

MIXING THE MIND: HOW TO DO IT

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I have pointed out that one shortcut to practicing meditation is to piggyback on areas of your life where you already have achieved focus and concentration. I found it in computer programming, and video editing, but it could be anything: playing chess, tying flies, doing crossword puzzles, and so on, wherever you find yourself spending real time concentrating and focusing the mind. You already have some discipline.

Some of you have messaged me asking how to convert this discipline into meditation practice. The best part is that you don't have to add anything more to your schedule, but just approach where you are already concentrating a little differently. Aside from photography, I did this mostly with computer programming, so I will use that as my example.

I slowly began to apply the basic techniques of the mind training I was learning to what I was doing on the computer all day long. During my computer work, whenever I would catch myself in a distraction, when I popped out of whatever I was deeply involved in and found myself once again outside my concentration zone and looking around, I would attempt the following mediation technique.

Distraction could be as simple as a dog bark, a phone call, the doorbell, an unwelcome thought, a daydream, etc. Whenever my mind wandered or whatever it took to startle me out of what I was busy concentrating on, the result was that I was suddenly distracted from what I had been focused on and instantly was just there – awake in the moment. Those distractions in my concentration were the only moments I had to insert dharma into my work, but there were a lot of them.

In those distractions, those gaps or moments when I broke concentration, I would be aware that I had been distracted and gently bring my mind back to what I was doing and let my mind rest in that. I would pick up where I had left off, but with a little more awareness.

After all, I had virtually nothing better to do with my time at those moments anyway; I was already at a complete stop. So whenever I found myself startled or popping out of whatever I was engrossed in, I took that opportunity to at least be aware that I had been distracted, bring my mind back to the task at hand, and just let my mind rest in that awareness. Gradually I became more mindful of what I was concentrating on, and slowly built a habit of being more aware.

Those moments of letting the mind rest after a distraction were short, perhaps more like nanoseconds than something more enduring, but the total amount of actual practice time I was doing off the cushion from these distractions added up. Pretty soon I was logging more total

time in off-the-cushion meditation than I had been able to practice at any other times in my day, including time spent on the cushion. At that time my meditation time on the cushion had become almost a kind of a joke. Every time I headed for the cushion it seemed like I put on airs, robes of expectation, arrogance, embarrassment over past failures, hopes, and irritation. The cushion was getting a much-needed supplement.

This new process of post-meditation practice was not something I could measure in days or even months. It took about two years of this kind of exploration before I really had it down to any useful degree, but it WAS useful and it actually worked, which translates to:

Perhaps for the first time in my many years of mind practice, I started to really like practice, something I had always devoutly wished for. If there was one thing I was ashamed of and feared all those years, it was that I could not find much joy in rote meditation practice. I knew that this was not the way it should be, but I was powerless to bring joy to something I could not find the joy in.

So there you have the general idea. If meditation won't come easily to you on the cushion, then take meditation to where you live, where you already can focus and concentrate and try that. Let me briefly go over the basic concept once again.

When you are doing something that naturally lends itself to focus and concentration, begin to be aware when you break that concentration. As mentioned, it could be any interruption, like the phone rings or you've got email, etc. Whatever the cause, the result is that you popped out of your concentration and are just there in the moment.

Instead of being frustrated by the interruption, take advantage of it to be aware of your distraction and with that awareness bring your mind back to what you were doing and rest in that awareness. And start again. Each time you break concentration, go through the same actions of being aware of being distracted, and gently bring your mind back to what you are concentrating on and let it rest there. Do this all day, every day when you can.

If you can remember to do this, you are logging meditation practice in real time. It adds up. And there is only one thing more to point out here and that is how to make whatever post-meditation practice you have into a real dharma practice. I will try to share that with you tomorrow.

MIXING THE MIND – CONCLUSION

August 2, 2012

This is for those of you who are having trouble keeping any kind of meditation practice going or for those who are looking for a way into meditation that is less painful than starting at square one. It has only one requirement, that in your life you have acquired one or more disciplines where you actually have to focus and concentrate your mind. And of course you have to do it often enough for my suggestions to be effective. I will review the steps so far.

(1) SKILL: Find an area in your life that you have mastered, requiring real concentration and focus. It could be anything, but you have to keep your mind on it and have developed some skill. For me it was photography, computer programming, and video-editing, but it could be almost anything. The point is that whatever you have mastered, you have already paid your dues and have acquired the habitual skills necessary to do it.

In traditional meditation there is always an object to focus on, be it the breath, a pebble, a spot on the floor, or nothing at all. In the method I am describing, it is some skill that involves focus and concentration that you have already acquired. This skill will be the object of your meditation. It helps if you do it all day long or often, otherwise you will never get in enough time to amount to anything.

(2) TECHNIQUE: Next, when we are performing this skill, we have to take advantage (and be aware) of when we are distracted from concentrating (can I say meditating?) on the task at hand, when we pop out of our concentration. Anything could pull us out of our focus, the doorbell, a phone call, and so on. This has been covered in the earlier two blogs.

When we are distracted from our task, we just remain aware of that fact and gently bring our mind back to the task and let the mind rest there as we pick up where we left off. We do this again and again, every time we are knocked out of our focus. This essentially is what goes on in basic meditation, whether we are sitting on the cushion or performing any other task that we have taken as the object of meditation. The only step missing now is to somehow accrue some spiritual credit for our investment of time and energy, and this is also important. And it is easy to do.

(3) DEDICATION. It remains for us to dedicate the merit of our every practice session, and this is simple. First, what is merit? Merit is whatever positive we manage to accrue from the task we set our mind to. When we sit on the cushion and meditate, it is whatever value or goodness we manage to generate by our meditation session.

And I have never read that any action, any object of meditation, if done with the right intention and spirit, will not produce some merit. The Zen Buddhists with their “Zen in the Art of Archery” or “Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance” have shown us this. It may be that the merit I produce from my practice is very, very small, but even that tiny amount can be dedicated.

My point is that if we do any task with the right intent, merit will accrue. Merit is non-denominational, meaning whether you are Buddhist, Christian, Muslim (or whatever), your merit can be dedicated. So how to dedicate the merit? I will show here how the Buddhists dedicate merit and you can take it from there. We might with pure intent say to ourselves something like this:

“I dedicate the merit of this practice, however small it may be, to all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas that they may benefit all sentient beings and bring each of them to greater

awareness.”

You can vary the words, infinitely, but the intent should be do benefit all beings and help them to become more aware. Of course, you can use your own religion, dedicate it to the saints, etc. You are taking what otherwise could be an ordinary activity and, by dedication, putting it to a better use. In closing, let me share a little personal story with you.

When I first started meditating I didn't even have a cushion to sit on. Then my teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche gave us a small statue of the Buddha that he had blessed. I placed it in front of me and that became a little shrine. It meant so much to me.

As the years rolled by, my meditation area got fancier and fancier. Today I have a big cushion with a little cushion on top, plus all my favorite Buddhist statues. I even have some hand-painted thangkas hanging on my wall and on and on. Folks, I know how to set the stage and even add a little ambiance. I have a candle, a lotus light, and even a miniature spotlight that shines just on my dharma text. In other words, I have all the trappings of a successful meditator.

But over time my meditation area has collected more than just copper and brass. It is also infested with my expectations, hopes, as well as all my fears and you-name-it connected to meditation. Sometimes it gets so bad that I can feel myself taking on airs as I approach the cushion. “Michael, the meditator, has entered the building. “ This does not help meditation.

My point is that while formal meditation on the cushion is important, if there are ways to muck it up, I tend to find them. Sometimes, in addition to your practice on a cushion (using the same techniques), try some off-cushion (post-meditation) practice. You may find that off-cushion meditation has less baggage connected to it, because you have already learned how to focus and concentrate on whatever object (or task) you have in mind. And it is all important that you don't forget to dedicate the merit.

The above described method is one I have used. I was surprised at how many tasks in my life I could incorporate as some form of dharma practice. Like a pebble dropped in a still pond, the circles of dharma practice grows. And the amount of practice time I am able to do this way is way beyond what my on-the-cushion practice schedule will allow. Any questions?

If you would like to read more on the subject check out this collection of blogs in e-book format called “Training the Mind,” found here.

<http://astrologysoftware.com/books/index.asp?orig>