

OBSCURATIONS

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A number of you have written to me about seriously starting to look at your mind, call it dharma practice, mind training, or just wanting a clear mind. And many of you are actually doing something about it, at least some sitting meditation or, if not that, contemplating doing some. But most of you are not that happy with your progress and would like to improve it. The next blog or so addresses this issue.

We all know what sitting meditation is and some of us have even tried it. And while it is easy to just sit on a cushion, it is not so easy to get the results you imagine. And sitting meditation takes time, often a long time. What can we do to bring better practice results and sooner? That is what we can discuss here.

Aside from practices like sitting meditation, there also are what are called “preliminary practices” and most people either don’t know about them or would prefer to skip them and get on with something like just sitting. But these preliminary practices are called “preliminary” for a reason and it may be important that you understand that reason.

The preliminary practices are for when we realize that we have too many obscurations to just plain “get it” right off. There are those who can get results from dharma practice right off, the first time out. Not me. I was way too obscured. I had too much mental baggage and no amount of pretending to “get it” got me anywhere. No point in fooling yourself when you are sitting there bored and wasting time .

After much too long a time I finally understood that If I was serious about the dharma I had to face the fact that I was not ready for the simple practices (much less the more advanced teachings) until I had thinned out my obscurations a bit... well, quite a bit. But how to do that? That is what the so-called preliminaries are designed for, getting us into shape, sort of a dharma boot camp if you will.

In the Buddhist tradition it is often said that there are three types of students; we can call them fast, medium, and slow. The fast ones somehow get the dharma right off, just by hearing about it. They are good to go, but this type is very, very rare, even though we all like to think we are one of them. The medium ones take more time and have to really work at it, and the slow students require a step-by-step introduction and for a long time at that. And which type of dharma student you are has nothing to do with how quick your mind works, whether you have good hair, or any other personal qualifications. It has to do with how much mental baggage you have accumulated and carry around – obscurations.

Now I was clever enough to know I could not get away with imagining I was in that first group, the fast learners, because I had already heard the dharma and nothing much happened to me, at least not all at once. I didn’t just “get it.” But I hoped that maybe I could qualify for the second group, the medium-fast learners. If not, I had no choice but take up my place in the slower group. At least I am glad that there was nothing lower than that to be demoted to.

Remember it is not about our native intelligence; it is only about how obscured our mind is as to which group we fall into. And most of us either don’t know or won’t allow that we have

obscurations. Well, even if we can admit or get glimpses that our mind is pretty well obscured, what can we do about that?

The Dharma Toolbox

We can't expect the clear instructions that the Buddha gave or even simple meditation to be all that useful if we are all congested with obscuring mental baggage. Sure, we can continue to wade through the swamp of our obscurations trying to do simple meditation and the like or we could take a little time to first remove some of the obscurations and then do meditation practice, or, as is the case with most of us, do some of both at the same time.

The obvious or practical move is to begin to remove some of our obscurations and that is what many of the preliminary dharma practices are all about – thinning out our mental obstructions. Initially most of us just wade in to a practice like sitting meditation and expect enlightening results right off. And we literally sit there for a long time and not too much happens. Then after a while many of us realize that it might be much more efficient to first remove some of our obscurations and then get on with the traditional meditation practices. It is up to us, a decision we have to make. It waits for us to figure it out. In my case I waited for many years.

Do we want to put up with trying to see out of some very dirty eyeglasses or first clean the glasses a bit and then take a look. I am sorry to say that I persisted for way too long peering through some very dark glasses, mostly out of pride, before I submitted to the simple act of the cleaning them even a little bit. It is a choice that we each get to make.

If we are serious about wanting a clearer mind, about actually learning some dharma, then we might as well slow down and do it right, do it so it actually works for us, and that most often takes time. For most of us, practicing dharma is a gradual process, not because it has to take so long but because we don't (or won't) do it right. The wonderful thing is that the dharma actually works and it works for everyone every time. However, it takes persistence and work. There is no magic bullet; at least I never found one. Or, if there is a magic bullet, it is through actually doing the preliminary practices we will be discussing in the next few blogs.

Looking back at my own dharma practice, at almost every turn, I tried to skip a grade, duck out of, look for the backdoor, and so on rather than do the obvious sensible thing of starting at the beginning and preceding from there. From the very start I wanted to skip meditation 101 and place out of learning the very tools I needed to make any progress, but that's just me. I was in a hurry to get ahead, too much of a hurry to just start at the beginning. What a waste of time... and for me it was a lot of time.

And this is why I am writing this. Some of you may be able to hear these words and save yourself years of botched or wasted effort and just do it right the first time. It is so much easier and so very much more successful. In dharma, slow and steady progress is the fastest way. "Hurry up" only gets you back to the starting line and even that very slowly. With dharma practice, if things are not moving fast enough, slow down and they will move faster, if that makes sense. Tomorrow, we will take a look at one of these preliminaries.