



## WHAT IS MEDITATION?

*Lisa Bright, the Sangha's Dharma Teacher, explains why meditation involves a lot more than just meditating.*

What's the point of meditating? People do it for lots of reasons. We might say that we're meditating to achieve some degree of inner peace, or to gain wisdom, or even to achieve a certain spiritual revelation. In Buddhism we say that we meditate to awaken to our own true nature. But sitting meditation alone—just sitting on a cushion in a secluded place and trying to attain a certain level of calmness—that is never going to awaken anybody.

There are a lot of misconceptions about this practice. For example, some people meditate as if it were an intellectual exercise. They've read all manner of commentaries and all sorts of Sutras, and when they sit, they're trying to experience what they've read about. They think they already know what is supposed to happen! This is a dead end because it's an attempt to live in the past. If you don't practice in the present moment, you miss out on everything!

Another common misconception is that meditation is all about trying not to think or feel. Have you ever actually tried not to do these things? If you're reading this, then you must have failed, since the only way to succeed is to die. Thoughts come and go all the time—that's just how thoughts work. Feelings of all kinds arise without warning, then perish away. Thoughts and feelings themselves are really not a problem for meditation; the problem is that we try to hold on

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## HELP US GO TO SEED!

We need a lot more seed—and we need you to help us get it. For the past 12 years, we have been harvesting wild seed to help restore natural areas in the greater Washington, DC, region. Most of our seed is grown out at our Wild Plant Nursery, where we are working with over 200 native plant species for use in local ecological restoration projects. We collect all of our seed directly from the wild—from local meadows and forests—to make sure that our plants are genetically representative of the local, wild flora. This “local-ecotype” focus is what makes our work, and the seed itself, so valuable for restoration.

Our seed collection effort is already supporting dozens of local restoration projects, both our own and those of our partner agencies. These projects are essential for preserving the remaining natural areas of this region. That's because more and more of those areas are unraveling, from a wide range of stresses. (The biggest problems are: fragmentation from development, invasive alien plants, and unnaturally intensive deer browsing.) The resulting degradation would be bad enough anywhere, but it's especially tragic here because our region is

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**Photo:** From left to right, Mary Webster, Chuck Mills, and Lisa and Chris Bright sit in meditation last April at our Wild Plant Nursery.



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endowed with one of the most diverse native floras in the eastern United States.

Our region has to do a better job of stopping the loss of its botanical heritage, and the Sangha is uniquely suited to help. Our wild-seed collection program is already the largest effort of its kind in the region, and is conducted in collaboration with a range of land-management agencies, including local park authorities, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the National Park Service.

We're now able to take our effort a step farther. Last year, we expanded our work to include a set of plant communities that are of strategic importance to local conservation: meadows and grasslands. Healthy meadows are islands of very high diversity within our already diverse landscape. It's not just that meadow plant communities are very complex—it's also all the animal wildlife that meadows support. Many native insects, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and mammals make their homes in meadows. Many of these creatures have specialized habitat requirements and can live nowhere else.

We need to expand our seed collection effort so that we can: grow more meadow species at our Wild Plant Nursery; grow larger quantities of those species; increase the volume of seed that is sown directly into our meadow sites; and increase the number of those sites that we are collecting from and planting into.

**Our target:** We need to raise \$10,000. This funding will allow us to hire a few seasonal interns just for collecting and cleaning seed. It will also cover some extra staff-time for the same purpose. (Without that coverage, we're not sure that we could afford this effort.)

**A strong start:** We have already been offered some important help in reaching our goal. Wendy Wagner, a professor at George Mason University, has organized a work-study internship for our program.

**And a very generous anonymous donor has pledged a 50% match of every donation that comes in, until we reach our \$10,000 total.**

**A sound investment:** This fundraising appeal has two precedents, both of them successful. In November 2009, we asked you for help buying a pickup truck for our Tree Bank / Hispaniola program. Thanks to your response, we put a truck into service in March 2010, thereby greatly expanding the Tree Bank's planting range. And last October, we asked you for help launching the Tree Bank's Forest Credit program; although it took more time than we expected, our first loans have, at last, gone out! (See "Tree Bank Updates," opposite.) So we're a good bet. We ask, you respond, we deliver. Let's keep it that way! You can donate on our website, [earthsangha.org](http://earthsangha.org), or by mailing a check made out to "Earth Sangha" with "seeds" written in the memo line. Our mailing address appears in blue on the opposite page.



## IT WORKS!

The picture above, taken in August, shows one of our first meadow-restoration projects: about two-thirds of an acre on its way to wet meadow in Fairfax County's Rutherford Park, along Long Branch Stream. The Fairfax County Park Authority released it from mowing in fall 2009, and at our request, plowed a series of six strip "test patches" into it, but left most of the land undisturbed. At the time, the entire area was just turf-grass.

We planted those patches with stock from our Wild Plant Nursery in May and October 2010. Then we waited and watched. Initially, nothing much seemed to happen, but over the course of this past growing season, things began to coalesce.

As you can see, there is now considerable diversity in the plant community. Among the species that emerged from our patches: swamp milkweed, Joe-pye weed, golden ragwort, ironweed, cardinal flower, blue vervain, tall meadowrue, deertongue, and Indian grass. Some natives "volunteered" as well—for instance, jewelweed and Virginia buttonweed came in on their own. Of course, invasives are present, but at least for now, the infestations aren't too bad. In an increasingly battered landscape, two-thirds of an acre of good news may not seem like much, but if we can do it once, we can do it again.







## TREE BANK UPDATES

Late summer has been an eventful time for our Tree Bank / Hispaniola program, which works along a section of the Dominican Republic – Haiti border to help poor farmers improve their incomes, and to conserve native forests on portions of their lands. Three news items:

**Coffee:** After nearly three years of work, we finally managed to import our first shipment of coffee from our Tree Bank farms. Our farmers produce excellent coffee but until now, they have not had direct access to the export market, so their coffee sales have never amounted to much. We’re trying to change that, and since virtually all coffee in our project area is shade-grown, our coffee program will create a powerful economic incentive for maintaining forest cover. It was difficult to set up the program—we had to incorporate our Dominican partner organization, learn how to work with the Dominican coffee agency, find a suitable freight forwarder, and learn about US food import regulations. But we did it—as you can see from the photo above, which shows a sack of our beans. Now we’re learning about coffee roasting, and we’re looking for a roaster to partner with. We’ll let you know when the coffee is available! (For updates, check the Tree Bank page on our website, [earthsangha.org](http://earthsangha.org).)

**Forest Credit:** Our credit program has launched! The program is extending small, low-cost lines of credit to farmers who establish forest easements on their property. The easements can be either established forest, or areas planted with native tree seedlings from our Tree Bank nursery. The funding comes entirely from our members, who donated over \$15,000 to start this program. We should have about 15 applications by the end of September. At the time this *Acorn* was printed, nine of them had been funded, thereby marking two big firsts for our project area: its first low-cost farm credit system, and its first forest easement system. Look for updates online.

**Hurricane Irene:** Now for the bad news. Irene spared our Virginia nursery, but our Dominican nursery wasn’t so lucky. All of our Tree Bank nursery’s shade cloth was shredded. We don’t yet know what the replacement cost will be but it will certainly exceed a thousand dollars. So if you like what we’re doing out there in the Dominican hinterlands, now would be a great time to make a donation!

# EARTH SANGHA

BUDDHIST VALUES IN ACTION

The Earth Sangha is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) charity based in the Washington, DC, area and devoted to ecological restoration. We work in the spirit of Buddhist practice, but our members and volunteers come from a wide variety of religious and secular backgrounds.

**Want to contact us or make a donation?** You can support our work by becoming a member. Membership starts at \$35 per year. Donations are tax-deductible. You can mail us a check (made out to “Earth Sangha”) or donate on our website. We will send you a receipt and include you in our mailings. (If your name and address are correct on your check, there is no need to send us anything else.) **Contact us at:** [Earth Sangha, 10123 Commonwealth Blvd., Fairfax, VA 22032-2707 | \(703\) 764-4830 | \[earthsangha.org\]\(http://earthsangha.org\)](mailto:EarthSangha@earthsangha.org). Complete program information is available on our website.

**Want to volunteer or meditate with us?** We work with volunteers at our Wild Plant Nursery and our field sites in northern Virginia. We meditate in the Del Ray section of Alexandria on Tuesday evenings. For more information see our website or call Lisa Bright at (703) 764-4830.

**The Acorn:** Our newsletter is produced with “print on demand” technology, which consumes far less energy and materials than does conventional printing. This paper is 100% post-consumer waste recycled, process chlorine-free, and manufactured entirely with wind-generated electricity. This issue © copyright 2011, Earth Sangha.

**One of the best:** The Earth Sangha is recognized by the *Catalogue for Philanthropy* as “one of the best small charities in the Washington, DC, region.”

**Photos:** Above left, our three-quarter-acre wet-meadow site in August, along Long Branch Stream in Fairfax County, Virginia. At left, in June, volunteers stretch plastic to “solarize” (basically, cook) invasive alien Chinese Lespedeza (*Lespedeza cuneata*) in the 17-acre “Big Meadow” at Meadowood, on Fairfax County’s Mason Neck Peninsula. Above, a sample of green (unroasted) Tree Bank coffee.







## “Enlightenment is nothing special.”

questions and doubts inevitably arises. Maybe you wonder, if the self doesn't exist, then what is it that is perceiving everything? And where does the body come into this? What's the relationship between the body and this self that I supposedly haven't got—this non-self? This inquiry constitutes the heart of meditation practice. In Zen practice, we're asked to carry this inquiry at all times and in whatever we do. We try not to put it down. As our meditation practice matures, we let this inquiry become ever more urgent and all-consuming. If we keep at it, at some point and out of nowhere, the answer will fully reveal itself. It will feel like a thundering awakening. Reality as we once knew it will have gone through a radical transformation. Zen teaches that real meditation starts at that point.

The second root issue: despite that thunder, enlightenment is nothing special. People often seem to think that enlightenment, or Buddha nature, or whatever you call it, is something very unusual that can only happen to a few special people and occur only in very unusual circumstances. That is not so. An ancient Chinese Zen teacher put it this way: your ordinary mind is the Buddha. What exactly is your ordinary mind? When your mind is not disturbed, that is your ordinary mind. It lets you get up in the morning, lets you have breakfast with your family, lets you go for a walk, work happily, and lets you have a good night's sleep. You feel content. Contentment is maybe the single best word for capturing this idea of “ordinary mind”—contentment no matter what the external conditions

may be. We all have moments when we employ this ordinary mind perfectly. But to maintain this ordinary mind at all times, even in the face of adversity? That is meditation.

And the third root issue: to practice well, our lives must have a purpose. Creating a purpose in your life is like the Zen technique of raising a big question when sitting. The point of that technique is to dispel distraction. We need a purpose in life to prevent ourselves from constantly chasing after this or that desire of the moment, to prevent ourselves from constantly running from this or that fear. So suppose we decide to do some project for the benefit of others. Our thoughts and feelings become more focused; energies that were dispersed begin to flow together into a single stream. And just like a natural stream, the flow becomes harder and harder to resist. When a stream encounters an obstacle, it always finds a way around it. With a clear, beneficial purpose, you become like a stream: your energies flow around obstacles, and the energies of others begin to flow towards you, just as water always runs downslope, towards the stream. You begin to interact with others in more practical and productive ways. And that, of course, is meditation.

**Photo:** A great spangled fritillary (*Speyeria cybele*), sips nectar from a sprig of the aptly named butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) last June in a park in Fairfax County, Virginia. In northern Virginia, butterfly weed is one of the less common milkweeds. (Milkweeds are plants in the genus *Asclepias*.) But unlike our “naturally rare” milkweeds, butterfly weed is a recent rarity: just a couple of decades ago, it seems to have been fairly common in our local meadows. If you've ever seen a butterfly weed in bloom, you'll realize what a loss that is. Help us keep the butterflies connected to their weed. Donate to our seed initiative.

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to some thought or feeling. To meditate is to learn to let the thoughts and feelings die away.

Yet another misconception is that meditation is a kind of therapy—a way of feeling better about yourself or others. And maybe meditation can help make you feel better. With practice, it's not too hard to achieve some temporary calmness in a highly controlled setting like a meditation hall. And there's certainly nothing wrong with wanting to be calm, but if that's all you're doing, then you're just postponing the big problems. It's like pruning back some big invasive thicket. At first, it seems like you've cleared a big space, but if that's all you do, the thicket will come back, maybe even thicker, and the problem could be even worse than before.

Just like clearing that thicket, if you want to make progress in meditation, you have to go to the roots. The root issues are not about whether it is sitting, standing, or running meditation. Rather, meditation practice should involve all of our activities, in everything that we do and at all times. As soon as we act—it doesn't matter what kind of action—then each act should become a form of meditation. The following should be the roots from which our meditation practice grows.

First, meditation isn't about sitting on a cushion. It's not our bodies that we should focus on, but our minds. We constantly want good things to come our way, and we want bad things to go somewhere else. Our craving for the good and aversion to the bad make us all a little neurotic, without even realizing it. We're too fearful of losing what we think we have, too preoccupied with getting more of what we think we want, and too scared of things that seem to threaten us. In Buddhism, the medicine that heals these neuroses is a radical shift in point of view: the realization that the self, as we usually understand the term, is an illusion.

At the beginning of our practice, the notion that the self is an illusion—that's an idea that is very difficult to swallow. A host of

**NEW WEBSITE!  
SAME OLD URL: EARTHSANGHA.ORG.**