

# Buddhism Beyond the Lists (1/5): What is Practice?

*The following talk was given by Diana Clark at the Insight Meditation Center in Redwood City, California on September 1, 2025.*

## Introduction

Good morning, good afternoon, good evening, wherever you might be. Happy to be here. I thought I'd hop on just a few minutes early and say hello. I saw in the chat some of you said welcome to me. So, thank you very much. It's nice to read that.

What a pleasure it is to practice in community. What a difference it makes, right? Even though we're not speaking to one another directly, this chat box is a connection. Welcome everybody. Maybe this is your first time. And welcome to all those people who aren't on chat, right? All those people that are watching but aren't putting things in the chat box, which is perfectly fine and probably what I would be doing.

This week, I'd like to offer something that's maybe a little bit different than what I've done in the past or what's sometimes done here. I'm calling it "Buddhism Beyond the Lists." And to be sure, I love the lists. I'm one of these people that really likes the lists: Four Noble Truths, Five Hindrances, Five Faculties, Seven Factors of Awakening, Eightfold Path, Twelve Links of Dependent Origination, and on and on, right? There are all these lists. But sometimes it can be really helpful to look at things from a bigger perspective, perhaps, or to add on or flesh out or provide some context to all these lists. And to be sure, so much of the Buddha's teachings include more than just lists, of course. So this week, we'll be bringing in different elements of practice that are beyond the lists.

## Guided Meditation: Stillness

Okay. So for our guided meditation, I'm doing a big exhale as I settle in. Maybe you'd like to do the same.

Is there a way you can find your way into stillness? Invite yourself into stillness. For some people, maybe there's been some activity already today. Can you allow stillness to arrive?

Most of us will probably be sitting. Not everybody. And if you're sitting with your back resting against the back of a chair, the back of the couch, whatever it might be, can you let your back and your seat sink into that support? Feel the support.

For those of you who are sitting with your back free and upright like I'm doing now, check that you're balanced. Be like the mast of a ship. Maybe rocking side to side, back and forth just a tiny bit just to find that place of balance, allowing the spine to be upright and for the arms to just hang. In this way, there's a brightness and ease. Hands can be in the lap, on the thighs, whatever feels comfortable.

Tuning into the soundscape. What are the sounds? Without straining, just opening, tuning into the sounds in the environment. For me, I'm hearing birds chirping, bringing a little bit of delight. A refrigerator running, whatever it might be.

Bringing awareness into the body. Again, tuning into where we feel supported, the contact of the body with the sitting surface, feeling the pressure against the body. Let the belly be relaxed.

Is there a way that the chest can be unarmored? Just open a tiny bit more with the shoulders moving back. This is such a small movement. Shoulders relaxed, away from the ears. The jaw relaxed. Maybe moving the lower jaw down just a tiny bit. Let it be slack.

What would it be like to allow awareness to inhabit the sensations of breathing? Feeling the body move as it breathes.

The way into deeper meditation is through letting go, releasing. Releasing tension. Releasing expectations. Allowing the experience of breathing to be imbued with awareness.

Recognizing that the mind likes to think, and we honor and appreciate that, and orient towards the sensations of breathing.

We could say that the name of the game, so to speak, of practice is being present for whatever is arising. Not checked out. Not rehashing or rehearsing the past or the future, but inhabiting this experience.

Thank you. Thank you for your practice.

## **Dharmette: Buddhism Beyond the Lists (1/5): What is Practice?**

### **It's helpful to have some clarity about what our practice is**

This idea of Buddhism Beyond the Lists. I want to start with a query, a question: "what does it mean to practice?" When I say, "nice to practice together," or when you say, "I'm a Buddhist practitioner," or "my practice is going really well," or "my practice is going terrible," or whatever, what do we mean? What is this word "practice" pointing to? And for each of us, what does it signify or indicate or what does it mean?

Sometimes during practice discussions that I'll have with a practitioner, especially on meditation retreats, I'm sometimes asking a person when they're describing something that's happening or maybe they have a question, I'll just ask them, "So what is your practice?" And I'm a little bit surprised how sometimes we discover that they don't really have clarity about it. This simple question, "Well, what is your practice?"

I just want to say that it can actually be enormously helpful to have some clarity, to have some intention, to have a particular orientation, to have a direction we're going. Otherwise, we just get pushed around by our preferences.

Maybe we sit down and discover that there's a certain amount of restlessness that is arising. So we think, "Oh, I'll just do open awareness," quote unquote, and "I'm just going to be aware of whatever is happening." And then we find the mind is darting all around and lost in thought and noticing different things. And there can be a certain restlessness there, but it's being done without awareness, without some presence associated with it. Or maybe there's a way in which we notice that we're really irritated or irritable, annoyed, mad. We think, "Oh, I'm going to do some loving-kindness practice as a way to work with this." And then we find ourselves saying to ourselves, "May you be happy. May you be healthy. May you be safe," saying this in our mind as a way to get rid of or address this hostility that we find. Or maybe there's this way that we discover, "Oh my goodness, my knee is killing me." And then we'll just do some mindfulness of the body and feel into the experience of the knee—the throbbing or the stabbing or the heat or whatever it might be.

To be sure, everything that I just described there is perfectly legitimate practice. But it can be helpful for us to have some clarity about what is practice. What is our meditation practice and what is a tool to help us with that.

Maybe in the same way that—and I've had this experience—I went for a hike and came up to a really watery area. Often this is in the fall when there's a lot of leaves. This was back on the East

Coast that I'm thinking of right now. And it's not clear, is this just because the stream has overflowed a little bit, or is this just one big giant puddle? Can I jump across this, or is this something that's really wide and filled with water? We can take a stick and put it in the water. And when we put the stick there, we can see there is this little wake that indicates, "Oh, this is a stream. The water is moving." But we wouldn't have noticed that the water was moving unless we had put a stick in it.

In the same way, mindfulness practice—being mindful—is kind of like putting the stick in, and we don't start to really notice all the other things that the mind is doing until we say we have this intention. "This is what my practice is going to be," and other things are just being highlighted because it's not what the practice is. This can be enormously helpful to have some clarity between practice and tools. Practice and what the mind is doing when it's not practicing.

To be sure, dharma teachers describe a lot of different practices. I myself have done this. I've done this here on the 7 a.m. and on retreats, and I teach weekly at IMC. Of course, I've talked about a number of different practices. There's a number of different reasons for this. Not one practice is appropriate for everybody. And then during meditation retreats, or when I'm doing guided meditations, I'm often giving more generic instructions. But on a retreat, or if people come and talk to me after I've given a talk when I'm in person at IMC, that's when there's an opportunity to tweak the instructions and to personalize them for whatever is arising for an individual. Because there's this recognition that we all have strengths, and all of our minds are not exactly the same, depending on our life circumstances and how we've spent our life. So some practices become more natural and easier, and some things, it feels like, "uh, this doesn't quite fit." We want to work with what is natural and easy and maybe expand from there.

It makes a difference if we have some clarity about what is our practice because there are benefits that can arise when we stick with a singular practice, using tools that are needed, using other things that are helpful to support us as we do this practice.

So you could say, "Okay, Diana, maybe that's nice to have this singular practice, but what do you mean by this?" Well, so many of the practices that we're offering here have scriptural underpinnings. Many of you know the Suttas<sup>[^1]</sup> and the commentarial literature. The Pali Canon<sup>[^2]</sup> is, the tradition holds, closer to the time of the Buddha. There are hundreds and hundreds of years between the Suttas and the commentaries. Some teachers emphasize the Suttas. Some teachers emphasize the commentaries. Gil and I and many other people at IMC emphasize more the Suttas.

In particular for mindfulness, many of you will know the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta<sup>[^3]</sup>, the Ānāpānasati Sutta<sup>[^4]</sup>, the Kāyagatāsati Sutta<sup>[^5]</sup>. Gil has talked about these. So what is practice? Maybe it's mindfulness of breathing, being tuned into the experience of the breath, making that primary and using other tools as needed, noticing other things that are arising as they arise, but having mindfulness of the breath as a primary practice. This can be really helpful just to have this clarity. Otherwise, it's like we're just kind of—I know I've done this myself earlier in my practice—I just kind of felt like I was always searching, searching, searching for the right thing to do, even within one particular sit, trying to find just the right practice to do.

## **Practices versus Tools**

So my invitation is just give yourself over. Choose a practice. Use tools as needed, but be clear what's a tool and what is your practice. I offered mindfulness of breathing, and I tend to emphasize that when I do guided meditations. But you might have as your practice just mindfulness of sounds as your primary practice. Maybe you have asthma and to be with the breath is associated with a lot of uncomfortable experiences, so it doesn't feel like a place where you want to rest your attention. So you do mindfulness of sounds.

Or maybe loving-kindness is your practice. A beautiful practice. You could be saying phrases: "May you be happy. May you be healthy. May you be safe. May you live with ease," while having in mind a dear person.

Or maybe there's a big part of practice that feels like a certain heartfelt, devotional aspect to it. We don't tend to talk about this so much here, but maybe there's a little bit of a ritual or devotion of something that's other than just the mind that's being brought to and highlighted with practice. Or maybe it's studying the Suttas. Many of you know that Gil and I taught Sutta study for years, both at IMC and now with the Sati Center.

But just to say that in general, we could say Buddhism is more orthopraxy than orthodoxy. And what I mean by that, orthopraxy is it's about what you do rather than what you believe. So to have some clarity about what is our practice, our meditation practice, our ethical practice, what are the ways in which we have this commitment of not causing harm in the world, keeping our hearts open as best we can in whatever situation.

Many of you will be familiar with this expression, \*Ehipassiko\*<sup>[^6]</sup>, this way in which we discover for ourselves by doing. It's not like "come and believe." It's things that we do.

## Practicing with Sincerity

And I'd like to end with this small—maybe it's not so small—another point about practice. Once we decide, maybe at the beginning of each sit, say, "Okay, this is going to be a loving-kindness sit," or "this is going to be mindfulness of breathing," it's also important how we do this, how we do whatever the particular practice that we've chosen. And I'd like to suggest that sincerity is an integral part of this. There's a number of ways in which we can orient ourselves or motivate ourselves for practice. We want to attain goals. We want to perform better. We want to get more breaths in a row or something like this. Or maybe we're just comparing ourselves to that person over there or how we used to be. But is there this way that we can just be authentic and bring all aspects of ourselves to whichever practice we've chosen to do at that time?

I would say this is what having some sincerity is: having integrity, welcoming all those parts of ourselves that maybe make practice not so easy sometimes. But as best we can, can we be aware of what's really going on? Can we be present for our practice? Can we invite awareness in without pretense, but with authenticity and bringing all aspects of ourselves with sincerity?

So, Buddhism Beyond the Lists: practicing, however you want to define practice for you, with sincerity, with knowing what your motivations are, and embracing your life.

So with that, I'll end, and I look forward to practicing with you tomorrow. Thank you.

## Notes

[^1]: **\*\*Sutta:\*\*** A discourse or sermon of the Buddha. These are collected in the Sutta Piṭaka, one of the principal bodies of texts in the Pali Canon.

[^2]: **\*\*Pali Canon:\*\*** The standard collection of scriptures in the Theravada Buddhist tradition, as preserved in the Pāli language. It is the most complete existing early Buddhist canon.

[^3]: **\*\*Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta:\*\*** The Discourse on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness, a key Buddhist text that provides detailed instructions on the practice of mindfulness meditation.

[^4]: **\*\*Ānāpānasati Sutta:\*\*** The Discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing, another foundational text that details sixteen steps for practicing meditation with the breath.

[^5]: **\*\*Kāyagatāsati Sutta:\*\*** The Discourse on Mindfulness of the Body, which elaborates on meditations related to the physical body.

[^6]: **\*\*Ehipassiko:\*\*** A Pali phrase meaning "come and see for yourself." It emphasizes the importance of direct, personal experience and investigation in Buddhist practice, rather than blind faith.

*This is an AI-generated transcript. It likely contains inaccuracies.*

## Links

Links for the guided meditation and talk:

- <https://www.audiodharma.org/talks/23756>
- <https://www.audiodharma.org/talks/23757>

Link for the YouTube video

- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EoxEuBDSm\\_c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EoxEuBDSm_c)

Link for Diana Clark

- [www.DianaClarkDharma.org](http://www.DianaClarkDharma.org)

Link for donations

- <https://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/donate/> (you can add Diana Clark as the teacher)