

BETTER THAN SUBSTANCES

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Of course I am talking about meditation. Like a bulldog with a bone, I can't seem to let go of talking about how incredible meditation is. Now, I am not talking about "practicing" meditation. That is tedious. I am talking about actually learning to meditate.

The main (and hardest) part of learning meditation is building the habit of mindfulness. That is what it is all about. This typically involves sitting (often on a cushion) in some quiet place and practicing the basic technique of meditating. It does take time. The emphasis is on "practice" and the purpose of practice is to learn (make a habit of) mindfulness. We need mindfulness in order to meditate and we need (at least I do) meditation in order to see clearly and respond skillfully to life.

Once a real mindfulness habit is acquired, then we can be said to actually begin to "meditate." Before that what we are doing is practicing meditation, building a habit of being mindful.

Not everyone is good at rote practice like learning the keyboard of a typewriter, for instance, or memorizing the multiplication tables. Some folks do better than others at creating habits, although most of us have no trouble creating bad habits.

If you can easily build a habit of mindfulness, meditation comes more effortlessly. By all means do that. If not (as it was with me), it can be difficult and take a very long time. There is an alternate approach to meditation for those of you who have trouble with rote practice.

Take the time to understand what basic meditation is (technically), and then learn the technique. Once you understand it, you can begin to apply it throughout your day in the many other things you do. It does not all have to happen sitting on a cushion, especially if that is not working out for you.

In a word, mindfulness is just that, being mindful of whatever you are doing, that and learning that when you do get distracted from what you set out to focus on (and find yourself daydreaming), to gently just bring the mind back to the object at hand and continue as you were. That simple act is the basic technique of beginning meditation.

And you do this again and again and again, always bringing the mind gently back to the task at hand until it becomes a habit and it is just natural for you to keep focused.

Once you have built a habit of mindfulness, of remaining focused, then all that remains is to learn to let the mind rest in that awareness you are maintaining through your mindfulness, and relax. Relax and rest in that.

We do that until the effort of mindfulness (trying to do it) has subsided, and we are naturally relaxing in mindfulness. At that point we are actually meditating or close to it. Why bother?

Meditation is known by its clarity and awareness. Once actual meditation is achieved and becomes a habit, the mind naturally wants to remain in that state and seeks opportunities to meditate, not just on the cushion, but throughout the day in various activities.

It took me almost forever to get to the point of actually meditating, because I am naturally rebellious and refused to just bite the bullet and learn the habit of mindfulness. Once I experienced real meditation, with its clarity and spaciousness, I felt uncomfortable (and obscured) if I was not in that state at least part of my day.

Kind of without realizing it, in the beginning I found myself ranging through my daily schedule trying to find my way back into that meditative state. At first my meditation was certainly not very portable. I could only do it with photography (you have seen my work), and then, very gradually, I separated the meditation from the photography, understood what led to meditation and what was the object that allowed me to do that, like photography. I began to include other activities in my day, like writing, and so on as objects of meditation. And the list grew.

Today, my meditation is quite portable. I can use it often throughout the day on almost anything I do that requires some kind of attention and focus. Why do I endlessly write about this?

Because meditation is way better than anything else I have ever experienced, and it is free and not-harmful. Moreover, it gives me the time I need to respond skillfully to the challenges life brings. For me at least, it is the very best thing I have ever experienced that is legal (not lethal) and that I can indulge in as much as I want to. And it feels natural.