

Garden Meditation - Cultivating Peace

A NATURAL PATH TO HAPPINESS

by

Timothy Mckibben

First Published in 2012

Second edition, revised and updated, published August 2013

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Title: Garden Meditation—Cultivating Peace: a natural path to happiness

Cover design and illustration: Robert Perry.

Edition: second ed. Revised and updated

ISBN: 978-0-9874785-1-1 (Ebk).

Subjects: meditation, gardening, happiness, Buddhism.

For more information about *Garden Meditation – Cultivating Peace* or to contact the author please visit www.gardenmeditation.org.

'A journey of discovery accessible to everyone. Connecting us with nature, the earth and our minds, Tim brings his incredible knowledge, wonderful insights and beautiful humour to the age old question of what makes life worth living.' Mel Neil, Senior Consultant – Emotional Intelligence Worldwide.

'Tim has done a wonderful job explaining Buddhist concepts using metaphors from his extensive experience in gardening. There are many striking insights woven into this little book which will resonate especially well with gardeners as well as an audience well beyond.' David Michie, best-selling author - including Buddhism for Busy People and The Dalai Lama's cat.

'This book makes great use of Tim's deep knowledge of Buddhist philosophy and practice gained through years of study, as well as his extensive knowledge of gardening. I find it an easy to read and often humorous guide to gardening, Buddhist study and meditation, and the photos are beautiful! I recommend it both to beginners and more advanced students, and I am sure that other gardeners will also enjoy bringing meditation practice into their gardens.' Dr Margaret Florey, Senior Linguist at Resource Network for Linguistic Diversity.

'It is a lovely book indeed, well done! In fact, I found that even though I was speeding through the reading, it had a centering effect on me, which is exactly what I needed. I am looking forward to reading the next installment.' Annie Rivera, Director Corporate Reputation Pty Ltd.



Author: Timothy Mckibben is a monk, gardener, and meditation teacher who has studied Buddhism for more than 25 years. A gardening enthusiast since young, for 20 years he has conducted public garden tours around the Tibetan Buddhist Society Peaceful Land of Joy rose gardens.

Summary: *Garden Meditation-Cultivating Peace* is a book with 150 colour photos and 60,000 words about life, gardening and meditation. It presents Buddhist teachings within a garden context, using gardening analogies to highlight the natural aspect of that gentle tradition. Approaching our shared human condition with

optimism and humour, it offers a stimulating read. However for those looking to delve deeper simple meditations are presented at the end of each chapter.

Gardening is a cultivation of the external environment, meditation of the internal environment. A vibrant garden full of healthy plants depends on first removing the rocks and weeds, then enriching the soil with plenty of organic matter. Likewise in meditation we remove causes of unhappiness, such as anger, worry, loneliness and depression, and cultivate a more joyful and compassionate approach to life. Then all enlightened qualities can flourish.

In the darkness of winter a rose bed appears just a bunch of thorny sticks, giving no sign of the potential held inside. However when nurtured by warmth and spring rains, a glorious range of colour and perfume emerges. Likewise when feeling a bit bleak and thorny oneself, dissatisfaction and irritation so easily arising, we have no inkling of the potential for enlightenment that lies within. But through the inspiration of age old spiritual teachings, gradually come the happiness, love, insight and peace we have long missed. This book sets out a series of small steps along the way.

The paperback version of this book also contains 150 colour photos and is available from major booksellers such as Amazon. To contact the author please visit www.gardenmeditation.org



Salvias and crepe myrtle

Introduction



Land, water or air?

Gardening and philosophy can seem worlds apart, almost diametrically opposed. Gardeners are doers, knowing the practical steps to take to get a particular result in the real world. The work couldn't be more physical and down to earth, battling with great clods of sticky clay that cling to your boots and shovel, making them twice as heavy as before. Philosophy on the other hand is often seen as a purely mental activity divorced from reality, toying with abstract ideas in some rarified space distant from planet

earth.

The Buddha, however, presented both philosophy and psychology in a practical context, showing them both to be essential disciplines in our pursuit of peace. Many of his teachings are of benefit to anyone whether they are religious or non-religious, as they simply present methods to make us happier human beings, irrespective of philosophical belief. For example, no matter who you are, learning to relax and still the mind through meditation is a useful life skill.

This book came about because though there is a widespread interest in relaxation, meditation and understanding the mind, many people have a reticence to approach these subjects when they are presented from within the framework of a religious tradition such as Buddhism. Religion is seen by some to be a human construct of beliefs, rules, and rituals, far removed from the natural world and, as such, lacking any real capacity to heal or to generate lasting peace or happiness.

The Buddha's teachings though are intimately in tune with nature in that they reveal our innermost nature, the stainless purity of mind, along with explaining the central role one's mind has in establishing the world that we experience. The preciousness of life and the inevitability of death, along with the natural processes of cause and effect in both the mental and physical worlds, are woven throughout Buddhist scripture. Meditation is a gentle method to cultivate kindness and insight step by step, remedying any imbalances in our 'internal nature' in the process.



Sky through Magnolia stellata

While working as a landscape and maintenance gardener, I noted some parallels between the development of the external environment of the garden and the internal environment of the mind. It occurred to me that focusing on these similarities would help illustrate this 'natural' aspect of Buddha's thought. Plants, gardens and the natural world are widely held in high regard. Many people have a strong, almost instinctive sense of how important nature is and how closely connected to it they are; that they are a part of nature and that it supports them. With that in mind, I thought it might be helpful to explain the principal teachings of the Buddha from a gardener's perspective, citing gardening examples. Moreover, the widespread regard and identification at some level with external nature, allows an easy route to understand the more subtle internal nature of the human mind. The gardening stories and analogies

hopefully will enable readers to enjoy this gentle and contemplative approach to spiritual development.

Gardens are incredibly intricate living environments that are continually in a state of flux, much like our own mind and body. If we recognise how the cultivation of the outer garden parallels the cultivation of the internal landscape of the mind, then as the garden grows, we too grow – and more than just calluses on the hands. For, after all, gardens are constantly changing, and if we stop cultivating a particular garden it will quickly return to a wild state. Our moments of enjoyment in that garden will also have passed, and become just memories. So it would be good if we could walk away with some enduring life qualities, such as a compassionate heart, kindness, patience, insight and wisdom. These are our most precious of possessions in that they accompany us wherever we go and help us make the best of any encounter or situation.

The structure of the book loosely derives from the Graduated Path tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, and the Buddhist content is from the same source. It is intended to be interesting and accessible to newcomers to both gardening and meditation. Seasoned gardeners may come away with a refreshing new perspective on their favourite pastime, while those familiar with meditation will find some novel examples for understanding age old truths.

Garden Meditation – Cultivating Peace can be viewed as an entertaining read, but for those looking for practical instruction I have included simple meditations at the end of each chapter.....(end of excerpt from introduction).

1 - Humans and Gardens



Passion flower

Tranquil perfumed sanctuaries to derelict rubbish dumps. Scenic delights to scenes of despair. The spectrum of gardens when strolling around the neighbourhood can be dramatic. The range of environments reflects a varying regard for the garden. For the sake of a quiet life, some people begrudgingly cut the grass on Sunday, anxious to get back to the sport on TV. In contrast is the enthusiast who recognises the life sustaining properties of rich brown humus. Keen to

turn off the whining pc, escape the claustrophobic confines of the stale office cubicle, through the tiresome traffic, far away from the roaring, rattling, mind your own alienating business tube train and into the tranquil green oasis. No tasks to perform. No demands to be met. No deadlines to meet. Relaxing the body, breathing real air at last. Remembering who we are. The tension of city office life dissipates in the gentle breeze.



Butterfly taking a breather

Gardens can be a nagging chore or a quietly joyful time, when we feel magically released from all our usual worries and preoccupations, to enjoy the peacefulness of a calm mind and a body free of tension. After we venture into the garden, the frenetic pace of mental activity, thinking, planning, anticipating, worrying and stressing diminishes, resulting in a calmer state of mind. With such a mind,

released from habitual pursuits of sensory stimulation, wealth, popularity or status, we are able to appreciate the simplest of things. We have the mental space to enjoy a fresh breeze, dew drops, the chirrup of the crickets, the clear light as the evening sets in, butterflies, birdsong – including even the raucously expressive ones such as cockatoos and kookaburras, and of course, the raindrops on roses.



Cockatoo enjoying a cypress cone

Perhaps eulogising about whiskers on kittens may be overstepping the credibility mark at this point! And let's face it, the proposition that thinking about cats' whiskers is a viable remedy for depression, does seem highly suspect. Perhaps the association between the whiskers and fishy cat breath is just too close. Nevertheless, *Sound of Music* aside, gardens to some are a revitalising breath of fresh air, though admittedly sometimes with distinctly organic overtones. An

arena to fully express our love of nature and horse manure of course!



Rose gazebo

Our garden gives comment on who we are, in that the one we end up with partly depends on the attitude with which we approach it. A block of land is like a living three dimensional canvas on which different personalities with various likes and dislikes, enthusiasm and disinterest, plant knowledge or otherwise, are expressed to dramatic effect. Some like exacting the military discipline of a parade ground on their plant collection. They endeavour to demonstrate a near total control of nature, with closely clipped lawns, paths and fences lined with box and conifer hedging. Any weeds have long learnt the danger of poking their heads up, fearing another dousing of glyphosate. In a brief moment of reckless disregard for the principle of order above all else, half a

dozen standard iceberg roses may also have snuck in.



Rock garden that I built as a youth

Cottage gardeners on the other hand, enjoy the natural spread, shape and colours of a range of trees, shrubs, herbaceous perennials and annuals, care-free in their disregard for the man-made boundaries of lawn edging, paving and fencing. Some enjoy a blaze of primary colour whilst others want soothing shades of green. Some like being the giant overseeing bonsai or alpine miniatures whilst others prefer being cocooned in a private rainforest. Some try to block the view of the road whilst others want a car park. Some love expansive vistas whilst others yearn for mystery and seclusion. Some want to eat whilst others want ornament.

What a life!

In order to set the perspective for this book, I will present a brief Buddhist overview of our situation in this life. As seen in our choice of garden, when seeking happiness we make choices based on our likes and dislikes. Everyone wants more happiness and tries to avoid discomfort or suffering. We spend our whole lives seeking the one and trying to avoid the other. Most of our choices are driven by these two preoccupations. Minor activities such as shifting in our seat, opening a car window, or putting not one and a half, but precisely one and a quarter teaspoons of sugar in the cup of tea, are all done to gain a little more comfort or happiness. Major decisions such as those faced by myself and many others with significant hair loss: do we shave it all off or go for the 'combover'? Decisions regarding where we live, career choice, and most importantly, whether to make a pot of tea using teabags or loose leaves, obviously after having first warmed the pot. Some crush a teabag against the side of the mug with a spoon. All done to try and squeeze a few more pleasant feelings out of the situation.

Some seek happiness by getting married and then the alleviation of suffering with divorce. Some seek alleviation of suffering with divorce and then happiness with marriage. Many act out this cycle multiple times, always convinced that the next change is the one that is going to give them what they really need. All these choices are driven by the urge for happiness. Even when we place ourselves in a situation that we naturally find unpleasant, such as visiting the dentist or our in-laws, it is usually because, on balance, we see some

long term benefit, such as an absence of abscess or possibly an inheritance!

Identifying our underlying motivation of seeking happiness is useful, because we can perform our daily routines without thinking about why we are making the choices we make. The fact that we have made a choice can disappear from sight as we plod on without checking whether we are getting a good result.

We all have, and have always had this wish for happiness, and we are a very intelligent race. For example, humans have created the agricultural, scientific, industrial and information revolutions. Who else but humans could have invented a paper bag on a string that when dunked in hot water oozes a life- sustaining beverage? Who else could come up with the marvellous trio of pop-up toaster, teapot and newspaper? Who else could have invented the Swiss army knife with all its gadgets, so that no matter where you are, whether at work, at the train station or at the supermarket, you always have the right implement handy for removing a stone from a horse's hoof?

Unsatisfactory experiences

Considering we are so bright one would think we would all have attained this happiness we are after by now. But looking around, there is no shortage of suffering (*any unpleasant experience from the mildest discomfort to chronic pain*). Commonplace are experiences of loneliness, depression, boredom, dissatisfaction, frustration, confusion, irritability, anger and worry – and all that even before getting

out of bed on a Monday morning! We suffer physical ailments ranging from the common cold through to arthritis, cancer and heart disease. Then there are all the difficulties associated with ageing: such as loss of breath; loss of sleep; loss of faculties of hearing, seeing, smelling or tasting; loss of memory; loss of mobility; loss of friends and relatives if they pass away before us or lose interest in visiting us; loss of house if we are shunted off to the nursing home. As the saying goes 'be kind to your children – they will choose your nursing home'.

Often in life we become separated from things we like and encounter things we don't like. Sometimes we can't get the things we desire, or else become bored with them soon after we do acquire them. Natural disasters such as earthquakes, wildfires and floods, wars and the death of loved ones are just a few of the many causes of suffering.

Seeking happiness

How do we dispel this persistent dissatisfaction that is telling us that things aren't good enough, that this needs fixing or that needs to be possessed before I can truly be happy? What do we usually do to try to find happiness? We may look for happiness inside a family size block of chocolate or two. Escapism at the movies is always an option, whilst consuming the mandatory bin full of popcorn washed down by a gallon of coke. We may seek it in extreme experiences such as skydiving, holidays to exotic locations, food, music or a new hairstyle.



Blue rinse artichoke

We may work very hard to get a better house, new clothes and car. Perhaps a bigger home entertainment centre, smaller smarter phone, more and more gadgets and a quicker internet connection will do the trick? Visiting a shopping complex on a Saturday shows acquisition is a common method of pursuing happiness. We may seek the fairy tale relationship – someone who will always give us what we want, when we want it, and never give us what we don't want, such as personal criticism or an eggplant and chickpea curry every second night.

The causes of happiness and unhappiness

Interestingly, all these ways of seeking happiness and avoiding discomfort are external to one's mind. We are trying to find happiness out there. Yet ask yourself where do happiness and suffering actually live? Inside the mind! They are internal experiences. Being bored with my garden, my old car or with my husband or wife is not coming from the external object. The car is not yelling out or indicating in any way that it is boring. The car is just sitting there and I am framing it with the boredom. The boredom or dissatisfaction comes from me. First, we need to recognise the role our own mind plays in our emotional upsets. Then, instead of blaming the other person for our unhappiness, anger and anxiety, we can understand that this is our own play that we are watching and reacting to.



A place to relax

Three different scenarios show how other people and external objects are not the main cause in determining one's wellbeing. First, we can look at our different reactions to the same situation at different times. Sitting on the garden bench can be relaxing one day but leaves us feeling restless the next, despite everything else being pretty much the same. Same bench, same tree shade, same company. Sometimes we are happy one moment and stressed the next. Though the outer situation hasn't changed, our experience of it has. Even when in a good situation, sometimes we are agitated or stressed. At other times we relax and enjoy the people and surrounds.

Second, great wealth gives no guarantee of happiness. Some derive little pleasure from their acres of landscaped gardens whilst others love tending a few pot plants on their apartment balcony or growing vegetables in a tiny plot. Some have every desired luxury, even to the minutest of detail, but are still discontent. Some have just enough to live on and are content. A royal palace can become a grim prison of depression as it was for Lady Diana, Princess of Wales, whilst the nomadic tent may resonate with happy laughter. The family in a Beverly Hills mansion may hardly talk to each other whilst a family in a one room shack, with just enough to get by on, have good relations.

In ancient India a poor man chanced upon a valuable gem. However being content with his lot he started thinking whom he should give the jewel to. Finally, he decided to give it to King Prasenajit. When asked why he had given it to the richest person in the land, he said that due to the King's

perpetual dissatisfaction, he was the neediest.

Third, two people in the same situation can have radically different experiences. For example, a keen gardener feels close to horticultural heaven in the great beauty of Melbourne Botanic Gardens whereas the IT geek with the flat laptop battery feels isolated amongst all this green stuff, frustratingly far away from a power point.

If two people are being criticized, the overly sensitive person may stew over it for weeks, as so clearly expressed by Robert Burns 'gathering her brows like gathering storm, nursing her wrath to keep it warm'. However, the mind of the patient person remains undisturbed, in the same way that the deep waters of an ocean remain undisturbed by the inclement weather above.



Brooding sky

.....(End of excerpt from chapter one). If you wish to read the rest of *Garden Meditation-Cultivating Peace* it is available from major booksellers such as Amazon as a paperback or Ebook.