

OFF THE CUSHION: POST-MEDITATION

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When I speak of post-meditation, meditating off the cushion, this bothers some folks, so let me be clear. I am not suggesting you give up meditating on the cushion, but I am suggesting that you might consider augmenting your cushion sitting by meditating on any other focused work you do, if you can. The cushion is a good place to build the habit (the mental muscle memory) of sitting. Sure, the cushion is home base or most familiar, but once you learn to meditate, you will find that you can meditate elsewhere, including almost anywhere. I wrote about this in the previous 3-part blog on “Mixing the Mind,” so scroll down if you want to revisit that.

I originally got into meditating off the cushion almost by accident through close-up photography, something I found joy in. “Joy” or happiness was an ingredient that came up missing with my on-the-cushion meditation time. After many, many years, my cushion sitting had (unfortunately, but understandably) gradually gathered around itself a lot of expectations, wishes, arrogance, hopes, fears, and boredom – a whole nest of obscurations which did not help.

I also found that I was not logging enough time in. I had an approach-avoidance thing going on with the cushion, which was not good. I had forced myself to do it too much over the years, and that had left a mark. At the rate I was going (or so I thought), it would take me lifetimes to accumulate any real results. By supplementing cushion practice with various other meditation practice, ones I had not stained through my learning curve, my progress greatly improved.

I don't recommend forcing yourself to sit for long periods. I do many short sessions, most of them off-the-cushion. This does not mean that I time them. If you are doing that, you are already in trouble. A session is measured by how long I enjoy the meditating process. When my mind gets tired or when meditation gets tiresome I try to be aware enough to recognize that and just stop for a while. Pushing practice beyond enjoyment may be an interesting exploration, but I have seldom found that my meditation benefits from it. Most of the great Mahasiddha recommend many short sessions and not pushing a session beyond your enjoyment threshold. I have had to protect my meditation from efforts to force it this way or that.

Meditation opportunities are everywhere, including whatever we do or could be doing. I don't limit myself to the cushion, but am learning to add other activities where I have to exercise focus and concentration, like making this blog. I have gradually added writing to the list of activities that I am able to use as an object of meditation.

For years I tried to force myself to meditate when I did not feel like it and there was little to no joy involved. Looking back, this kind of forced-practice only stained my meditation and did little good. At this point I try to bring meditation to whatever activities I am joyfully involved in that lend themselves to the technique. The activity I am involved in does not have to be joyful, only

my attitude and approach to it.

And I don't limit an activity by trying to get through it or be done with it in a hurry. There are no good or bad activities, only good or bad attitudes on my part. If I am cleaning the toilet, I try to do it attentively and joyfully. Why "joyfully?" If I have to do it anyway, why not? What good does bitching and moaning about what I have to do bring me? This is where the Zen Buddhists have so much to contribute. There are few (if any) objects or subjects that do not lend themselves to meditation.

Looking forward to a "joyful" activity, one I like, while wishing the one I am now in would get over quick is pointless. If I can relax and find joy in or be content with whatever I do, then I would not have favorites.

The first off-the-cushion object of meditation for me was photography, and even today I look forward to it. However some days it rains or is too hot or cold, or I just don't have the energy for it. I became attached to photography as the prime medium for meditation.

I have gradually learned to stop thinking it is the photography that is important, when in fact it is the clarity of successful meditation I yearn for, but for a time could only attain through photography. I just happened to get that clarity through the process of photographing nature up close.

On rainy days, instead of photographing I will sometimes work on organizing or finishing photos that I have previously taken. This too involves concentrated and careful work, and so is a good subject for meditation, with the result that when I do it, pretty soon my mind is clear and so on.

In other words, it is that baby and the bathwater thing again. I used to think the baby was the photography, when in fact the baby was always the extreme clarity of meditation achieved through the process of photography. This is an important point.

It is the clarity insight-meditation brings that is precious and portable, and I am learning to invoke that activity in more things that I do during the day.