

NOTES FROM THE CUSHION

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Meditation should be enjoyable, at least if you are in it for the long haul. You can't just grit your teeth and wade through it. It is a liberator, not some bitter medicine. That is why if you are having trouble sitting on a cushion to meditate, it can be helpful to find some activity in your life that you already enjoy, something that takes focus and concentration, to use as an object of meditation, and try that. For me it was close-up photography, computer programming, video editing, and writing. For others it could be fly-tying, jewelry-making, pottery, or what-have-you. More difficult might be watching sports or movies. Only you can know by trying. For example, it would be very hard for me to watch a movie and meditate, without being distracted by the content of the movie and just following that. That is a no-brainer, because the whole point of watching the movie is the content.

I mean, most of us learn how to type. Learning the mind-muscle memory involved in beginning meditation is no more difficult than that, but it does take some practice.

TAKING THE TEMPERATURE

There is an easy way for me to tell if I am up for meditation on a given day. Pick the object of your meditation. For me, a good example is when I am processing raw camera output into finished photos. You might think that all that went out with film, but modern digital photographs take a lot of processing to pull the photos into shape, especially if you shoot RAW as I do.

I have hundreds of photos waiting to be processed. You can't hurry them. Each takes exact care, precision, and time, lots of time. If I feel I am in the mood to process photos, I set about doing it.

As mentioned, there is a seeming endless stream of photos to process, so there is no such thing as finishing them all. You can only work in the stream of it, one photo at a time. The moment I sit down and begin (or soon after), I can tell instantly whether I have the bandwidth (the patience) to enjoy doing the work, whether I can meditate right then, i.e. with enthusiasm. It is like taking the temperature of my mind.

I am willing to push through a little discomfort and irritation, to try and get past it. Such detailed work takes infinite patience because, as mentioned, there is no goal to get to other than doing the process properly and joyfully. There is no point in doing it in a bad mood. You get bad results, and it is simply counterproductive. The secret for me is the love of doing it, but how to get there?

Trying to automate it and just forget the pain of details is no solution. I have to learn to enjoy

(and prefer) the laboratory of my own mind to mindless scripts that get the job done, but I am elsewhere.

NOT A RELIGION

Meditation and dharma teachings are sacred to me, but not because they are somehow “religious” (I am not very religious in the common use of that word). Dharma and mind practice are important to me only because they work and have given more to me to help live life better than any other factor. Period.

That being said, most of us may have to de-mystify dharma and stop treating meditation like a religion, if only to learn how to use it with our feet on the ground. I know, I’ve had to do this.

Dharma training is the essence of all that is practical, and if we get too “New-Age” about it, light too many candles, and somehow put it on a pedestal, we may never be able to make it work for us. I tend to leave a trail of misconceptions and false expectations when I get too carried away about ‘me’ being a meditator.

You might get the idea that I don’t recommend sitting on the cushion for meditators. Not true, so please take note. I have spent some thirty years sitting on a cushion, so I know it kind of well. However, there are things to watch out for on the cushions, so let’s not fool ourselves about that.

We start out without even having a cushion. Over time our cushion gets fancier, our shrine more ornate, and before we know it we are surrounded by dharma goods. Our actual practice may not be able to keep up with our finery and may be lost in one form of spiritual materialism or another. That is my point. Only you can know if this is a problem you have.

IN THE BEGINNING

Beginning meditation brings you face to face with your own mind, perhaps for the first time. It is not often an easy introduction. Believing all your life you have some mental control and finding out you do not does not always go down well. There are some immediate benefits to sitting meditation from day one, like learning you don’t know how to do it.

SOLITUDE

Traditional texts advise to seek a place of solitude to meditate. That may be hard if we don’t live near a cave, so most of us try to find some spot in our home where we can practice. It can be a corner of the bedroom, the end of a hallway, a back porch, almost any place where you have some space that is out of the swing of things. Later you can perhaps meditate anywhere, but in the beginning you might want to step out of the storm of your daily traffic.

CUSHION OR CHAIR

You don't need to sit on the floor with your legs crossed. You can sit on a straight-back chair. However, if you can sit low to the floor, perhaps on a cushion that sits on a rug, and partially cross your legs, that is even more traditional. There are benefits from doing that. If you don't have a cushion, fold a standard pillow in half and use that. It helps to have something under your butt that raises your rear-end up a just a bit.

THE TIME OF DAY

It is best to, if you can, sit at the same time each day, and in the same place or environment if possible. Within seconds of sitting on the cushion you find out where your mind is at. It is like taking (as mentioned earlier) your mental temperature. You instantly find out if the mind that day is wild, gentle, or somewhere in between. Believe me, you may not know what state you are in. And taking your instant temperature is not the same as sitting in that temperature for half an hour or more.

FAMILIARITY

The mind may be familiar to you, but it is not something most of us have much control over, to begin with. Take boredom for example.

It is we who are bored, not something that we can blame on meditation, the cushion, or the environment. We have to own it. Then there is the fact that, try as we might, we can't seem to place our attention on the object of meditation, be it the breath or a pebble, and have it remain there for very long. We wake up again and again lost in a daydream or distracted by one of a hundred things.

When we talk of our meditation practice, or even think about it, we may imagine all kinds of mental self-control. However, we find out right away, if we are honest, that we don't have any. There is something about being surrounded by all kinds of nice cushions, statues, candles, etc., but unable to keep our attention fixed for even a minute without wandering, that is embarrassing or at least a little sobering.

I am not trying to lecture here. These are just a few notes about beginning meditation that may be worth considering.