

A CATCH-22: THE NATURE OF PRACTICE

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It is important for me to understand that practicing sitting meditation is just that: 'practice' and not the final result of that practice. For many years I assumed (falsely) that sitting practice was its own result and that assumption really cost me time and discouragement. Practice of any kind is "practice," just as practicing scales and fingering on the guitar is practice and not the same as playing music. The distinction somehow escaped me.

I wish someone had pointed this out to me years ago. Although the word "practice" was right in front of me all the time and I even called the sitting meditation I was doing at the time "my practice," somehow the common meaning of that word never registered. It was just a label that everyone I knew used. We all did our dharma "practice." So what is practice, practicing for what?

Dharma practice (or meditation practice) and its goal is a perfect case of Catch-22, a circular argument, each part of which depends on all the others. It is the old razor and shave analogy. It is the shave we are after, not the razor, although the quality of the shave can depend on the razor, and so on. The shave here refers to the awareness and mindfulness that results from meditation practice and the shaver is the meditation practice itself, the technique or means. Meditation practice (the technique itself) is not the result of that practice, but the means to obtain the result. This is true of any kind of practice.

Learning to play the guitar (or any instrument) involves practice and learning the guitar fingerings or playing scales is not the same as playing music, but they are related. If we don't practice the guitar, we will never play music on it. That is the Catch-22. Or it is like the scaffolding used to create a building. The scaffolding is not the building, but rather the means to erect the building. The scaffolding is our meditation practice and the building is the awareness that eventually comes from meditation practice. When the building is finished, we take the scaffolding down, and here is the tricky part so read with care.

If you take the scaffolding down too early, the building never gets finished. If you leave it up too long, it obscures the building itself. In other words, the scaffolding is there for a purpose, after which it is removed. The same is true for meditation practice. We 'practice' meditation to build a habit of focused mindfulness and that mindfulness results in greater awareness and clarity on our part.

Sitting meditation practice exists to help us build a habit of mindfulness and the ability to rest our attention in a focused way. And while that mindfulness habit is developed on the cushion (so to speak), its true use is not just limited to our meditation sessions, but is even more useful off the cushion in the rest of our day-to-day existence. We build a meditation habit by sitting on the cushion but its main use is not limited to our time on the cushion. Once we learn the habit of mindfulness, we use its results the rest of our life, everywhere and in everything we do.

I am not saying we should not practice meditation or that we should practice meditation and then stop practicing once we have learned how to meditate. Not at all. What I am attempting to point out here is that the technique of meditation (and all the trappings) are not themselves the goal of mediation, but only the means. If we successfully practice meditation and achieve some

actual results, those results are not limited in use to our time on the cushion. They are useful on the cushion and off the cushion, equally. And since most of us spend far more time off the cushion than on, that means in the rest of our day-to-day life.

I am also suggesting that we not mistake the means to awareness (the technique and the trappings) for the awareness itself. It is the shave we are after, not the razor, the building and not the scaffolding. In other words, be sure to remove the scaffolding when the building is completed. How will we know when to do that? That is easy. The whole point about greater awareness is that the first thing we see is the difference between the building and the scaffolding. We know what is no longer necessary (what should be added and what removed) without giving it a thought. It is that obvious, so if we have any doubt at all, even the tiniest bit, then we are not at that point. This is the definition of realization of any kind; it is beyond a doubt.

All of the paraphernalia we gather about ourselves while learning meditation (at least the Tibetan kind), the statues, malas, blessing cords, lockets, armbands, brocades, cushions, altars, offering bowls, etc. are all part of the scaffolding and not the main reason we meditate. They help to get us there. And while there is nothing wrong with any of these things inherently, they are there to help build a habit and these tools are not themselves the result or goal of our meditation. All these things are relative meditation aids and not the absolute result of Buddhist practice which is to develop the same awareness that the Buddha attained. Everything else either helps to attain that or detracts from it.

What is the point of my writing this? The point is that practice can be tedious and boring, so let's not try to pretend otherwise. Meditation practice is like music. We practice until we "get it," until we master a habit, after which we just play. If we confuse practice with playing, it is easy to get disappointed or disillusioned. Yet if we know that we only practice to build a habit and not for its own sake, it can be possible to practice with understanding and greater clarity and not waste time in false assumptions.

Basic meditation is a practice, a path we are on to a goal, and not the goal itself. I find it is helpful to know this up front.