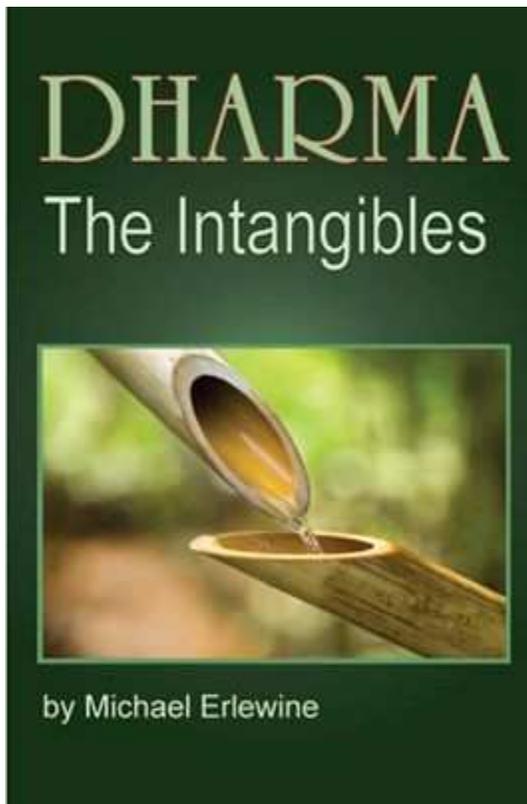


THE INTANGIBLES: HOW MUCH PRACTICE IS ENOUGH?

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[Note: This is the last article (for now) on various Buddhist concepts we should be familiar with, but that are not always discussed. If you want them in a convenient e-booklet, you can download it here:



<http://dharmagrooves.com/e-Books.aspx#Dharma>

What follows is an article on practice time.]

How much time we devote to meditation practice is a conundrum, one that has all kinds of answers depending on how we approach it or who we ask. It is not unlike the salesman who asks "How much do you want to spend?" Of course, just starting out we tend to have no idea. How can we know what we don't know? We are just beginners.

Early on in life I figured out that I would never get to heaven by going to church on Sunday for an hour. It is the same with meditation practice. We are probably not going to get enlightened on a pittance of effort. How could we? Would I learn to play music on guitar by practicing only an hour or two a week? It takes more than that, but how much?

And where do we find the time?

I can answer that last question right off. I always chuckle to myself when I run across a friend who claims they are too busy to do the things they really would like to do. I know that is not true. A personal mantra I recite to myself is "Time is something I make," meaning we make time for those things that are important. It may seem impossible, but we do it anyway. Time is something we can make.

As for how much time for dharma practice, the experts say different things like, at least five minutes a day, half an hour, an hour, a good two hours, and on up to 24x7. What I found out after some years is that no amount of time, short of all day long, is ever enough. Ultimately we want to mix meditation with our life, like engaging a clutch, so that we are being mindful all the time. That is how long we should meditate and this is not an unrealistic expectation, but it takes (pun intended) time. In the meantime we have to start somewhere, and make some preliminary effort. Of course, it is a drop in the bucket, but at least we are on our way.

Back in the beginning of my own meditation practice, I tried to practice every day, even if it was for only a short while. Some days I would forget to practice, so I can remember at times sitting up in bed when I was going to sleep and meditating for maybe two minutes, just to keep my commitment. You can be sure I tried everything, every which way but loose that is.

And for most of us, the simple truth is that we won't be logging enough hours just sitting on the cushion. We just won't. We have to work. We have kids, responsibilities, and so on. It is clear from looking at our schedule that we need to mix our meditation technique with our daily tasks at home and at work, but how is that done? In the long run, this is the only answer, unless you want to become a monk. And I have seen enough monks in my life to know that they too have a busy life aside from meditating.

Meditation, like any other kind of practice, runs on enthusiasm. It's what keeps us going and without it, we are on a dry run and it really can be tedious. My point here is that the key to how much time we can (or need to) spend on dharma practice depends on our enthusiasm, so look to that, but it is a real Catch-22. If we have no results, there is little enthusiasm, and with little enthusiasm there are few results. Many of us are just treading water trying to figure out how to make all this work.

Well, as they say, start where you are. All advanced meditation practice is based on having at least some firm grounding in basic meditation, what is called Shamata. Like learning chords on a guitar, without them you are not going to be playing music. Without some experience with Shamata, you are not going to be meditating anytime soon.

So learn the basic technique of concentrating on an object and bring the mind back to it when you get distracted and find yourself daydreaming. That is the muscle-memory part of it. Here is whole easy-to-read booklet on Shamata that you can download:

<http://dharmaagrooves.com/e-Books.aspx#Dharma>

At the same time I suggest you also learn a Tibetan mind-training technique called Tong-len, because not only is it easy, it is portable. You can do it anywhere and at any time. It will allow you to log enough hours to possibly get to heaven or at least on your way to greater awareness. A free booklet on Tong-len is also at the above link.

Shamata is somewhat difficult to learn and in fact, in Tibet (so I am told) students do not even start Shamata until they had finished a very difficult series of exercises called ngondro, which amounts to a kind of dharma boot camp. But in this country we try to learn Shamata straight away. Nice work if you can do it.

But Tong-len is another matter. It is an All-American practice that fits us to a T. Anyone can do it; it really works, and you can watch it work.

The key to the problems of this life is awareness, the key to awareness is the dharma, the key to dharma is practice, the key to practice is enthusiasm, and the key to enthusiasm is to love what you do.

So, get some love in your practice life. I have written about this many times, so I will not go on about it here, but the general idea is, if you can, to work with something you already know and love as a meditation object, especially if you are learning basic Shamata meditation.

And if you don't love your practice, say so to yourself. Don't pretend. Be what you are and ask for help from someone who knows. Mind training is an opportunity we can't afford to pass up. After over 40 years of practice, that is what I believe is the truth, at least for me.