

## **Focusing meets Buddhism**

We walk silently down to the lake along a candle lit path. Each of us adds a stone to a small home-made raft. The stone will carry our message of empathy to the deep places inside of us, the deep places in the lake. The boat is set aflame and towed out to the centre of the lake. As the boat slowly burns in the clear night, the stones drop down, taking our messages into the darkness. We chant quietly and watch...

This ritual marked the end of a weeklong Focusing and Meditation retreat, held in Scotland and led by myself and Jutika, both Buddhist practitioners. It is our third year of running them, each one a great success. For me, this week lies close to the heart of what I do: taking Focusing into a "Buddhist" context, or perhaps more fundamentally, taking Focusing to people who want to awaken, want to become freer, who sense there is more to life.

I came across Focusing on a Buddhist retreat about 6 years ago. Even hearing it described as "the body's own wisdom" had a deep effect on me. It has been profoundly transformative for me on my path, and after nearly 3 years of teaching it in this context, my sense is that many feel the same way.

These days there are probably dozens of approaches to following the Buddhist path. There is a huge tradition. In essence Buddhism offers a path away from a painful way of seeing and living, to a way of living in happiness, freedom and spontaneity. Meditation is a central tool in this journey, providing a way to see ourselves and our lives clearly and without prejudice. As I found out, it is all too easy to misunderstand and misapply the teachings and practices, especially since Buddhism is relatively new in this culture, and comes with many ideas and symbols that don't fit well in ours.

Like many I came to meditation and Buddhism wanting both answers and some practical ways to bring about change in myself. I was young, confused, anxiously wanting the peace and calm that Buddhism seemed to promise, I dived in and practiced a full time Buddhist life for over 12 years. Then the cracks began to show, and the pain and confusion were still there, more than ever. When I look back I can see that in my attempts to clear my mind, in my attempts to be "spiritual," I left myself behind.

Easily misunderstood ideas did not help! There were teachings that there is no self, that the ego is to be battled with and overcome, that there are negative states to eradicate. (I put all this very simplistically; in reality it was much more complex and in fact, I got a tremendous amount from all those years of practice. It's also important to point out that many forms of Buddhist practice are not like this.) In essence, though, I was running away from my experience, and trying to create a different, less painful one! And to make matters worse I was punishing myself for not succeeding and therefore not being spiritual enough! The sad thing is I see my own story mirrored in others.

When I offer Focusing in this context, my message is that your experience is not something to run away from! I love it when people get the message. It's so easy with meditation to subtly push aside those distractions, those unwanted, less spiritual, desires and thoughts, yet in doing this we are in great danger of separating ourselves from the possibility of change, that we know so well from Focusing. I offer the idea that we (the conscious mind) may not have all the answers to our life, that the body may have something important to say, have wisdom even. I offer something that says you are OK as you are. More than that, that you are deeply OK, even beautiful as you are, and that trying to be more spiritual could get in the way of knowing and feeling that.

I ask them to be curious about it. Are you interested in what is really going on in your body, during meditation? Are you open to every aspect of yourself? Do you want to let in the gentle light of Presence and acceptance? Are you ready to see that what you thought was an enemy may in fact be protecting something valuable inside you, even guarding a treasure? Are you ready to trust what is there, that it is already enough and already profoundly spiritual?

Focusing has so much to offer those seeking self-understanding and change. Focusing brings a deeply sensitive, embodied and experiential method of meeting yourself. It also brings the gift of a listener or companion. How valuable is that?, when so much of Buddhist meditation is done silently in your own mind. It is wonderful for people to feel witnessed at this deep level.

There are other possible benefits of Focusing in this path. It helps to bring the noble ideals and aspirations of Buddhism into relationship with the real experience inside. It might sound grand, but Focusing offers a connection with what you could call "soul" By this I mean the deeper places in your being, formed by your unique life and circumstances, i.e. the imperatives of your life. These places call to us to be met, and we ignore them at our peril. It's early days in this meeting of Buddhist practice and Focusing, but I am confident and excited by it.

Contact me ([manju@livingfocusing.co.uk](mailto:manju@livingfocusing.co.uk)) for a list of related articles and books.

**Manjudeva 2009**