

WHAT ABOUT ALL THAT RELIGIOUS STUFF?

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In what I have written in the last few blogs I have tried to explain something about what Shamata meditation isn't. I have mentioned that (at least for beginners) it is usually not relaxing, is not easy, can be boring, is only a practice, and that this practice should not to be confused with the results of the practice, etc. I don't intend to be negative.

Much of this is to point out that here in the U.S. (where there are so many different ideas as to what meditation is) let's not mistake the authentic meditation technique as taught by Zen and Tibetan Buddhists for the many (quite valid in their own right) relaxation techniques masquerading until the name "meditation."

There is nothing wrong with lighting some incense, burning a candle, finding a quiet place, taking a break, and trying to kick back for a few minutes. I do it myself... well, not the incense and candle part much, but I do like to relax like all of us.

But these kind of relaxation therapies are not likely to result in the habit of meditation I am presenting here. Authentic Shamata meditation is a discipline that has to be learned and practiced like any other formal technique, whether it is playing a musical instrument or learning a computer program like Photoshop, etc. These techniques don't learn just themselves. I wish they did.

And I have purposely avoided dragging the whole element of religion into this discussion, but let's look at it for a moment. Although Buddhism is usually classified as a religion, I have never considered it such and I am not a very religious person of the go-to-church-on-Sunday variety. Early on I knew that sitting in church for an hour or so a week would not get me to any kind of heaven. I would need more than that my friends.

Buddhism (and these mind-training techniques) is just a very practical method to work with the mind. It is not something I believe "in," but rather something I find useful, even essential for my mental clarity.

What, you may ask, are all the devotion, prayers, aspirations, and all that other 'religious' stuff all about usually connected to Buddhism? This question is a little more difficult to answer, but here goes:

The Shamata meditation technique we have been discussing here itself has been around for thousands of years and works fine with or without any feelings of devotion we might on occasion have. Meditating in this way is also perfect for our deepest and most sincere moments of knowing ourselves just as it is perfect for keeping focused on a project or our daily tasks. Where do these two streams cross? I can only give you my own experience.

I am a bit of a hard case when it comes to education. I don't take to teachers easily and have trouble learning from those I don't respect. Keep in mind that I never even finished high school because I was too anxious to get out there in the "real" world and have at it. And I could at that time find no teachers that I wanted to follow on.

My instructors have always been life teachers and not professors of this or that subject. I know that this is not always a reasonable attitude on my part and I am working on it, but nevertheless this is my personal situation.

Perhaps it is because from the age of six until sixteen or seventeen I intensely studied nature and the outdoors, and I mean 'intensely'. Nature was 'my' schoolbook and the lessons I learned there did not always jibe with what society wanted to teach me. That is an understatement.

Furthermore, my idea of fun has always been to find someone more experienced in life than myself, someone who compels my respect, and learn from them. From this kind of person I am willing and eager to learn. In fact, I live for this. And while I am not one who wins the lottery, in finding authentic teachers I have been very, very lucky. In these kind of situations I am always willing to assume the role of student. I even keep my mouth shut!

It is not my intention here to tell you the stories of my life teachers but rather to explain how the more spiritual aspects of Buddhism entered my life. In a word, these aspects (like prayer and aspirations) were pointed out to me by my life teachers and are not something I came up with independently. I find most religious sentiment useless.

In these blogs I have been trying to point out the practical value of learning meditation and have skirted around the deeper and more personal side of it all, yet that side exists for each of us somewhere inside. There are moments of knowing or realization that go beyond our day-to-day practical considerations. Life is not all about just getting ahead.

My life teachers have been deep and not shallow. They do not just surf the surface of it all but also go to the root level at the heart or center of things. In my experience, the particular Tibetan rinpoches (and other teachers I have been so fortunate to work with) are deeply spiritual beings. Weigh my words here: they command my respect. They tame me and I am not all that easy to tame.

My point is that when I was taught basic meditation as we have been discussing here, of course it (eventually) had an outer practical use in my day-to-day life, but there was something more they passed on than just advantage. My dharma teachers showed me that if I am going to perform an action, to take action, and that action will be done, that I might as well also do it with heart, as in: with all my heart. That is the spiritual component I am sharing with you.

The Tibetans teach, as do many Native American traditions, to make aspirations before entering on any task and, in addition, at the end of any task (or piece of work) to offer or dedicate the results not just for your own personal good but also for the benefit of all sentient beings. They term this action the "dedication of the merit."

Furthermore, these aspirations and dedications are, for the Tibetans, not merely something added on to our actions but are considered often more important than the actions themselves, and this is key, so please take note:

Aspiring to benefit all beings at the beginning of an action (or our workday) and offering whatever merit or good we manage to accumulate from our finished work to benefit all beings at the end of our action or workday is how that work or action becomes auspicious and ultimately of value.

Yes, as mentioned in an earlier blog, the skillfulness of our actions is what generates merit and

brings greater wisdom or awareness, but without encapsulating that skillfulness with the bookends of proper aspiration and dedication, that merit can be lost. The Tibetans teach that we must dedicate the merit. This is key.

So if this kind of aspiration and dedication makes me 'religious', then color me religious. And if being respectful and devoted to the teachers in my life who were kind enough to point all this out to me makes me a religious groupie with a 'guru', then so be it. But that is the extent of my religiosity.

I deeply respect those men and women whose kindness makes it possible for me to share any of these thoughts with you here and I wish nothing more than to follow in the line or lineage of such teachers and help to pass all of this on and keep it alive, because learning about the true nature of the mind has been the key to life as I know it.