

How to Deepen Dharma Practice

By Kathy Wesley. From a letter 4.06

Many people, after practicing the Buddhist dharma for a while, ask, ‘How can I deepen my practice?’ The question is an excellent sign – it means that the dharma is making a difference in the person’s life and that they are ready to go farther in the practice.

The best advice I have been given by my teachers is this:

1. Take your practice off your cushion and into your daily life. Instead of trying to simply increase your cushion time, try to erase the imaginary line that most people draw between their meditation seat and the rest of their lives. There are several ways to do this:

A. Train your mind in wishing for the benefit of beings. My teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, always said that if you develop a really strong inner wish to benefit all sentient beings, your practice will automatically deepen. To help accomplish this, think about your wish to benefit sentient beings as often as you can—while you are walking, standing, eating, etc. Think, “May I be of benefit to everyone who sees me, hears me, touches me, etc.” When you wake up in the morning, think, “May everything I do today benefit beings in some way, and may we all come to buddhahood.” at night before you go to bed, think, “May I benefit beings tonight, even in my dreams, and may we all come to buddhahood.”

B. Make offerings to the buddhas and bodhisattvas as often as you can. When you see something beautiful—a sunset, a flower, a tree, a person, anything—mentally offer it to the buddhas and the bodhisattvas for the benefit of suffering beings. Offer your meals, offer anything new you buy for yourself or receive from others—and your store of merit will increase and your wish to achieve buddhahood for the benefit of beings will increase.

C. Recite mantras mentally when you’re bored—while waiting in line, while stopped in traffic, etc.

D. Use off-the-cushion tong-len whenever you lose your temper, feel lonely or jealous, etc. If you’re like me, that means you’ll be doing it several times a day! To do this, think, “May the anger that I am feeling contain the anger of all sentient beings. By my suffering through this moment of anger, may all beings be free of anger. May we all come to buddhahood in the future.”

2. Develop a relationship with a teacher. Teachers help give our practice direction, and keep us out of the pitfalls that can develop. If you don’t have a teacher right now, then do a guru yoga practice (like the one attached here) with the Buddha himself as your guru. The Buddha will be a good “stand-in” for a teacher until you meet one.

3. Think about starting Ngondro practice. If you would like to practice Mahamudra meditation, this is the best way to approach it. If you would like information on Ngondro, the best source is the book, “The Torch of Certainty” by Jamgon Kongtrul.

Of all of these, Number 1 and 2 are the most important. When you erase the line between your cushion and your daily life, and gain the guidance of a trustworthy teacher, your practice will automatically deepen, and you will feel happier and more full of purpose than at any other time in your life.

