

DON'T PROLONG THE PAST

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The great 19th Century Tibetan master Patrul Rinpoche wrote:

Don't prolong the past,
Don't speculate about the future,
Just dwell in present awareness.

The question is how best to do this? How do we not dwell on the past or the future, but somehow be mindful of the present, the one place where a future (and therefore a new past) can be built. The traditional way to do this which has been taught for over 2500 years is Shamata meditation. And there are many, many forms of meditation.

Sitting quietly in meditation for a few minutes each day may give me a greater sense of calmness and clarity, but that is not the only or even the main reason to meditate. That is certainly not why I meditate. The primary reason to learn to meditate is to build a mental habit of mindfulness and awareness so I am not so easily distracted and carried away all the time, so that I can be present.

The habit of meditation is not just about sitting on a cushion. While it is important to sit, that is not the main reason to meditate. Sitting on a cushion builds a habit that we can then use the rest of the day when we are engaged in our regular life. We sit and meditate to learn mindfulness and to make it a strong habit, but we use that mindfulness that we learn while sitting in meditation everywhere else and all the time. We need it.

Sitting meditation is about learning to remain mindful and in the present as opposed to being endlessly distracted by thoughts of the past or the future. The first thing most people learn when they begin to meditate is that they are in fact easily distracted, that is: they can't just "let the mind rest." The moment they sit down, the mind is running all over the place. When beginners try to sit in meditation they experience their distraction first hand and are mostly helpless to do anything about it. They have built no meditation habit.

Sitting meditation, while it can be nice in itself, is all about building a habit of being in the present. This is why yogis call their meditation "practice." We "practice" meditation and that practice prepares us for the rest of our day, the time we are not meditating on the cushion. And that rest of the day is when we need the habits built through meditation the most.

In my opinion many people have meditation just backward. They believe that the relative calm of ten minutes or a half an hour of meditation is why they meditate, when the reality is that those ten minutes are our time to 'practice' meditation, the time when we learn to meditate and the rest of the day is when put that practice to work.

Unless we have practiced meditation on a cushion long enough to actually acquire the habit of being mindful and present, we have nothing to help us keep that awareness the rest of the day. It is a Catch-22. We can't just skip meditation on the cushion and expect to have its results in our daily life. We soon just are right back to where we first started, in the midst of our distractions

It takes actual time sitting on the cushion to build the habit of being present, of being mindful at the times we are distracted, and then learning to bring our attention back to whatever we are doing. This habit is especially beneficial during our post-meditation time, that is: when we are just living life.

I don't know about you, but I get carried away just all the time. I go too far. I say things I don't mean. And I don't always catch myself when I should. Things get out of hand easily for me and I am often not aware of it until somewhere down the road. I lack mindfulness. Sitting meditation is about building a habit of mindfulness that alerts me when I am distracted and allows me to drop that distraction and quickly return to whatever I am doing. It is a simple habit that becomes automatic.

However, like all habits it has to actually become a habit. You can't just think it and have it be so. You have to practice meditation until it works. It is no different from practicing a musical instrument, except here the instrument is your own mind and attention.

My point is that while sitting on a cushion for a short time each day can be calming and relaxing in itself, that is not the main reason to meditate. The main reason is to practice being mindful, to practice recognizing when you are distracted, and learn to bring your attention back to whatever you are trying to do.

This is not to say that you can't just sit and mull things over or let the mind cool out and just run like a quiet stream, or light a candle, some incense, and kick back in the mind. Of course you can. There are many ways of soothing the mind, but the technique I am pointing out here is about being mindful, about mindfulness.

Shamata meditation as taught by Tibetan and Zen Buddhists is about being mindful and alert. This takes practice and, like all methods of practice, it is not at first relaxing. It takes effort to meditate effortlessly, if that makes sense. And it takes time.

I wish I could tell you that the results of meditation practice are instantaneous and appear the first time you sit, but this is not the case in my experience. Like all habits, meditation and mindfulness has to be built through effort and time. Playing music on a guitar is not the same as practicing scales and fingering. The analogy to meditation is a good one. Meditation is your practice and its results (over time) will affect your whole life.

I have found this to be true. I have been meditating for many years and it has been hard work much of the time. For me these habits don't come easily and I am a genius at rationalizing on any given day why I should wait to practice meditation until the next day. The only one I have harmed is myself. It just took me much longer than average for the results of meditation practice to kick in. Enough said.

If you are interested in more details about the practice of Shamata Meditation, here is some information. If you have questions, comment on this thread and I will do my best.

http://www.kagyu.org/members/forum/pdf_files/Newcomers/KTD/MeditationGuidelinesforweb.pdf

Graphic by Michael Erlewine: The image was designed by me, one of many illustrations used in

my books on Tibetan Astrology. Just thought you might like to see this. It is too complex to explain here.

