

Orientation for the Retreat

Joshua Tree 4

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Bhante Vimalaramsi

Joshua Tree Retreat 2009 Orientation and Beginning Instructions

BV: OK. Now, this meditation is going to be a little bit different than what you may have been doing in the past. Please follow these instructions precisely exactly. And your progress is going to be amazingly good. If you fall back into the old way of doing it, because a lot of people here I know have done meditation in other forms, if you fall back in the old way of doing it, you're going to have almost no progress in your practice. And I'm used to people seeing a lot of progress. So.

When you practice loving-kindness meditation, you first start by sending loving and kind thoughts to yourself. You begin by thinking of a time when you were happy. When that happy feeling arises, it's a warm, glowing feeling in the center of your chest. As soon as that feeling arises, then you begin to make a wish for your own happiness. "May I be happy. May my mind be peaceful and calm. May I be filled with joy." Whatever wish you make for yourself, you need to feel that wish. You know what it feels like to be peaceful and calm. Take that feeling, put that feeling in the center of your chest and surround yourself with that feeling of peace and calm, and radiate that feeling to yourself.

While you're doing this, your mind IS going to wander. You're going to begin to think about other things. Thoughts are NOT your enemy to fight with or to stop. Simply notice that your mind has become distracted. ALLOW that distraction to be there by itself. But don't keep your attention on it. Now, every time mind's attention moves away from the object of meditation, there's a little bit of tension and

tightness that arises in your mind and in your body. You need to relax that tension. Now, your brain has two lobes like this, and there's a membrane that goes around each one. When mind becomes distracted, that membrane contracts just a little bit. That contraction, that tension, that tightness, is Craving. This is subtle. It's not big. But, when you purposefully and intentionally relax, your mind will kind of feel like it's coming out a little bit, and then your mind is very calm, and clear, and bright. Bring that mind back to your object of meditation. What's your object of meditation? The feeling of loving-kindness, making a wish for your own happiness.

If you're sitting for thirty minutes, and your mind wanders away forty or fifty times during that sitting, and you notice that, and you let it go, and you relax and come back to your object of meditation, that IS a good sitting. A bad sitting? You notice that your mind is distracted, "Oh I gotta think about this for a while." Now you're not meditating at all. If your mind wanders forty or fifty times in a half an hour, that means you have a fairly active meditation, and it's a work meditation, but it's not a bad meditation. Mind will settle down by itself but you have to do it gently. Not jerking your mind from one thing to another. Allow it to be. Relax. Smile.

TT: 5:03

This IS a smiling meditation. Smile with your eyes, smile with your mind, smile with your lips, a little Buddha smile, you see on the images, and smile in your heart. Make it sincere. Truly wish yourself happiness. FEEL that happiness. Radiate that feeling to yourself.

5:35 While you're sitting, please do not move ANY part of your body. Don't wiggle your toes, don't wiggle your fingers, don't scratch, don't rub, don't change your posture, don't rock back and forth. You can sit and move as much as he does [referring to Buddha statue]. [laughter] While you're doing this, there can be some sensations that arise in your body. Sometimes it's an itch, sometimes it's a stiffness, a hardness, a heat, a vibration, sometimes it's even pain. Now, what the meditation is about, is about learning how mind's attention moves from one thing to another. The meditation is not about over-

focusing on just one thing and trying to suppress anything. So, you're sitting in meditation and let's say you have an ache in your knee. And your attention gets pulled to that. What do you do? The first thing you notice is your mind has gone to that sensation. ALLOW the space for that sensation to be. Relax tension and tightness. Smile. Bring your attention back to the loving-kindness and making a wish for your own happiness. The nature of these kind of sensations is they don't go away right away. So, your mind's attention is going to get pulled back to that. You don't point your mind to it. If it doesn't pull your attention away, just let it be. But, if it does pull your attention away, notice that your mind is there, let it be, relax, smile, come back to your object of meditation. And you'll bounce back and forth with that for a little while. Now, one of two things will happen: Either that sensation will go away, or it won't. [laughter] But if it doesn't go away, your mind starts developing this sense of equanimity to it. The emergency is taken out of it. And eventually, it won't even pull your attention to it.

A spiritual friend is someone that when you think of them and their good qualities, you really like them. You respect them. You sincerely do wish them well. So you're sitting and you're sending loving and kind thoughts to yourself. "May I be peaceful and calm. As I feel this peace and calm, I wish this feeling for you. May you be peaceful and calm." When you start sending loving and kind thoughts to your spiritual friend, you also want to try to visualize them. Now that's kind of a tricky word because some people visualize very easily. They can see an image in their mind of their friend, and they can hold that image very nicely. Other people don't see with images but they see with words. So, your imaging with words is the same as trying to see someone. You can use their name, that's enough to bring that image up. But when you bring up that thought of them, make sure that you see them smiling and happy. That can remind you to be smiling and happy.

TT: 10:00

Smiling is a major part of this meditation. Smiling is extremely important because when you smile your mind is uplifted. They did a

study on the corners of your mouth, and I think it was at the University of Minnesota. And when the corners of your mouth went down, so did your mental state. And when the corners of your mouth went up, so did your mental state. We're trying to develop a wholesome, uplifted mind that is happy and has a lot of joy in it. So the more you can smile, and that means not only while you're sitting, or walking, but while you're going to the bathroom, while you're eating your meal, while you're going from one thing to another, while you're changing your clothes, while you're doing ANYTHING, you need to be smiling. Now, OK, this is a smiling retreat. [laughter] And if you don't smile, I get tough. [laughter] And I'll make you smile. [more laughter]

Stay with the same spiritual friend ALL of the time. Don't jump from one person to another person to another person. Stay with that one spiritual friend. They're the same sex, they're alive. When I was in Malaysia, there was a woman that was having trouble thinking of a spiritual friend. And at the time, Mother Theresa was still alive. And she said, "Can I use her as my spiritual friend?" And I said, "Is she the same sex?" "Yeah." "Is she alive?" "Yeah." But it's a little bit more difficult to do it with someone like that because you don't know them personally. You can use some very inspiring, very popular teachers if you want, or not, but if you don't know them personally, it's hard to keep that feeling rolling with them. It's better if you knew them and you knew what they were like and what they do. OK?

Now, sit for no less than thirty minutes at a time. And when your sitting is good, sit longer. This is not going to be a retreat of bells. We're not going to be ringing bells very much except for important stuff, like eating. [laughter] Getting up, things like that. So you're going to be going at your own pace. You can have a sitting and at first it seems like the sitting will last for hours and hours and hours, and you open up your eyes and look at the clock, and it's been ten minutes. [laughter] You can't get up until thirty minutes. There are other times that you'll be sitting and you think, "Well, maybe it's time to stop sitting." And you open up your eyes and you see you've been sitting an hour and a half, so "Wow, that was nice." OK.

This is a natural progression. One sitting is not going to be the same as the next. Don't try to force it. If you have a good sitting and then you get up to do your walking meditation and you come back, don't think that you're going to be able to have that sitting continue because it'll change; that's the nature of our minds.

TT: 14:29

Now, walking meditation: Do not put your attention on your feet; stay with your spiritual friend. Keep radiating loving-kindness to your spiritual friend while you're walking. The walking is for exercise, to get your blood flowing. Now one thing that happens in retreat and it's very frustrating to me but I can't get people to stop doing it, is you'll be sitting on the floor and you say, "Well, I'm uncomfortable." And it's been forty-five minutes or an hour or something like that, and then you get up off the floor, and you sit in the chair. Don't do that. The walking meditation is every bit as important as the sitting meditation. If you get up from the floor and just go to a chair and sit, what happens is your mind starts to dull out. Because you haven't got your circulation going so well. The walking meditation, you don't have to do it super slow, walk at a normal pace, but stay with your spiritual friend. Now, at first the walking meditation is going to be somewhat difficult because you're not used to it. And you're used to walking around, walk from here over to there, you're used to thinking this and thinking that and ho-humming around. So the walking meditation is a very important aspect to help break old habits of thinking while you're walking instead of radiating loving-kindness while you're walking. Now I want to keep your meditation going from the time of your sitting, getting up, going outside, keep your meditation on your spiritual friend. Walk no less than fifteen minutes. When your walking is good, you can walk longer. OK? You can walk up to forty-five minutes; I don't think any longer than that is really useful. You get tired after that.

So after you do your walking you stay with your spiritual friend, come in, sit again. Now I want everybody to understand that I want you sitting no less, and this is sitting, not just sitting and walking—just sitting, no less than six hours a day. Which is not a lot. And when

you can sit longer, I want you to sit longer. I was in a regiment when I was in Burma, where I had to sit for one hour and walk for one hour and I was doing that eighteen hours a day. Try that sometime, it's not much fun. But I don't care if you have a break, that's up to you. Keep smiling, keep wishing your friend happiness. OK? Do this with your daily activities. Do this with your job that they give you. If you have to chop vegetables, stay with your spiritual friend and chop. Be careful, but chop! Smile. Keep your smile going. Keep your smile going! Keep your smile GOING! Don't let any breaks happen. Now, don't get frustrated. Because your mind is going to get distracted. Welcome to the real world--it always gets distracted by something! As soon as you notice it, you can't criticize yourself. You just notice that your mind has gone off on a tangent this time, OK, let it go and relax and smile and come back! This is a practice of do it again, do it some more. It's OK. Lightness. Don't be critical about yourself or what you're doing. Keep your mind uplifted as much as you possibly can.

TT: 19:29

Now there is this thing that is called the 6Rs. And that's something that we developed a while back. This is the exact instructions in doing the meditation: Recognize that the mind is distracted. Release the distraction. Relax the tension and tightness caused by that distraction. Resmile. Return to your object of meditation. Repeat the process. 6R EVERY distraction. Recognize—and it's not, "Oh, I've got to memorize these six words or I'm not going to do it right."
[laughter] This is just a flow. It's recognize, release, relax, smile, come back and keep it going. Get in the flow of it. I was giving a talk in Laguna Sangha, and one lady raised her hand, she said, "You mean you have to roll your Rs." [laughter] And I said, "Yeah, that's it!" [laughter] It's not six different things that you have to do, it's a flow that you want to get into. Recognize, release it, relax, smile, return, keep it going, gently.

That is Right Effort. According to the Buddha's teaching, according to the Eightfold Path, the 6Rs are Right Effort. Or, I call it Harmonious Practice. When an unwholesome state arises—what's an

unwholesome state? Anything that pulls your mind's attention away from your object of meditation. You recognize that unwholesome state, you release that unwholesome state, and relax. You bring up a wholesome state, "Oh, resmile!" and come back to your object of meditation. And you keep that wholesome object going. That's Right Effort. That's what the Buddha was continually stressing, so that your mind would develop new habits and ways of looking at the world. So your mind will be open and accepting and loving and kind and content. The meditation will teach you all of that, I promise. And a lot more. Make the meditation fun. This isn't some kind of regiment where you have to grit your teeth and go to it! No, no, no, no, no. If you're doing that, I'll come along and smack you in the back of the head. [laughter] "Stop doing that!" [laughter] Come along and be happy. Take it easily. Don't try to force thoughts away. Don't try to force anything. This isn't the Buddha's way, force. It isn't the Buddha's way to suppress. What it is, is learning how to lovingly accept everything that arises in the present moment and allow it to be there without feeding it anymore. Don't get involved in "Oh, you know, this happened a little while back and this and that and and and and and and..." and now you're a thousand miles away. What is that? That is part of one of the hindrances! Restlessness. Be familiar with restlessness. It's going to be around for a long time!

TT: 23:59

Learning to see how mind's attention moves from one thing to another is what the meditation is about. "Why is it moving? Why is this happening?" We don't care about why. We let the psychologists worry about that. [laughter] We want to know how does mind's attention jump from "I was over here, very happy, smiling, wishing my friend happiness, and all of the sudden I'm thinking about that. How did that happen?" That's the key question. Not why did it happen, HOW did it happen? When you start looking at HOW mind's attention moves, you start seeing that there's a feeling that arises, and then there's this tension and tightness that comes up and right after that, now you're starting to think about all of your concepts, your opinions, your ideas, your stories, start to come up. And this is where you really, really start believing, "These thoughts, and these feelings, they're MINE! And 'I' have to control them. And 'I' have to

do something with them." But actually it's not true. It's just thoughts, it's just feelings. Your job is to allow them to be there without trying to force them to be anything other than what they are. But NOT keep your attention on them. Bring your attention back and relax, and smile, come back to your object of meditation. You'll start to see that all of the distractions turn into a kind of process, and this process works exactly in the same way EVERY time. And this is one of the funny things, because a lot of people in the West, they say, "Well, the people in the East, their mind is different than ours." No, it's not. Everybody's mind works in exactly the same way. Boy does that get a lot of psychologists fired up. [laughter] There's always a feeling that arises, there's always craving that comes up after that, there's always clinging, which is all of your thoughts and opinions and ideas and concepts, and then there's this habitual tendency. "My habit is whenever I have this feeling and these thoughts, I always act in this way." And then you're off in la-la land for a little while until you remember to 6R it and come back to your object of meditation.

Now, let's go back to the walking a little bit. While you're walking, don't be looking around too much. Where your eyes go, there goes your mind. And your mind will start thinking about this and that and become distracted. Now at first the walking is going to be difficult because you're not used to staying with your object of meditation while you're walking. That's OK. That's only natural. As soon as you notice that your mind is distracted, let it be, relax, smile, come back to your object of meditation. While you're walking, if you keep your eyes down six or seven feet in front of you, not in a real focused way but just a gentle gaze, and stay with your object of meditation, this is the way to do the practice. Not by putting your attention on anything other than your spiritual friend. Now, after fifteen, twenty minutes, it's time to come back and do the sitting. You come back, you keep your meditation going all the time. You don't put breaks in it. You keep your meditation, stay with your spiritual friend. Come, you sit down, now the first ten minutes of the meditation, you start sending loving and kind thoughts to yourself again. After then minutes you go back to your same spiritual friend, and stay with them the rest of the time. Again, while you're walking, while you're eating, while you're going to the bathroom, while you're taking a shower, it doesn't

matter. Stay with your spiritual friend.

Now what can happen, is your meditation can hit a space where it becomes very good. And now it's time to do a little bit of walking because your body's starting to achy a little bit, it just feels right that you should get up and walk. Stay with your spiritual friend. You can get into a jhāna while you're sitting, and you can keep that jhāna going while you're walking.

What is a jhāna? A jhāna is a stage of the meditation. It's a stage of your understanding, HOW the process works.

TT: 30:01

OK. We get up at five o'clock in the morning. We are here at five thirty.

SK: ~

BV: I don't care. [laughter] We stay in the meditation hall until ten o'clock. Not nine-thirty, not quarter after nine, stay in the meditation hall until ten o'clock and then you can go back to your kutis if you're tired. Now you can sit in your room if you want. Don't go to bed before ten o'clock. Don't be lazy! [laughter] Everybody here is going ~ [laughter]

SK: ~ they can take notes.

BV: Yeah. So, you get seven hours at sleep. You go to bed at ten o'clock, you get up at five, that's seven hours right there. After lunch, you take an hour break. We eat at eleven. After that, clean up, do your personal body things that need to be done, and you still have until one o'clock to take rest if you want. Or you can walk if you want. I don't care what you do. BUT, what you have to do is, if you're going to go out for a walk, stay with your spiritual friend, that's all. But if you want to lay down and take rest in the afternoon, do it from twelve to one. Now that's eight hours sleep. This is a walk in the park! This is really, really easy. I don't demand that you get up

at three o'clock in the morning like I had to. I don't demand that you go to bed at eleven o'clock like I had to, and got told that I was lazy because I was taking so much sleep. [laughter] I'm giving you eight hours! OK? This is a piece of cake! Keep your practice going all the time. I can't think of anything else. Oh, you can take notes during the talk If you want, or you'll have it—I'll record it so you can....

SK: You will have some handouts that you can keep if you don't want to take notes, but you're allowed to take notes.

BV: It's whatever you're comfortable with. OK. Any questions?

S: Yeah, I have a question.

BV: Wow! All right!

S: It's wonderful to see you.

BV: Oh, thanks Scott! [laughter]

S: The part where you ~ and, how can I say it, I'm trying to conceptualize how I would radiate these thoughts or feelings to my spiritual friend. And I'm not sure if it's to mentally create words or is it more of an emotional....

BV: It depends on your mental makeup. If it's easy for you to visualize somebody, like you close your eyes and you can see them right in front of you, use that image, OK? Now take that image and put them in your heart, and surround them with that feeling that you make.

S: So you bring that IN to your heart!

BV: You bet!

S: Not—

BV: Not out.

S: --out.

BV: Right. And then you radiate that feeling.

S: OK, I got it.

TT: 34:54

SK: And, it's important not to get into the idea of pushing this out to someone. It's more like you're wrapping up a little tiny baby and putting him here. That's what it is. It's also, you're developing your ability to send loving-kindness out as if you are the wick on a candle. You are the light, and the radiance goes from the wick of a candle. YOU are the wick of the candle.

S: I may not have heard it but I think also in terms of the spiritual friend, you do not want to choose a family member.

BV: At first it's best not to. Especially if you're living with that family member. Because, you think of them and all of the wonderful things about them, and you really love them a lot, and then you remember they did something you didn't like. [laughter] And instead of sending loving and kind thoughts to them, you're sending them some kind of angry thoughts. And that's not as good.

So, pick a friend, not a relative. You'll do the relative later. I promise, you'll do all of your relatives, you'll do—What we practice here is called breaking down the barriers. So, once you have developed your attention and your heart so that it's really open and you have a lot of strong equanimity, then we'll start havin' some fun!

Now, I tell you that this is a loving-kindness meditation. And it is. And that's not all of it. What this practice is, is the brahma viharas. And they naturally go from loving-kindness to compassion, to compassion to joy, from joy to equanimity, as you go deeper in the practice. You don't have to make those kind of things come up at first; just stay with the loving-kindness, and SMILE! It can't be overstated. You

gotta smile. You have to have that mind that's uplifted. THAT is how you will progress the fastest. Now, again, with the spiritual friend, while you're radiating loving-kindness to your spiritual friend, you want about seventy percent of your attention on the feeling of radiation. You want about twenty-five percent of your attention on the feeling of your wish. And only about five percent on visualizing them. That gives you an idea of the importance. Now the visualization, if you're seeing them like in a photograph, or you're seeing them like moving around in a movie, it can sometimes get fuzzy, it gets cloudy, it's like it's a lonng ways a way, and sometimes it just disappears. Don't worry about it. Start again. If you can't bring up that visualization, bring up their name, and then the visualization will come. Don't spend a lot of time trying to make the visualization arise. It's not near as important as the radiating of the loving-kindness, or making a wish. OK? Anything else? Yeah?

S: When you're radiating loving-kindness to your friend, your friend is in your heart?

BV: Yeah.

S: So you're radiating it inward, right?

BV: You're radiating it.

S: OK... [laughter]

BV: Are you like a wick of a candle? How does a candle radiate light?

S: Out.

BV: And in, both.

S: OK.

BV: Yeah? [to next student]

S: Bhante, when I think of the happy feeling and--I watched the

dhamma talk through David's website, and ~ instead of finding out in my heart, I found out my loving and happy thoughts somewhere around here [?]. If I focus inside here I become very tired and if I let it go and find ~.

TT: 40:05

BV: Don't push it. Just start feeling that warmth and the radiation feeling. It'll come. Smile more. OK? Smiling is the key. Smiling opens up your heart. Smiling opens up your mind. Smiling allows your mind to have joy. Joy is an enlightenment factor. It's desirable to have joy in your practice. I had years and years of people telling me whenever I had joy arise, "Don't be attached!" Well, geez, I didn't want to be attached, I was pushing that stuff away left and right! It's OK to have joy arise. It's desirable. What do you do when joy arises? The same thing you do when a pain arises. Notice that it's there, allow it to be there, relax, smile, come back to your object of meditation. OK? Yeah? [to next student]

S: The object of meditation is—

BV: Radiating. Making a wish for your happiness or your friend's happiness, seeing them smiling.

S: What about the breath in all of this?

BV: Nope.

S: Forget about the breath?

BV: Absolutely. If you see that you're starting to do things with the breath, then stop, and smile, and start over again. Now I do teach the breath meditation. For some people, loving-kindness is extremely difficult to do. Engineers for one. [laughter] They can't feel because they're so used to thinking. So what I do with that is I say OK, you don't have to do loving-kindness anymore, let's go do the breathing meditation. But I like teaching loving-kindness because it's different than what other people are practicing. A LOT of people practice

mindfulness of breathing. AND, they've developed all kinds of bad habits. And it's hard to let those habits go. So I give you loving-kindness meditation to do instead, and this is new. So your mind says "Ah, OK, we're going to do it, and we're going to do it this way." After a period of time, depending on who you are and how you're doing with your meditation, I might say, "OK, let that go and go back to the breath." Now you understand HOW the meditation is done. It's basically the same instructions. It's just a different object of meditation. But it's real easy to fall into old habits, and develop your one-pointed concentration. And one-pointed concentration is real peaceful, real calm, your mind is steady, it just stays on that object of meditation, and you don't learn anything, because your mind is so absorbed into the breath. It's hard to remember on the in-breath relax and on the out-breath relax. It's hard to do that unless you've developed a habit. And you develop the habit by practicing loving-kindness first. Don't want anybody taking a wild fling and saying "Well I've done that one enough, I want to go back to the breathing meditation." I'll tell you when. The Brahma Viharas will take you to the realm of nothingness. Very, very deep, strong equanimity. That's as far as the Brahma Viharas will take you. That doesn't mean your meditation is over. Can you attain Nibbana by doing the Brahma Viharas? You bet. Nibbana is real. It's not for working for next lifetime. You can attain it in this lifetime.

TT: 45:06

Now, over my years of practice and teaching, I have found the closest thing to the Buddha's explanation of the practice. and the instructions I have given you, if you follow those exactly, you don't add anything, you don't subtract anything, your progress is going to be amazing. As I said, I'm really used to seeing good progress. And if you're not having good progress, I start wondering what else are you doing? How are you changing the meditation? A lot of people are afraid of the word "jhāna." They've been taught just to do straight vipassana. What we are doing is samatha, which means tranquility, which is jhāna; and vipassana, at the same time. And we'll get into that more as the retreat goes on. But for right now, please follow the directions as closely as you can. You see you're going off in another

way, then just stop and let it go and take a breath, slowly come back to the instructions. You will be satisfied with this retreat. Guarantee it. And if you don't smile, I WILL make you smile! [laughter] OK, any other question? Time to go to work.

Transcript prepared by Uma Sarason
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