivate our "peaceful abiding".

A long time student of mine named June lives with many physical ailments. At first the idea of meditation was completely unappealing to her. She had learned to deal with her pain through constant distraction. By keeping herself always busy with high levels of stimulation, she could ignore her bodily sensations. This strategy was successful in certain ways but also left her feeling disconnected and exhausted. After learning to sit through the initial sensations of discomfort and the accompanying fear and resistance that would arise, June discovered that by settling into the sensations they could actually dissolve. Now, she proudly says, "sitting is my best friend".

Connectedness to life...

Feeling connected to life is the basis for deep peace. When human beings sense connectedness with themselves and others, peace is the natural condition. Sitting can create a sense of deep connectedness to life.

As one drops deeper into the silence, an unexpected inner movement occurs. Deeper than the thoughts, feelings and sensations that are constantly changing is a quality of presence that is continuous. Perhaps you can feel it, if you pause and sense "what is the deepest sense of life I can know right now. Beneath the thoughts and usual sensations- what is IT?"

When sitting, moments will arise when one experiences the subtlest sense of being alive- the sense of Being. For at least a few seconds we sense our connection to all of life. This is the most nourishing place I know.

There is always a pre-verbal "pulse of life" that can be sensed. It is both personal and completely impersonal. It is life itself pulsing through us. We can feel it. One "knows" oneself as part of All. At first this happens for brief seconds or even fractions of a second. Consistent sitting can connect you in a direct way to the totality of life. You feel at home in this universe, never separate. From this connectedness an implicit caring for the world arises.

Often while I am sitting, temporary "arising" of mind will pull me away from deep connectedness. As soon as this is seen, the thought dissolves like a bubble bursting in mid-air. All that remains is life aware of itself in its primordial, uncreated form. After a while, this background quality of Being can be sensed even when the mind is distracted. Gaining confidence in this ground of Being through consistent practice brings profound peace and deep rest.

In this article, I speak of learning to be at home in the circumstances of our lives. I give examples of people finding peace within extraordinary circumstances. I then speak about feeling connected to the whole world. It is important for me to acknowledge that living like this is not easy. In my personal life, all of these abilities are a "work in progress". I am forever grateful to my sitting practice for helping these capacities to grow.

So to repeat:

Reason #1 to sit: to become responsible for our thoughts and become free from the habit of cultivating unhelpful thoughts. To do this, we must grow our capacity for awareness and our ability to see that the thoughts have no inherent power unless we believe in them.

Reason #2 to sit: to experience our capacity to be at home in our bodies even in challenging moments. When we discover the capacity to rest even when uncomfortable, life changes enormously. Pausing and befriending our bodily experience is the basis for non-struggling. As we sense the truth of the moment, the bodily discomfort will often lessen or even vanish. Imagine how different our lives would be, how different the world would be if we cultivated this kind of resting.

Reason #3 to sit: to experience our fundamental connectedness to absolutely everything. **This connectedness is the ground for love. This is the perennial "peace that surpasseth all understanding".**

Please join me for as little or as much of the day as suits you. Even one hour of "sitting for peace" is a gift to yourself and to the world. Look at my schedule in California and perhaps we can sit together, wherever you are.

Russell