

Dharmette: Stories of Practice (1 of 5) No Distractions

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November 24, 2025

Keywords: samādhi, insight meditation, Mahānikāya, Abhidhamma, Pāli, U Paṇḍita, mindfulness, equanimity, Rangoon, Thai Buddhism

So, hello and welcome to this Monday beginning of a new series. And for this week, I don't really have a theme that I'd like, particularly that I want to follow. Thank you. But rather, I've given how much I've taught this year about first *samādhi* and insight and building on that and kind of more deeper teachings of insight last time I was here. Coming out of the retreat this last week and being here for this Thanksgiving week, I don't want to focus on a teaching, but rather I want to talk a little bit more personally to share some of the stories about that of my experience of practicing over the years. It was a little bit inspired by having breakfast with the resident volunteers at the retreat center.

I was at the retreat last week, and there are people who live there, residents who care for the place, and the custom is some of the mornings of the retreat is to have breakfast with them, and we chat and talk about all kinds of things. But it's not unusual to have discussions about practice and practice stories. So to continue that. So one of the stories that people like to talk about, and it was kind of fun to talk about, but also very instructive, is to talk about the challenges of practice and how practicing can be the location, the place, the circumstances for practicing. Meditation, practicing on retreat, is not so ideal, seemingly.

But it may be ideal, the ideal being there should be silence, a place that shouldn't be disturbed by anything, that's quiet, that that's somehow ideal. But when I was introduced to insight meditation in Thailand, that was not the message that I got. I didn't get the message that we were supposed to somehow separate ourselves from the world and be in pristinely perfect, silent, still, peaceful environments to meditate. We were supposed to learn to meditate, learn to be mindful in the midst of whatever life brings us. It wasn't that we were supposed to go find noisy street corners to meditate on. But we were supposed to just practice with whatever circumstances there were.

And nothing was considered a distraction, just one more thing to be mindful of. And one of the first surprises I had of seeing this, when the very first time, the first time I was to Thailand and was introduced to insight meditation, during that time I was taken by a Western monk to large headquarters of the biggest sect of Thai Buddhism. There's two or three sects, depending how you count. And the biggest one is called Mahānikāya. And they have a big campus in the middle of Bangkok next to the river, which has this huge kind of apartment building, kind of dormitory where many monks live, many floors.

And for some reason, we went there to visit another monk who was up on the fifth floor or something. And so we come from the street, through the front door, to this very big lobby. And the lobby had just tremendous amount of people coming and going. What I do remember was there was kind of a stairs, almost like a curving spiral stairs that were going up to the second floor. And I think it just kept going up floor after floor.

And there was a desk, a very large desk, where kind of an entry, kind of a little bit on the side, not facing the door, but perpendicular, where a monk sat as a receptionist, as a receiving people. And there were like six telephones, wire telephones on the desk. And lots of phone people calling and I guess maybe phone ringing, him talking. There was a lot of yelling. And there was a lot of people coming and going in that lobby, up and down, this way and that.

And it was a very busy place. You know, it was right in Bangkok. People were coming and going. Monks were coming and going. And then on the far end, as far from the door as you could be, the front door, under those steps they were going up, there were about a dozen lay people meditating on retreats.

And they were just sitting completely still and quiet in this very public place, because there was no, I guess, meditation hall for lay people like that. I don't know quite the reason why they were sitting meditating there. But they were sitting completely still and quiet, seemingly undisturbed by all the commotion going on there. And they were practicing mindfulness insight. And I was so inspired by that.

I had come from doing years of monastic life deep in the wilderness, deep in the mountains where things were kind of pristine and beautiful and inspiring in many ways. But to see that we could practice insight right there in this busyness, that that was very inspiring and instructive for me. When I was in Burma, practicing long retreat there, the longest retreat I ever sat was eight months in Burma. And mostly that was alone in my room and walking meditation in the hallway in front of my room. And it was one of the happiest times in my life to be able to devote myself so fully to the practice.

But it was in the middle of Rangoon, and it was kind of a community college, kind of like campus, the whole big monastery, very big monastery. But the facilities I was staying in was a little bit close to the edge of the monastery. And so the, in the town around it was very prominent because a number of places, including some of the local Buddhist temples, had loudspeakers. And the loudspeakers back then were kind of raspy or poor quality loudspeakers. So the music came crackling through.

And most of the time there was Burmese pop music being played over and over and over again. Madonna's song, Just Like a Virgin, was, luckily they were singing it in Burmese. But they played that over and over and over again. And here I was at one of the most famous insight meditation monasteries in the world, the kind of the origin of the kind of insight meditation that many of us practice and teach here in the West. A place where, you know, sometimes there were thousands of people meditating there.

And there was this constant glaring of these poor quality loudspeakers, mostly pop music. And for one week there was a Buddhist festival and 24 hours a day for seven days there were Buddhist monks chanting the *Abhidhamma*, the *Abhidhamma*, the Buddhist texts and Buddhist psychology, which are very, very dry. And the chanting of it, in *Pāli*, you couldn't understand what they were saying, was very monotone and dry and just going on, droning on and on, day and night. And even there, that was understood to be just one more thing to practice with.

And to inspire us with this kind of idea, the abbot U Paṇḍita told the story of the turning point for him when he started doing insight practice. He had been a monk since he was a teenager, quite young, teenager. And he'd gone through all this monastic study and was very well learned. And then he was ready to start practicing meditation as an adult at some point. And he went on a retreat.

And this teacher, U Paṇḍita, he was kind of a little bit, looked like he should have been a general in the army. He was kind of strong and determined and stern and, you know, very strong motivation and fire kind of guy. And because his personality, so he was going to practice in a very determined way. And he had a roommate. And his roommate always went to bed early.

And in that tradition, you were supposed to only sleep four hours a night. But his roommate didn't do it. They slept much more. Went to bed early. But the worst of it was his roommate snored.

And the teacher said he was indignant and angry with his roommate and very dismissive of

him. He was this lazy guy who's sleeping all the time, and now he's snoring, disturbing my meditation. But at some point, he stopped his complaining, and he took the snores of his roommate as the subject of his mindfulness meditation. He just became really mindful of it. And his resentment, his anger, his self-righteousness, all those faded away as he just got absorbed in the sound listening.

And he went, that was a turning point in which he started to understand what mindfulness was and the simplicity of it, and that simplicity of even something that he thought was a horrible distraction and something that was ruining his meditation actually become the source of really maturing in this understanding what this insight practice is. So these are all stories meant to convey that there are no distractions when we do insight meditation. There's just more things to be aware of, more things to be mindful of, more things to absorb and take in and learn how to be with simplicity, with equanimity, with non-resistance, with openness, with this too is included. There is no thing, no distraction, except maybe the house burning down, something serious like that. But in ordinary kind of situations, the idea is to always fold everything into the practice.

So these are important lessons I got from this practice. And so I'll tell more stories like this, simple stories, I hope, for this week and my practice. So thank you very much.