

MY TAKE ON LEARNING TO MEDITATE: PART TWO

RECOGNITION OF THE TRUE NATURE OF THE MIND

In the first part of this article, we looked at getting started in learning meditation, which primarily centered around being able to concentrate naturally and at the same time rest ourselves in the concentration while concentrating. This is called “Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) and it forms the basis for the more advanced forms of meditation. I also discussed what are known as purification practices, which basically are remedial practices necessary to get our obscurations down to fighting weight, so to speak, in order to learn the basis for meditation -- concentration and resting.

So, we should be able at that point to rest quietly and be aware and focused at the same time. As mentioned, this is called Shamata or Tranquility Meditation, which is the ability to concentrate and rest-in-peace so to speak. That is a good thing; Tranquility Meditation is intended primarily as a base or basis for the more advanced realization practices like Insight Meditation (Vipassana) and Mahamudra Meditation. We have to be able to rest in concentrated awareness before Insight Meditation can be attempted. If we can do this, we are ready for the advanced practices. Our preliminaries are done.

However, and this is a big “however,” even though we are prepared, we can’t just launch into Insight Meditation at will. This is a threshold point (perhaps “The” threshold point) in dharma practice, a crucial stage and what in western esoterica is called a “ring-pass-not,” meaning it’s not just linear, so that we are free to just go and take the next step on our own.

For one, we are going from what are called the “relative” dharma practices to the “absolute” dharma practices, terms I never thought as very intuitive for the English reader. Another way to say this is that we pass

from dualistic practices (ones with a subject and an object like the “Preliminaries” or purification practices) to the non-dual practices like Insight Meditation and Mahamudra. More about that later.

And this transition is like the narrow pass on the top of a mountain, in that the going is so tough for most everyone that we must go in single file and need a guide to get through it. And that guide traditionally is an authentic teacher, someone who themselves has made the trip from the dualistic practices to the non-dual practices. If we read the pith dharma texts, the essence-of-the-essential practices, they all agree that we cannot attempt this transition without the help of an authentic master or teacher.

What has to happen is that an authentic master points out to us the how our mind actually works. This is called “Recognition” and by that is meant that we recognize the true or actual nature of the mind for the first time. And this process is achieved by what is called the pointing-out-instructions. In Zen Buddhism, they have something similar, but they call it “Kensho.”

Only an authentic master is capable of doing this. Sure, they say someone might be able to do this intellectually by themselves, but it would only take something like three kalpas, each of an infinite length of time. This is the Tibetan way of saying it cannot be done without an authentic teacher. Don’t even think about it, IMO.

So, this requirement marks what we could call a hard-stop in our progress. What do we know about the pointing-out instructions and where on Earth will we find an authentic master? There are a great many dharma students swimming around in this state, seemingly unable to progress further. We just have to be patient, diligent, and work through it step by step.

And this is because we cannot grandfather ourselves past this point, much as we might like to. And this is so

because without an authentic recognition as to the nature of the mind on our part, we can't see what to do or where to progress to. We would not know what to do. LOL.

This is the straight and narrow gate that all dharma practitioners must pass through. We can fool others, but if we are honest with ourselves, we cannot fool ourselves. And if we are not honest, it can't be done either. Recognition of the actual nature of the mind is a pivotal event, one that cannot be faked, because we would only be fooling ourselves and no one else. We have to go back to the purification practices and shave off some more obscurations and try again.

"Recognition" is the "sine-qua-non" of dharma; we can't achieve realization without it, no matter how hard we try. I am sure that other traditions have other traditions, but in the Karma Kagyu Lineage, "Recognition of the true nature of the mind" is required in order to practice what are called the "Realization" practices, such as Vipassana and Mahamudra.

It's not a man-made rule, but a natural barrier. If we have not recognized the true nature of the mind ("Recognition") we have not recognized the nature of the mind; we can't move forward because we don't know what to do or how to do it. There is nothing else precluding us from the advanced realization practices other than our own lack of recognition of the nature of the mind. Thus, the large gathering of students in the anteroom prior to "recognition," those who have not successfully received the pointing-out instructions. What to do?

Well, after we have tried everything we know and failed, we come around to what the teachings dictate, getting on with the task of finding an authentic teacher to give us the pointing-out instructions. And, although difficult, this is not as hard as we might imagine. Such an authentic teacher does not have to be enlightened or

perhaps even fully realized. They do have to have recognized the nature of the mind themselves and be willing to work with us to help us do the same. There are lots of lamas that can do that if we connect.

It may seem unfair to ask us to fend for ourselves, but that time indeed does arise when we must find the courage and confidence to solve our own problems. If we want to learn tennis or golf (or whatever) at a higher level, we have to seek out a pro. This is the same with this crucial dharma revelation. And the perhaps ironic part is that we can't just pick any one teacher and declare the job done, attended Recognition 101, and claim that we have recognized the actual nature of the mind. That would be nice if we could. LOL.

Recognition requires that we actually recognize the nature of our own mind and if we don't, then we don't and are still in dharma-limbo. There is no backdoor, grandfathering, or way to purchase Recognition. It's like birth or death; we each go through it on our own and in single file. And we go through it (mentally speaking) naked as a jaybird, as they say. We have to jettison what is holding us back.

And IMO, pointing out the true nature of the mind is a bit like brain surgery, meaning it is very, very exacting, certainly as exacting as we are. It's the most real thing that we can ever do, at least until we do it. And no merit badge is given out other than our own merit of achieving this. The authentic teacher cannot do it for us, press a button, and see that we can achieve recognition. It is indeed a singularity personified. We each have to do it ourselves.

With that having been said, it is doable, and you will probably do it more easily than me. I am a hard case; this I know. And I received the pointing-out instructions a number of times and didn't get it. I even had one of the Heart-Sons of the entire lineage take me into a room just with himself, sit me down on a chair, and give

me the pointing-out instructions and I didn't get it. I had to exit that room having not gotten it, with His Eminence watching me leave. That was not my finest moment. LOL. Yet, that happened. I was not prepared. LOL.

Luckily, after much hard work, some years later I did get a little glimpse of recognition, but I wish I had time here (and you the patience) to explain to you all that I had to go through to further fine-tune the purification I received from my two Ngondros. Getting my aggrandized Self down to fighting-weight, so to speak, so that I could grasp the pointing-out instructions, was not a walk in the park. It was years of constant effort on my part, including the effort to make no effort. LOL.

I have tried to give you a feel for and some sense of what is out there waiting for you to experience in learning the dharma and meditation. Don't be dissuaded from making the effort, but effort it does require, and plenty of it, including as mentioned the effort to make no effort.

I had to ask myself, what in this life is worth having and learning? It took me a while to come around to the dharma, but ultimately there was no choice. I tried to do good things and to make a contribution to society and my generation. I worked hard to assist astrology to thrive in my time by being the first person to program astrology on home computers and share my results with everyone. Computers changed astrology forever.

I pulled all recorded music together and helped to change how music was presented, not through a few know-it-alls, but to show by consensus which music of each artist was the best and why. This is the All-Music Guide (allmusic.com). I then did the same with all known movies and film the All-Movie Guide (allmovie.com). And I did this with the help of 150 full-time employees and 500-700 of the best freelance writers in the world. And I gathered what is probably the largest astrological library and donated it as part of the

permanent library at the University of Illinois. And later I personally collected (without much help) information on (and photographed) 33,000 of the most important concert rock-posters and donated that info to several places, including the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan. And so on. You get the idea: I tried to contribute. I became an archivist of popular culture.

Yet, what I found out, as fascinating as those endeavors were and hopefully somewhat helpful to society, like all things, they were only temporal successes, band-aids on an everchanging world and its problems, what the Buddhists call Samsara.

And while I was doing all of this, I was also gradually learning to practice the dharma. I started on that, casually, in the late 1950s with an interest in Zen Buddhism, and eventually by sitting Zazen with Roshi Philip Kapleau, etc.; and I kind of dabbled in dharma topics, mostly reading, late-night talking, and so on. Then, in February of 1974, I met and served as the chauffeur for Ven. Chögyam Trungpa during his visit to Ann Arbor, who in the process sat me down for an hour or so and personally taught me Shamata Meditation.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche totally catalyzed me and changed my view and experience of dharma. From that point on is how I measure the years I have practiced meditation (or tried to). It was several years later that I met my root teacher or Tsawi Lama, the one authentic teacher who successfully pointed out to me the nature of my own mind so that I actually got a little something. I have been working with the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche for 36 years, have traveled to Tibet with him, and attended 30 yearly ten-day teaching-intensives on Mahamudra meditation, and two years of training with His Eminence Tai Situ Rinpoche on Mahamudra meditation. So, I have at least some experience (and made efforts) working with authentic dharma teachers.

This is long, but in another chapter of this article I intend to explain to readers something as to how the pointing-out instructions (at least in general) as to the recognition of the true nature of the mind is accomplished. This is a start.

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“As Bodhicitta is so precious,
May those without it now create it,
May those who have it not destroy it,
And may it ever grow and flourish.”