

THE INTANGIBLES: ENTHUSIASM FOR PRACTICE

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No matter how you dice it, practice is practice, and that goes for dharma practice too. Enthusiasm for what (in the beginning) amounts to rote practice is almost an oxymoron. If you aren't enthusiastic, where is it to be found?

Well, how do you find joy right now in anything in your life? What gives you joy? Start there. People typically use a pebble or a stick for an object to focus on in basic Shamata meditation, and most often the breath. In themselves, these are not holy objects. You get extra points for using an image of the Buddha, but that is beside the point that there is no "right" object of meditation. We are welcome to pick an object we love to work with and concentrate on, especially if it helps, so make it easy on yourself.

Of course, if we chose an object we are attached to and then focus on the attachment, that won't work. It is the familiarity with and the concentration involved in whatever technique we choose that is our focus, rather than our attachment to it, plus the fact that we are relaxed when we do it, even though it may be complex.

We are also free to choose something unrelated to cushions and typical ideas of meditating. For me it turned out to be photographing nature. I didn't plan it that way, but as it turned out, close-up and macro photography takes sufficient concentration practice to be similar to the techniques of basic sitting meditation. I stumbled on it, but you may have techniques that require concentration you have learned years ago that you are already skilled at. Try using basic meditation technique on those. For me it was nature photography.

And for me the best part was that I felt at home with nature, even joyful, and that was very hard for me to come by in standard meditation practice while sitting on a cushion. Just consider: meditation practice was new to me. Not only that, but I had no true idea what was supposed to come out of my practice, only whatever ideas I had scrounged up from books, teachers, and other students. Mostly I was in the dark about it all, but of course I thought I knew what the results of meditation would be. Few beginning meditation students have any real idea of what the fruition of meditation could be like. It is not our fault that we don't know. We just don't know.

Is it any wonder that I wasn't naturally filled with joy about practicing something I knew nothing about? It is the same way with my practicing anything. By any definition, it is a trial.... trying. For me it was very trying.

Like anything else we must practice, a certain amount of enthusiasm is required to get results. If you don't naturally have that joy because you are on a learning curve, you may want to look at that fact and find another object of meditation, something you

already know and love, where the hard part is already done.

I am not suggesting that you give up sitting on the cushion, but if you are getting nowhere fast, then you might consider doing the identical sitting practice, but with a focus and technique that you already have skill in. In other words, a subject in which your learning curve is already over, so that you can concentrate with some kind of real joy on the practice itself. Make sense?

We really should not blame ourselves if the routine part of learning meditation technique is boring, difficult, and something we find ourselves slogging through on faith that there is light at the end of the tunnel. The problem with that approach is that without some joy or enthusiasm it may not work or, if it works, the going is very slow, like taking the long-way around.

Whatever we concentrate and focus on (the object) in meditation requires at least some enthusiasm, if not actual joy, on our part. Perhaps some of us can get it up without resorting to non-standard (more familiar) objects of focus. It just did not work for me and I tried it for decades!

The memory of my faithfully practicing when I had no idea of what I was looking for (enlightenment or whatever) with a technique that was foreign to me, and trying to keep my spirits up, is painful even today. As I like to say, if we learn to play an instrument, we can put on a CD and at least listen to the music -- what we are trying to do. We can hear beautiful music, even if we can't play it yet, so we know what we are trying to achieve.

But with meditation, there are no DVDs (or whatever) that we can just play and get a clear idea what our eventual meditation result (enlightenment, realization, recognition, etc.) will be like -- nothing. It is all left up to our own expectations and hopes, which at best are a patchwork quilt. I mean, just where did we get our expectations? Ask yourself. In my case I simply had it wrong, and had it wrong for years. The fact is that I was taught how to physically meditate, but no one explained what I should expect, at least not well enough to help.

So, if your current meditation practice resembles a dry desert wasteland, mix it up by finding an object of meditation that you already care about. Let's face it, basic meditation technique involves concentrating on an object and bringing your mind to it when you find yourself getting distracted. That's the technique. While the breath is often suggested because of its portability and familiarity, any object will do and we get to choose. For me it helped to shake of the "holier than" whatever attitude of sitting on a cushion and the pie-in-the-sky expectations I had.

In other words, you can do this with any discipline you have already mastered, like tying flies, building model airplanes, or any other craft that requires concentration and focus. Something you will find out later in meditation is that we have to make ourselves at home and become comfortable with the procedure and object of focus. We have to just

let the mind rest. That's what the technique is all about, so you might as well start relaxing and being comfortable now. A new and unknown situation may not help, so look around for something familiar that you already know and love. It worked for me.

Meditation practice without enthusiasm is very difficult, if not impossible. This is a little Catch-22 that only we can solve. We may have to do whatever is necessary to have interest, enthusiasm, and preferably some joy in practice.

And there is another consideration. Even in traditional meditation technique, we become wedded to the technique of meditation on the cushion and later have to learn to apply the technique to everyday life. It is in post-meditation (everyday life) that we eventually will spend the most time practicing in. The baby is the meditation, and the bathwater is whatever object of meditation we choose, cushion, tying flies, playing chess, etc. At some time in the future we will have to separate the mediation we learn from the particular object we used to learn it through, so that we can meditate in whatever we do. We have to transfer the technique to whatever we do in life.

As mentioned, I initially learned to meditate while shooting close-up photography. And yes, at a later date I had to learn to separate out the meditation from the photography, and that took a while, but not as long as never learning to meditate properly in the first place.

[Photography taken while practicing meditation.]

