

## THE CARROT AND THE STICK

April 5, 2013

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Learning meditation is a little like a cowboy roundup and then the rodeo. You have to tame the mind before you can ride it. And there is a bit of the carrot and the stick involved, only in reverse order, first the stick and then the carrot.

Learning meditation takes practice and practice (for most of us) is no fun or at least not much fun. So in the beginning it is hard to get folks attention enough for them to actually do the habit-building work of learning to meditate.

To facilitate this, the Tibetan Buddhists introduce us to what are called the "Common Preliminaries," which are meant to be a reality-check enough to get anyone's attention. They consist of the Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma, sometimes called "The Four Notions," and they are sticks, not carrots.

Briefly they remind us that our life is precious and we might want to put it to good use, that impermanence could be only a next-breath away, that the karma we create always comes back to bite us, and that trying to game life is an exercise in futility – ideas like that. They are a wake-up call.

The Four Thoughts urge us to let go enough of our distractions to at least learn the basic habit of meditating and, as you can see from the list above, they do it with a stick, not a carrot. So where does the carrot of Buddhism come in?

The short answer is "Later." The longer version of an answer is really interesting to me, and it involves a pivot or point of transformation, let's just call it the "point of no return," because once past that point, the stick turns into a carrot from then on. Just where and how does that point of no return come about?

Traditionally, as it is taught, it does not come about until we have mastered (at least to some degree) the basic habit of meditation, until we can allow the mind to naturally rest, just as it is, in awareness. This involves learning Shamata meditation and being able to rest in Samadhi from that practice.

Once we learn to leave the mind just rest in its natural state, we can begin to learn Vipassana, insight meditation. Mahamudra meditation, the main form of meditation practice by the Karma Kagyu Lineage, teaches a special form of insight meditation that uses Shamata meditation as well.

The main idea is to begin to examine thoughts not for their content (what they mean), but rather for insight into their true nature. All of this takes time and effort, which is a little more of the stick.

When the true nature of the mind (how it works) is seen, that is called "recognition." It is not enlightenment (nowhere near it), but it is the moment when the stick turns into a carrot, so it is more than a little worthwhile. This is what I would call the "point of no return." There really is no turning back after recognition, mostly thanks to the advent of the carrot.

What was before sheer effort now because sheer interest, as the practice of meditation is finally brought into line with our ingrained self-interest. We become attached to our practice, in a good way, finally propelled by an enthusiasm that is self-generated, like one of those perpetual motion machines – mental fusion.

After recognition, we take possession of our life, and assume full responsibility. No longer does the world owe us a living, but we owe ourselves life and are empowered to live it. And we know just what to do.

It is from this "point of no return," when we no longer can go back, that the road to true enlightenment finally begins. At least, that is my understanding.

