

THE BEAUTY OF IT

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Perhaps we are not supposed to talk about the excellent and wonderful qualities of meditation, because indeed it is a long slog from learning the basic technique and habit of meditation to experiencing the fruits of actual meditation, other than as some quiet time in a day.

For me this took many, many years, but not because it had to, only because I was not doing it right and thought I was. But if you have ever learned to type or play an instrument, it is no different. We have to practice, and practice is not meditating, for the most part.

There is a ticket price, an ante-in, a paying of the dues, all of which are just the learning of the habit, building the basic muscle memory needed to meditate properly. If we don't want to (or "can't right now") learn that, then the door to meditation remains closed to us. Every activity requiring practice is like this.

I fussed around at the doorway to meditation for decades before figuring out a way to enter. That was my bad, the fault of no one but myself. I assumed I already knew what (by definition) I did not know, which was how to actually meditate. I am not alone in this, either.

There is the necessity of learning the technique, building the habit, and that is not a lot of fun, at least in my case. For me there has to be some joy in what I do, and finding joy in rote practice is probably an oxymoron, at least for me. Practicing and building the habit of meditation is the great barrier (the guardian at the threshold) of real meditation for many, and it kept me out for a very long time.

This is why I keep suggesting here that we supplement our on-the-cushion practice with post-meditation practice, with something we do each day that requires concentration and focus, something that we not only can do, but hopefully love or at least like to do. Then we can have that missing ingredient of joy or enthusiasm that we may not find in rote learning of the technique of meditation.

The very greatest Mahasiddhas from India and Tibet all seem to agree that many short sessions of practicing meditation techniques is recommended, rather than some long grind you force yourself to do. They cite sessions as short as the time it takes to take a sip of tea. By forcing practice, we run the risk of staining it with effort, our disappointment, and exhaustion. That stain is hard to remove; only joy can remove it. So there is a bit of a Catch-22 here, a hurdle for most of us or at least a speed-bump in the road.

How do we find joy in rote practice?

I practiced meditation technique for 31 years and still never got the hang of it. Looking back, what a huge disappointment it was (for me). And please everyone, don't tell me that all that time I was busy removing obstacles, or that everything in life comes in good time. That is only a partial truth.

It is quite clear to me, aside from thinning out my obscurations, that with a proper understanding I could have learned to meditate in fairly short order, especially if I could have realized that

meditating was so clarifying, and that joy was the key. I was too often told that perseverance was the key.

A big, big problem is that as beginners we have no experience of the fruits of meditation, i.e. what it is actually like. If we learn to play a musical instrument, we already know what music sounds like. We can be inspired by it. But with meditation, there is no “music” we can play. We have little to no idea of what real meditation is like, other than what we have gleaned from books, teachers, and our own imagination, the last being the most dangerous.

And... in my case actual meditation was nothing like what I imagined and had determined it should be. My ill-formed opinions turned out to be my worst enemy, what I think I knew, but didn't, which opinions I held up as a bar my actual experience on-the-cushion had to measure up to. How foolish that was!

I don't know what I was thinking meditation was. I guess I thought it would be enlightening, but having never experienced enlightenment of any kind, all I could do was guess at what real meditation would bring to my life, based on books I read and things other people had said to me, including my teachers.

As a funny aside here, the assemblage I gathered in my mind around the word meditation was identical (in nature) to what each of us gathers around us that we refer to as our “Self” or personality. LOL.

If I would have admitted to myself (and to my teachers) that I was getting nowhere, I know that they would and could have helped me. But like so many of my dharma brothers and sisters, I kept a stiff upper lip and believed I was already meditating, and that what I was experiencing was enlightening me. In truth, aside from my good intentions, it was not.

I was finding no joy (or very little) in my practice and kept at it (at times) only because to not do it at all would be too embarrassing. If I was not a dharma person, then what in the world was I? That was too hard a question for me to face, so I kept at it, essentially staining my practice with effort that I did not joyfully give. That was a big mistake, folks.

After 31 years of practicing, one summer while attending a 10-day dharma intensive on Mahamudra meditation, I finally understood (got a glimpse) that working with the mind was not something in the future for me, some pie-in-the-sky idea that I had been floating, but rather something that “I” actually could do right here and now. Up to that point I was like a swimmer with an inner tube beyond my reach. My own swimming efforts were pushing the inner tube of meditation-success beyond my grasp. All I had to do was to find a way not to make tiresome effort, and things would work out. I was onto something

I spent the next three years actually working with my mind, not only on-the-cushion, but also (and especially) off-the-cushion in post-meditation experience. After that (and some life-shaking experiences), I found true meditation (true for me, that is) through the process of taking close-up pictures of nature. Go figure. It was the “joy” factor that I loved nature and critters that made all the difference.

After that it was only a couple of years to settle into a meditation style that actually suited and worked for me, rather than I for it.

I guess part of the takeaway here has to be that (as far as I know) learning meditation takes real

time, not just a half-hour a day or ten minutes. So does learning to play the piano, for what it is worth. There is no free lunch. Is it worth it?

Yes, absolutely, and then some. In all the world that I have seen, there is no more valuable tool than the clarity and insight meditation can bring. With it I can see, without it I could not see very clearly how to negotiate the curves and turnings in my life.

True meditation cannot be taken by force of practice, but (like so many things in life) only by love and enthusiasm. We need to be aware that the process of learning the habit of meditation is not meditation, but practice like any other form of practice.

If we keep that in mind and apply the practice to something we love, the doors of meditation will open. If it does not feel better than any other state we know, then we are still practicing and not meditating. At least, that is my experience.