

An Intensive Lay-Practice Month

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Thanks to Martin Jordan of the Sheffield Meditation Group in the UK.*

In January 2011 the Sheffield meditation group decided to undertake a month of intensive practice in daily life. It was the idea of a group member who thought it would be good to be on retreat in daily life whilst the monastic community at Throssel was also conducting its annual 'Rains Retreat'. The New Year is also, of course, the traditional time for good resolutions and fresh starts.

Finding out that the Ordinary Mind Zen school had already established a similar tradition (www.zencentersandiego.org/practice-suggestions/), we followed two bits of good advice from them. The first was to each sort out what we individually needed to work on in our practice – where our 'edge' was. The second was to complete a written undertaking of what we were each going to do using a standard form. The idea was that this would make the commitment both specific and 'real'. And so that another person would know what we had committed to, while maintaining confidentiality within the group, we each sent a copy of our undertaking to Reverend Leandra, our group monk.

The lay training month thus actually started in December as we all began to privately decide what we would like to do in the intensive practice period. For many it set up quite a deep exploration about what was 'right effort'. On the form we had listed all the main areas of practice: meditation, mindfulness, the precepts, the sangha and study as well as a catch-all 'other' category. So in some ways the temptation was 'to do loads' and commit to a lot of 'doing'.

However for several of us this is not what happened at all. One person opted for a lot of quiet reflective time, another decided their life was over-busy and opted simply to try to do less; a third decided to concentrate on mindfulness, doing one thing at a time – in particular when driving. Other commitments were to work on attachments and cravings for things like tea, coffee and alcohol. And a common element was about training within relationships and families.

Really sticking to a steady pattern of regular sitting was part of most people's plan. Again this did not always mean more, just making sure that it was done and not abandoned too readily in the face of other demands. But some did have to change their normal routine to ensure the sitting was done in the midst of a life with children. One group member describes what this involved:

'Creating undisturbed sitting time involved adopting the lifestyle of a milkman, waking between four and five and trying to keep my eyes open... At the other end of the day I was going to bed at the same time as the kids and often before my wife.'

But the month was as much a collective as an individual activity. Each of us relied on the fact that the others were doing their best to stick to their commitment to help us keep going with our own. We had also decided on a shared theme for the month – 'training for others' – which encouraged us throughout the month to reflect on how our actions and training affected other people. We set up various ways of supporting each other depending on people's preferences. Many of us used the group's online chat forum to exchange ideas and experiences, others set up 'buddying' arrangements with one another and, in addition to our regular weekly meditation evenings, we also had a couple of specific Sunday morning gatherings to share how things were going.

We marked the start of the month with a small ceremony at the group evening, each formally placing a copy of our written commitment on the altar. At the end of the first week we all enthusiastically reported how well things were going, how relatively easy it had been to

follow our intentions. People reported, for instance, how lovely it had been to have a quiet start to the day with a sit and a silent breakfast with no radio or TV distraction. By the second week, though, it was a different story. Things were generally getting tougher and it was now that the time-limited nature of the project – just having to do it for a month - and the support of the group to keep going really came into its own. We all had days when it was difficult and plans went awry. But we encouraged each other simply to pick ourselves up, dust ourselves down and keep going.

As the month progressed, we gradually came to understand the nature of our own training a little better – its direction, its strengths and its weaknesses. Sometimes we would find the original plan needed to be slightly adapted as certain elements became more important than others, or when it became clear that a specific change was really necessary or beneficial. By the time we ended the month with another simple ceremony and a small token to remember it by, most of us found that some key things we had undertaken had now become habitual and would continue naturally after the end of intensive period.

Despite the ups and downs, we all felt that the training month had been enormously helpful to our practice. It was rather like going on retreat without physically going anywhere. We learnt much about what was helpful to try to do within daily life, as well as what was not. What had made it so powerful was undertaking a very personalised effort with the support of the group and the nature of this effort as a joint enterprise and common endeavour has, unsurprisingly, also brought us closer together as a group. We are looking forward to next January and doing it again.