

Sit Like a Buddha
An Online Course on Beginning a Meditation Practice
With Lodro Rinzler

Talk One: The Power of Why

Hi. I'm Lodro Rinzler. I'm really excited to be doing this "Sit Like a Buddha" class with you guys. So, we have several weeks together, and I just want to paint a little bit of a picture about what we'll be doing. This is not necessarily your everything-you-would-ever-want-to-know-about-Buddhism class; this is actually something of a basic intro to meditation. The actual practice that we'll be doing is *shamatha*—peaceful-abiding meditation—and we're going to be going through it step by step, starting with today, where we're going to be discussing why we would even want to do such a thing.

My goal is that at the end of this whole class, you will actually have an established meditation practice. It's not just something that you did for a few weeks and it was fun; it's actually something that will now be a part of your daily routine and, more importantly, your day-to-day experience.

"Meditation practice," I often like to say, is an interesting term. The idea of meditation practice is that we're practicing for the rest of the waking hours of our day. All throughout our day, we're practicing on the cushion to be present, to be very much focused with what's going on right now so that when we are out with friends, when we are at work, when our spouse is yelling at us, we're actually present with that activity too. So there's a very practical element to this meditation practice that we're going to be doing.

Before we go too far into the practice itself, I want us to take this period of time and just start to think about why we're doing it to begin with. Everyone who's entering this class, you might have a different reason. If there's five hundred people taking it, there might be five hundred different reasons why you actually want to meditate, and that's fine. The important thing is that it's personal to you. So as we get into this class it might shift and change a little bit, but let's just start by contemplating our personal intention, and I'll get into the importance of this in a minute, but let's . . . I hope you'll indulge me in an exercise. We're going to do the meditation posture today, and then we'll get into the other aspects of the shamatha (peaceful abiding) practice next week.

But to begin, let's take what's known as a good meditation posture, which is saying basically a posture where we can rest our mind. We're going to have a sense of relaxation and yet be dignified and uplifted at the same time. I'm sitting on a cushion; you could sit on some cushions or pillows on the ground, or you could sit in a chair. If you're sitting in a chair, maybe push away from your desk.

You want to feel balanced when you sit down to meditate. So I want you to sit in the center of your seat—once again, cushion, chair, doesn't matter in this case—and that means you're not leaning back against the back of your chair; it means that you're not slouching forward like you would at a computer, but you're actually fully upright and you have a sense of being, feeling the weight of your body on the earth. So that could mean your sit bones digging into the cushion or chair, your feet pressed firmly on the ground about a hips' width apart, or if you're sitting like me, your knees a little bit lower than your hips and your legs pressed firmly on the ground.

From this strong base, we elongate upward. It could almost feel like there's a string at the top of our head pulling us straight up, elongating the spine. And what we're doing here is allowing for our natural skeletal curvature. We don't need to tense up the muscles in our shoulders and our back; we relax those.

Let's actually just drop our hands at our sides for a second, even if you're in a chair, and then pick them up at the elbows and drop them, palms down, like I did. This right here is actually a natural and comfortable spot on which to rest them, and because most of us are not used to sitting upright and it's uncomfortable, this gives us a little bit of extra support for that.

Our head sits at the top of our spine with our chin slightly tucked in, and we can bring a sense of relaxation to the muscles in our face. So: uncreasing the forehead, relaxing the muscles around the eyes, around the nose and the jaw. If that means that your jaw hangs open, that's fine. You could even put your tongue up against the roof of your mouth, allowing for clear breathing and slowing down the swallowing process.

What we're going to do here is . . . actually, in this particular exercise you could close your eyes or you could leave them open. If you leave them open, just rest your gaze about two to four feet ahead of you on the ground, loose and unfocused.

Let's begin by just taking a few deep breaths. *[Pause]* And now I want you to just hold your mind to a specific question: why am I taking this class? Just notice whatever answers come up in response to that question: Why am I taking this class? What's my motivation for it? Don't feel like you have to get the right answer or that there is such a thing as a right answer; just let the answers that do arise wash over you like a wave and keep coming back to that basic question: Why am I taking this course? What's my motivation? Why am I taking this course?

When you're ready, you can open your eyes or raise your gaze, and what I'd like to do is just have you offer that contemplation, whatever came up for you. Some of the reasons I've traditionally heard are things like, "Well, I'm really stressed out and I think this meditation thing might help," or, "You

just mentioned this peaceful abiding thing or this calm abiding thing. I could use some calm, I could use some peace—that sounds great,” or, “I have some pretty intense emotions I’m working with right now. I’d love to learn how to work with those”—and we will do that, of course—and many, many others: people have trouble sleeping, people have trouble managing feelings of overwhelm. Very rarely are people like, “Oh, this sounds like a fun hobby,” but if that’s your particular reason, that’s fine too. Maybe you’re just curious.

Whatever your personal motivation is, I think it’s important to hold that in your heart, and here’s why: meditation is hard. I’m going to say this right off the bat in our first class: meditation is really hard. It is not an instant fix like we might have with other things in our life. If you are like, “Oh, this guy’s sort of interesting. Maybe I should order a book by him,” you could go on another tab in your computer and go on Amazon or Shambhala.com or whatever, and have it delivered to you. Or you might get hungry during this and you could go to another tab and order food and have it delivered to you. There are so many different ways that we just have a desire and then it’s somewhat fulfilled relatively quickly. Meditation is not that.

Meditation is actually something of a long and gradual path, and the effects that it has on you are relatively subtle, so you might look over your shoulder at the end of this course and say, “Gosh, I think I’m a little bit more present than I was when I started this class.” Or, “Maybe I am a little bit calmer,” or, “Maybe I’m a little kinder than I was—maybe I’m a little bit less of a jerk than when I started this thing.” It’s subtle in that way, but it’s also very effective and very practical.

So I’m going to encourage you to stay with it, but the reason I ask you to contemplate your personal motivation, your personal intention, is because when you are disheartened and you don’t want to meditate on a given day, that’s what’s going to keep you going: “I’m doing this because *blah*”—whatever your version is. “I’m doing this because I want to do X,” “I want to cultivate this quality in my life,” “I want to have less stress,” whatever. When the chips are down and you just don’t know why you’re even taking this thing and you don’t even want to watch the next video, reflect on your personal intention.

I mention this because we go through our life in one of two ways: we either have a conscious intention or an unconscious intention. I’ll use an example: You get hired for a new job and you say, “Oh, this is wonderful. I needed money; I’m going to take it!” But we’re not exactly sure why we’re doing this new job. We go in and it seems to be going well enough, but at a certain point, it’s hard work, maybe we feel underpaid, maybe the hours are longer than we wanted, maybe we don’t get along with some of our coworkers, we’re not sure why we’re even doing it, and then it all falls apart. Whereas if we go in

with a conscious intention: “You know what? I think that the mission of this company is really in line with what I want to do; I want to be a generous person, and they’re going to allow me to give away money to lots of organizations I want to support; it’s a great foundation; I’m going to go work for them.” Great! Your intention is in line with their mission and you actually know why you’re showing up every day, so that when you do have a fight with your boss or a coworker, when you do feel like you’re working too many hours, you actually can say, “Oh, I’m doing this because *blah*,” and you have your own intention for doing it. So it’s not just a meditation thing.

Yes, meditation is hard and our intention will sort of power us through some of the tough times, but this is looking at our life as a whole, which is important. All of the stuff that we talk about with meditation is very applicable to the rest of our life, and here we’re saying, “I’m going to look at my intention throughout my day. I’m going to look at my intention for the work I’m doing, sort of on a big scale and also on a day-to-day scale. I’m going to look at my intention for why I’m going out for a drink with my friends later, knowing that if I go into that with an unconscious intention, I’m probably going to drink more than I want and lose all sense of mindfulness and not really go down a road I want to go down; whereas if I go in with a conscious intention, I might be a little bit more clear about how much I’m drinking, why I’m out with friends, what I want to get out of the whole experience.” Everything. Our romantic life: “Why am I looking to meet someone? Is it because I feel lonely? Is it because I just went through a breakup and I’m feeling a little hurt, or is it because I actually feel sort of confident in myself and my own company and I met someone and I’d like to enjoy their company as well?”

It’s just noticing why we do certain things that’s important, because if we stumble through life with an unconscious intention, we don’t have a life that we feel is in line with what we want to do. If we live a life with a *conscious* intention, we live a life with meaning. We actually have a sense of purpose in our day-to-day activity. And we look back over our shoulder and we say, “Oh, I feel like my work/my relationship/my social life/whatever is infused with what I want to cultivate in my life” (whatever that personal intention is for you).

I wanted to offer that perspective before we even got into the formal shamatha practice because we have to know why we do what we do. Otherwise it’s going to become very difficult.

The exercise I want us to all do in the coming week is to actually, before we even get out of bed, just think through what we have to do that day and come up with a conscious intention for what we want to bring to that day. I’ll give you an example: If I’m going to be meeting one-on-one with a number of people in a given day, I’ll say, “Okay, maybe my intention today is to try to be really present with them in our conversations.” If I am going to be meeting with a lot of volunteer organizations I work with

or something like that, I'm going to say, "Okay, my intention is to be very generous today, with my time and my energy, maybe even with my money—who's to say? But the overall quality is generosity." If I'm going to go and meet with people who are going through a really rough time I'll say, "Maybe my intention today is to be really kind to a lot of people and see how much I can extend my kindness, my gentleness."

So when you wake up in the morning, just think through what you're doing that day and then come up with an intention that feels meaningful to you. It could be any of the ones I just listed, or something of your own. It could be patience. It could be you want to exert yourself more in a certain area, you want to be disciplined in a certain area. Whatever it might be, but something that's not just like, "I want to slog through my day." Right? Something that's a bit more conscious than that, because when we wake up and we don't start thinking in this way, we go through the rest of the day in an unconscious way.

So in the morning, set that intention, and then you could do a number of different things throughout the day. You could set something on your phone, like a little reminder that comes up and says "kindness" or "generosity," so that you remember. You could take a Post-It and put it on your desk or on your computer so that you see it throughout your day. You could put it as the background of your computer desktop. Whatever you could do to actually see it regularly and be reminded of it regularly throughout your day is important. That way you don't lose sight of it after the morning.

The last part of this particular exercise is, in the evening, to reflect on how you did. I mentioned earlier that this meditation path is actually very hard, so one of the things I want to mention as we engage it is that we have to be very gentle to ourselves, and I cannot emphasize that enough. If we take this next several weeks as an opportunity to beat ourselves up because we're not meditating as much as we thought we would or we're probably thinking we're the worst meditator in all of time or something like that, it is going to be counterproductive to the overall process. So let's take these next several weeks and give ourselves a break.

I've found that for people whose intention might be to relax, the best way to relax is to not beat ourselves up and to let things unfold as they will. So let's try and do that a little bit. At the end of the day you might say, "Oh my god, I completely forgot to be kind. I was a jerk all day." In that case, tomorrow's a new day. But if you say, "Well, I think there were a couple moments where I actually lived in line with my daily intention. I actually was kind to those sorts of people in these three meetings in my day. That actually might have been helpful to people and helped me to cultivate that quality." In that case, you

should celebrate it! You should actually rejoice in the fact that you are living a life in line with the intentions you want to cultivate.

I want to just leave you with that, and let's please do this daily exercise over the next week: setting the intention in the morning, trying to remind ourselves throughout the day, and then reflecting back at the end of the day very gently and seeing how we're doing.

In the next week we're going to get into the formal shamatha (calm abiding) practice, and we'll dive into meditating every day going forward. I'm looking forward to joining with you in this journey. See you next week.