

Buddhist Discussion Centre (Upwey) Ltd.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhassa



How to Make the Most of a Bhavana Course

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Glossary

Bhavana: Producing, increasing, developing, by devoted to realizing, attaining; earnest consideration, meditation

Introduction

As Buddha Dhamma Students it is useful and worthwhile to know how to get the most out of our practice in the shortest amount of time. The purpose of a bhavana course is to provide a certain time and place to earnestly consider the Buddha Dhamma to develop our minds. Bhavana is often translated as meditation; however, in the contemporary English usage of the word meditation, there is more to it. We translate bhavana as developing one's mind to see directly the true nature of one's internal and external environment. This development is achieved through the understanding and insight that results from applying the teachings of the Buddha.

What Needs To Be Done To Make The Most Of A Bhavana Course?

The purpose of this article is to provide the student with clear instructions that are easy to follow.

Time, Mind and Merit

We need to plan adequate free time to attend the course, prepare the mind to be able to attend the course and to make the merit to attend the course.

It is highly recommended that a suitable diary be purchased to plan our time to attend bhavana courses throughout the year. For those that are working – apply for leave well in advance. Inform family and friends of our unavailability during this time. Put our day to day necessities in order; such as paying bills, washing etc. For those with children, make suitable care arrangements for them and ensure the children understand and are comfortable with such arrangements.

One month before the course, to prepare the mind, we need to:

- * Generate our intention to attend the bhavana course and a strong wish to learn.
- * Use our 5 styles of friendliness, professionalism, practicality, cultural adaptability and scholarship. This means identifying and understanding how each of the five styles works in every situation that arises throughout your day. For example, we might choose to apply friendliness to a whole morning, using it to interact with people, complete tasks, etc.
- * Ask the teacher about reading material that would be appropriate for the course. Ask the teacher of any other preparations that are needed or would help.
- * Hold 5 precepts. We need to recollect the 5 precepts many times a day. They are: no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no lying and no intoxicants that cloud the mind.
- * Chant daily. See our chanting sheet.
- * Make merit. Write a weekly plan of the merit making activities we will do for the month leading up to the bhavana course. It is important to discuss the plan with our teacher to ensure that we are generating the right types of merit and enough merit. Suitable merit making activities include: cleaning (the altars, meditation hall, kitchen, amenities block, sweeping the path etc...), cooking, offering food, offering lunch dana and offering robes to monks during the Katina ceremony, offering flowers, water, cups of tea, materials of scholarship (stationary supplies), preparing the Temple grounds, assisting to prepare all the materials for the course, photocopying, aiding other members to get to the Temple, coordinating a meal roster for the course for example. This may mean planning some extra free time in the week prior to the course to focus your merit making activities leading into the course.
- * Obtain the instruction for the course during the week prior to the course.
- * Wear plain, comfortable clothes and minimum make up so as not to distract other students with your appearance.
- * During the course, turn off your mobile phone unless it is really needed.

Even though we may have done the above preparation leading up to the bhavana course, it is most important to ensure that we align our agenda with the teacher's. This sometimes means dropping our own agenda at the gate. For example, to help the teacher create the right environment, take the precepts; develop Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha refuge before arriving so as not bring our worldly concerns with us. Use mindfulness to check what our agenda is and to see if it is aligned with the teacher's. What we talk about when we arrive at the centre is a good indicator of what agenda we have on top.

On arrival, look to see what is needed to support the teacher and students at that time. The

more teachable moments we can produce, the faster we will learn what the teacher wishes to show us.

Overcoming Obstacles

Often it is not our habit to arrive with the right mind which is ready to learn Buddha Dhamma. For example, if a student arrives at the Centre with their latest flurry and worry issues, the teacher has to stop teaching others and stop his or her agenda to settle the student down. Flurry and worry is an example of one of the 5 hindrances to meditation and learning.

Sometimes we may arrive with sloth and torpor and seeing the teacher cleaning the kitchen or preparing lunch we do not happily take over from them. When a new student arrives we do not meet them at the door, introduce them to other members and organize tea or coffee for them. Sloth and torpor is also one of the 5 hindrances. We need to check which of the 5 hindrances is predominant in our minds at the time and apply the correct antidote so that we can produce a wholesome learning mind.

The wholesome minds of generosity, friendliness, gratitude and respect are a suitable platform our learning minds can arise from. Also mindfulness and to refrain from idle chatter are part of making ourselves teachable.

Active Listening

‘Prick up your ears like rabbits’ as our Teacher John Hughes used to say. Be awake, alert with that sort of mindfulness (Carter, Carter, Sloman, 2006).

John Hughes gave us many Dhamma talks every month and he taught us to listen differently to a normal conversation or discussion. It was called active listening. We sit as if in meditation with awareness of our body, with our mind contained in the volume of our body. On our breath would be OK. You keep bright attention of the present moment, alert, mindful. Then we listen only, just hear with alert interest to what is being said. It is unnecessary to comment about the content - what is important is to hear what is being said with little or no ‘noise’ or interruption from our side. Keep an open channel, clearly comprehend what is being said without moving ahead of the speaker or falling behind. Keep up with the flow, hear the teaching as it arises on your mind or at the location of your ear or hearing.

To help this process be effective immediately we recommend that participants identify a couple of key ideas from each day of the course to take away with them and apply during the following week. This is called ‘active listening’ when you listen with the intention to find something worthwhile you can apply in your life. When you recognize the usefulness of a practice decide straight away "I'll try this out today". It's called use it or lose it (Carter, Carter, 2009).

Our Teacher John Hughes, who founded our centre at Upwey, used to say if we find out

something new, and can recognise its usefulness we must put it into practice straight away. At the time we discover something new our mind has the best understanding of why we need to change our habit and adopt the new behaviour.

May the merits of this article help Buddha Dhamma Students develop clear and bright learning minds for clearly comprehending and practicing Buddha Dhamma.

May the merits be shared with all beings.

Bibliography

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