

# ACHARYA GODWIN SAMARARATNE AND HIS APPROACH TO MEDITATION

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Godwin Samararatne was one of the members of the Founding committee of the Nilambe Buddhist Meditation Center in Sri Lanka in the late 1970s. He became the first Resident Teacher and the Manager of the Center some short time after its setting up in early 1980. He led the Center as its Director and the Chief Instructor for nearly two decades until his passing away in the year 2000.

He started his career as a librarian in the public library system in Sri Lanka and later became the Head Librarian in the main public library in Kandy. In addition to being a librarian he trained himself as a counselor/psychotherapist, and he also became a research assistant to Prof. Ian Stevenson of the Behavioural Medicine and Psychiatry Department at the University of Virginia, USA in the area of parapsychology. He continued working in these fields until his passing away.

While leading the Meditation Centre at Nilambe he was invited to lead retreats, discussions and presentations in many parts of the world. He was a regular traveller to meditation retreats in the Waldhaus, Germany, and also gave retreats with Buddhist meditation groups in Switzerland and a Buddhist Theravadan Group in Cape Town, South Africa.

First and foremost Godwin believed that meditation was not about having special experiences; rather he saw the spiritual path as encompassing the whole of life, and providing a set of tools for meeting all the challenges and difficulties of everyday life. By practising and consistently applying these tools he believed we could overcome our suffering and find a lightness, joy and contentment in our lives just as they are.

Godwin believed that the techniques and tools which are employed in the practice of meditation should be simple and should be applicable in any situation in day-to-day life. Sitting meditation was only a beginning for Godwin, and he emphasized that to reap the full benefits of meditation one should be able to extend the practice to all positions and all situations in life.

To him meditation consists of 3 aspects. The first is *knowing the mind* directly experiencing the workings of the mind, such as thoughts, emotions, etc. arising in the mind. The second is *shaping the mind* developing the mastery over the mind which means using tools to gain mastery over thinking and emotions. He used to say that an untrained mind is a mind which is controlled by emotions and thought patterns. When our minds are controlled by particularly negative emotions and thought patterns, it can create more and more psychological suffering for us. But once we start gaining mastery over emotions and thoughts, that process will lead to the third aspect which is *freeing the mind*. In other words, if one gains mastery over thoughts and emotions one feels happy, peaceful and concentrated. Such a mind has a tendency to be in the present moment most of the time and it has the capacity to spread loving-kindness through its thinking and action.

For Godwin, in the same way we keep the physical body healthy, the mind too needs to be taken care of. We keep our bodies healthy by taking food and necessary nutrients, cleaning them and providing therapeutic treatments. Similarly keeping the mind healthy is also an important task in life. In order to keep the mind healthy one needs to understand the causes which make the mind sick. For Godwin the practice of meditation was the way to learn about the nature of the mind. Meditation is, in a way, learning through one's day-to-day experiences about those causes and then taking the necessary course of action to remove those causes in order to regain perfect health. If one observes and experiments with the factors which cause unhealthiness of the mind, one can easily identify negative emotions such as anger, jealousy, hatred, insecurity, sadness, etc. which bring about this sickness. In order to see this clearly, one needs to pay attention to what is going on in one's mind on a moment-to-moment basis. Meditation is the practice of cultivating one's mindfulness, awareness and concentration.

In this context, Godwin believed that Buddhist meditation practice provides a number of tools, such as paying attention to the in-breath and out-breath, paying attention to thoughts and emotions, etc. to identify and work with these negative emotions and negative states of mind. When Godwin mentioned Buddhist techniques, he did not say that someone should have a deep knowledge of Buddhist philosophy to embark upon meditation. Rather he stressed the interest in, and the importance of, cultivating the capacity of mindfulness, awareness and concentration, with the help of simple techniques, in day-to-day situations. In other words, Buddhist meditation teaches one to be self-reliant and one learns to be responsible for what is happening in one's own mind. Godwin frequently used a particular phrase in this context. He defined meditation as *finding the medicine for the sickness one has created oneself*. When one is sick, one cannot be healed by asking others to take the medicine. Similarly, just reading the prescriptions and literature concerning the illness also will not help in the healing process. Only adhering to a prescribed treatment plan will bring about true healing.

When one is self-reliant, one will rely on one's own effort (self-effort) in walking on the path. This process will lead one to develop confidence in the path. One will have a chance to see for oneself how much psychological suffering and psychological damage can be avoided through making this effort.

Godwin emphasised the importance of the trial and error method of practising mindfulness in one's daily life. When one is not aware or mindful one will start doing things habitually, repetitively and mechanically. This process will end in one behaving like a machine. If one develops machine-like behaviour one forgets the importance of positive emotions in his or her own life. As a result one forgets the real art of living. When one does not have friendly feelings towards oneself, one cannot feel love for another person or for other beings. Similarly one cannot feel warmth for another person. As a result one becomes more and more violent towards oneself and towards others. All this is related to the absence of mindfulness and an absence of awareness of what is going on in one's own mind.

Another important aspect of mindfulness is that it opens one up to experience the present moment without worrying about what has already happened (the past) and without dwelling upon what will happen (the future). Unfortunately, most of the time we live in an unreal past or in an unreal future and we call that living. Godwin stressed that when one starts living mindfully in the present moment, that will give a different meaning to the dimension of time. He used to stress that living in the present moment does not mean one is ignoring the past or the future. Rather one learns to use the past and future in a conscious,

deliberate and meaningful manner. He used to quote from a school of psychology which says that sadness and depression are related to the past, and that anxiety is related to the future. This insight is again another pointer in understanding the relationship of time to our suffering.

Another important aspect is that when one sees with awareness that one is creating suffering through attachment one can also see how other human beings too create their own suffering through the same process. This insight will give one an opportunity to appreciate human nature and the flaws in oneself and in others as well. This outlook will generate a kind of compassion which could be expanded to include the whole of humanity eventually. Further, this experiment could develop the capacity to see the nature of attachment, how the self or ego is involved, and its relationship to suffering in this process. One could also develop the capacity to see whether this so-called self or 'me' is real or whether it is something that arises and passes away like a thought from moment-to-moment.

Finally, one last important aspect Godwin mentioned along with the practice of mindfulness was that one should learn to be one's own best friend, self-contained and contented with oneself. Such a person, according to the Dhamma, is described as someone who is at home wherever he or she is. Such a person has the capacity to be happy while being alone with himself or herself, and also in group activities or in social gatherings with others. Such a one learns to handle all situations in life with the help of the Dhamma and eventually becomes his or her own Dhamma teacher. Such a person is described in the Buddhist tradition as a person who has learned to be a light unto themselves.

Finally Godwin used to say that he was fortunate to have met many masters and many spiritual gurus and teachers belonging to the various traditions. Some of them had claimed that they did not belong to any tradition. But for him the best master of all was life itself. Sometimes life can be really hard and sometimes it can be really smooth. But it teaches you who you really are.