

PRIVATIZING SPIRIT

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I imagine many readers are tired of these little dharma discussions. Why can't I write something a little lighter? Well, I probably could if I wanted to, but to be perfectly honest, I am fascinated with the mind, how it works, and how we can become more aware. It is that simple. It is unfortunate that mind training and meditation are not more valued in this society. They are so precious.

For example, we all know that we can lose a limb and still be present, but we also know that if we lose our mind, we are no longer really there. Well, I feel the same way about using the mind. The mind is not good-to-go just as it is. Most of us are severely obscured and don't even know it. If we don't learn to clarify and properly use the mind, we are at a great disadvantage.

Many people I know are interested in meditation; at least they flirt with it. However, what passes for meditation these days is all over the board, everything from sitting in a corner with a lighted candle, to lava lamps, and various relaxation therapies. It is hard not to sound pejorative when I explain that while any kind of relaxation practice is just that, relaxing, and perhaps good for us, let's not confuse that with the kind of meditation that the Tibetan and Zen Buddhists do, including of course the Buddha himself.

And for some reason in our society we don't discuss our own spiritual practices. It is considered impolite to ask someone about their meditation experience, just as it is to inquire about bathroom habits. Meditation is somehow personal and private, almost taboo.

This privatizing of basic meditation experience is a big step backward. There is nothing private about rudimentary meditation technique in Tibet. It is openly discussed and crystal clear to anyone interested. Not only that, but the Tibetans have described scores of meditation techniques, each in minute detail.

In America our personal experience in meditation may be something we keep to ourselves, but I question the value of that as well, at least for beginners. We have literally nothing to hide! And in this country, most of us are beginners in mind training. It isn't taught in grade school or, for that matter, in most colleges. And it is not that easy to learn, mostly because we don't discuss our own practices publically and interact enough with those who could advise us.

As for meditation being something somehow "spiritual," I have long ago forgotten what that could mean. It is all spiritual to me and sharing our meditation progress with someone with actual training is something that a little light and air can only improve.

Now I am certain to get a lot of meditators who read this blog who may jump in with comments

that teachers have told them never to discuss their practice with anyone other than their instructors. Of course I know that admonition, but hear me out.

That advice is mainly for more advanced students who actually HAVE a teacher with whom they are working successfully. If you are fruitfully working with a meditation instructor, of course getting possibly contradictory advice from others can perhaps be confusing.

I am speaking here of those beginners who are just learning something like Shamata meditation and who may not even have an actual teacher yet, much less one they can really learn from. Shamata meditation is something that CAN be discussed openly and it is important to learn the technique properly from the start and to have your questions answered as they come up. Trying to practice Shamata meditation on your own without an instructor is almost self-defeating. Very few people can do that, and most of us are not among the chosen few.

We all know how difficult it is to change pronunciation of some word that we taught ourselves or read in a book, but got it wrong. Sanskrit words are a good example. We habitually pronounce it wrong even after finally learning the proper pronunciation. It is much worse if we get the basic meditation instructions wrong and then proceed to imprint that in our muscle memory through years of practice. That is even harder to undo, aside from the fact that it probably will not bring results.

And by sharing I don't mean a bunch of beginners advising each other on what none of them know. That is just the blind leading the blind. What I am talking about is for beginners to find someone with experience that they respect and share with them what's going on in there with our attempts to practice meditation. In other words, make sure you are doing it right!

Once someone shows you how to do basic meditation, it is helpful to follow up with at least several touch-back sessions to make sure you understood the instructions properly, and that you are still doing them properly. For example, who ever heard of taking just one guitar lesson. It is like that.

Heaven only knows how many years I wasted because I strictly kept my Shamata meditation practice private. The person who taught me and the other students around me all were very private, so I thought I had to be private too. It was a kind of peer pressure, but it was not helpful. It cost me precious years.

Probably I didn't have anything to report, no real progress, but I should have at least reported that fact to someone. They might have pointed out where I was wasting my time. Instead, because others did, I kept it all secret. Secret from whom? Certainly not from me. I knew only too well how little I was learning.

It is perhaps time that those of us who are learning basic meditation open up and expose what's going on in there to someone with real experience, for our own sakes. Let some light in.

The important point for each of us is to make some actual progress. Let's not worry so much about appearances. We know we know... very little, and that our progress is probably slower than we would wish.

What might help is to get with those who know more about this than we do, share what is going on with our meditation, and see if we can get some pointers. That's what I do.

Finding someone who can teach us basic Shamata meditation is not like finding our guru or root lama, so don't confuse the two. Shamata technique can be taught to us by someone who has learned it properly, whether we personally synch with them or not. Higher practices require a real student-teacher bond, but beginning meditation could and should be taught in every grade school as a simple awareness technique, if not as part of a spiritual discipline.

We take guitar lessons. Meditation is no different. It has to be learned and practiced. And none of us are getting any younger.

