

Green Meditation: A Month-Long Retreat with Clark Strand

Week 3: Original Practice

Green Meditation can be practiced using nearly any currently existing form of meditation or prayer. It only requires a willingness to use that form, whatever it is, as a way of clearing the path back to Nature. For modern people this kind of trailwork requires two things: a bit of eco-spiritual orienteering and a tool one might liken to a “spiritual machete.”

Spiritual orienteering makes use of what maps remain in ancient spiritual records like the Bible, the Upanishads, or the Buddhist sutras. Typically, its practice involves some form of group reading and discussion, such as we are doing here in this online retreat. We select a text or teaching, a symbol or a practice, and trace it back to its roots in Nature, leaving the crowded superhighway of contemporary life (a highway with no speed limit, ending in a cliff) and picking up the long green footpath that stretches back, not just the few thousand years of recorded history, but for millions of years before that. That path of sustainable living has been there all along, but it is only when we set foot on it again that we are able to look backward along its course and see that we are the heirs to what might be called the "Evolution Sutra," the teachings of which show us how to negotiate the journey forward through deep time.

A “spiritual machete” is a practice that allows us to follow those ancient maps where they lead. In one of the earliest texts from the Buddhist tradition, Shakyamuni describes the process as follows: “It is just as if a man, traveling along a wilderness track, were to see an ancient path, and ancient road, traveled by people of former times.” This was the Buddha’s way of describing the wisdom he found in the jungle, a wisdom that was already inconceivably ancient when he was born. And yet the traces of that wisdom and that path were probably easier to find in his day than they are in ours.

Today we must have a tool for recovering that path once we have determined through study and discussion the general area where it might be found. As a spiritual instrument that tool must be well-balanced and reasonably sharp. The way is too cluttered, too choked with the overgrowth of culturally conditioned ideas and attitudes, and clogged with the detritus of anthropocentric thinking. Fortunately, unlike a real machete, which grows dull with use, this spiritual tool becomes sharper the more we use it.

This week, we will look briefly at one such tool—the tool of mantra. The Sanskrit word *mantra* literally means “tool for thinking” or “instrument of thought.” The first is the more accurate English equivalent, however, because “instrument of thought” implies that a mantra is somehow subordinate to thinking...as if you could *think* a mantra, as if mantra could be an “object” of thought. The mantra is a tool for thinking precisely because, rather than *generating* thoughts or *becoming* a thought, it cuts through thoughts instead. It clarifies our thinking by allowing us to trace thoughts all the way back to their origin. In this sense, the mantra really is a spiritual machete. It is like the diamond which is hard enough to cut any other substance while remaining whole and unscratched itself. Whatever else the mind does with it, the mantra never shows a mark. It never stops being what it fundamentally is.

And what is that? What is mantra?

Mantras are pure sound. Naturally, this doesn't mean that a mantra has no meaning. Many do. A mantra typically consists of up to a dozen syllables or more, but may consist of only one, as in the Sanskrit characters **OM** (pronounced “Aum”) or **A** (pronounced “Ah” as in *father*). Even mantras this short have meaning, if only for the simple reason that they have been passed down with a body of teachings from ancient times and have therefore accumulated layers of associations, much as an old stone or piece of wood will acquire a patina from being handled by countless people over time.

However, it is only through actually practicing a mantra that we come to understand its meaning in the end.

The path of mantra is like the path of Green Meditation. Both lead us back to the source of all things in Nature. Both simplify and purify the mind, serving as tools for sustainable living and thinking. To take refuge in a mantra is to take refuge in the simplicity of sound before thought, just as taking refuge in Nature is to take refuge in the simplicity of the matrix of biological processes that includes all life, sustains all life, and into which all life returns in the end.

PRACTICE:

This week's talk addresses the *Prajnaparamita mantra* which comes at the close of the Heart Sutra. If you choose to recite this mantra as a primary practice for the retreat, then you should:

- **Start by memorizing it:** If necessary, write it on a piece of paper and place this in a position so that your eyes are lowered when you gaze at it.
- **Choose a time to recite it:** If possible, this should be done at roughly the same time each day. For purposes of our Green Meditation Retreat, dawn and dusk are the most ideal times for practice, although it can additionally be done at midday or in the depths of the night.

If you practice a different mantra, or if your daily practice consists of sitting meditation, simply recite the Prajnaparamita mantra a few times at dawn and dusk, using it as a way to focus the Green intention of your practice. Think of this as the intention to recover the long green road through time using the practice of your choice.

GREEN MEDITATION TEXT:

Gate gate para gate parasam gate bodhi svaha

(Gone, gone...gone beyond...gone completely beyond...Enlightened Mind, All Hail!)

The “a” is pronounced “ah” as in “father”

The “e” is pronounced “a” as in “place”

The “v” is pronounced as a “w,” although this rule is often ignored by English speakers

Note: The Japanese version of the mantra reads: **Gya tei gya tei ha ra gya tei hara so gya tei bo ji sowa ka**

Remember that the mantra communicates two thoughts simultaneously:

(1) That we experience life in this world as a discontinuity with the Earth (*i.e.*, as a raging river that needs to be crossed to the other shore)

(2) That, in reality, no such discontinuity exists (*i.e.*, we cannot be anywhere else but Nature, the idea of such discontinuity being, in itself, the cause of suffering)

Thus, the Prajnaparamita mantra communicates the core problem of suffering and the core solution to suffering in a single teaching that can be recited again and again.

IMAGES FOR CONTEMPLATION:



The characters of the Heart Sutra inscribed on pebbles in black sand. (Origin unknown)



The Sanskrit character “OM,” painted on a river stone by the late Mark Rogosin of Woodstock, New York, circa 2007.

TROUBLESHOOTING: Most difficulties in taking up Green Meditation flow from the same core problem: Because Green Meditation involves a tangible, significant change in the way we actually live, it may trigger resistance in a number of different areas of our life.

- Our partner, family, or residential community may resist our efforts to scale back artificial lighting
- Our earlier bedtime may be interpreted by others as a withdrawal of attention or affection
- Our work schedule may interfere with an earlier bedtime
- Our habitual need for stimulation of various kinds (including nighttime television or Internet use) may make Green Meditation difficult to practice

Such difficulties are common, but their solution is not difficult to imagine. The core problem comes from trying to practice Green Meditation like we practice most other things in life.

Modern life does not encourage the long view. If it did, we would live as we do. Taking the long view necessarily involves the cultivation of great patience. We cannot change everything in our world all at once. Though it is theoretically possible to chart a direct course back to the long green road through time, to make that course change too quickly will usually mean that we must travel it alone. The Way of the Green Bodhisattva is quite different. In the beginning, it usually means cultivating small, deliberate changes that no one notices but ourselves—for instance, scaling back on unnecessary lighting when we are alone in a room; going to bed ten to fifteen minutes earlier than usual; or lying awake in the dark for a few minutes before we are sleepy. Even reciting the Prajnaparamita mantra a few times daily in the recognition that it defines the core problem facing modern human beings (and likewise offers the core solution) is a practice that will lead to significant changes in our lives and the lives of those around us...provided we practice it patiently, taking the long view.

Our goal in practicing Green Meditation should be that of the Bodhisattva—to save all sentient beings (or, if we wish to think ecologically, to save our own and the countless other species with whom we share this matrix of interdependence we call the Earth). That is slow work, requiring a consciousness of deep practice. Even a very small change in our course through deep time, faithfully observed and carefully re-plotted with each cycle of day and night, will in time lead back in the direction of deep time.