

PRACTICE IS NOT PERFECT

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Meditation and the practice of meditation, two different things. I have written here many times how meditation is first about building a habit and only later can it be said that we are “meditating,” much later for most of us. Like the scaffolding on a building, meditation “practice” is just that, practicing meditation, and not meditation itself. The practice or habit-building part of meditation has to eventually be let go of or removed, leaving room for the actual meditation itself. In order to learn to meditate, we must practice the process of meditating. We must learn it. It is a little like those molds that form Jell-O our moms had when we were kids. When the molds are taken away, the form remains. This is sometimes called muscle memory or just plain habit.

How do we know when to remove the scaffolding? Luckily for us, meditation is organic enough that the scaffolding just melts away or we walk out of it. When I used to ask my first dharma teacher questions like this, he would often respond “How do you know when you have to go to the bathroom?” You just know.

Few of us probably love the rote practice of meditation, but most or all of us will love meditating once we learn to do it. Why? Because actual meditation is a clear and luminous state, one that we would rather stay in than fall out of. In the beginning it is almost impossible to get into that state, and later equally impossible to fall out of it out, so I am told.

The problem for me has always been to be able to distinguish the forming from what is formed, the scaffolding from the meditation, the baby from the bathwater. I tend to become attached to the scaffolding or worse, think that the practice is meditating. Not so.

The great Tibetan meditation masters tell us that not only can we each learn to rest in the natural nature of the mind, but we often do so every day and just aren’t aware of it.

Actual meditation, then, is resting in the mind’s nature and being aware of it at the same time. This suggests that what is lacking in learning meditation is not something from the outside, not something we somehow have to add on or “get,” but rather just an awareness of what is already there, of the mind itself. Awareness too can become habitual, which is why we practice, to form that habit. It follows then that all meditation practice is designed to... eventually... allow us to recognize and become aware of the nature of the mind itself, which nature up to know we have managed to ignore.

In other words, we are never going to get anywhere other than where we already are, and the goal of practicing meditation is to somehow become aware of what we now already have, our mind. This is just ancient wisdom.

So, we “practice” meditation until we become aware of what meditation actually is, after which

the mind becomes something we can finally recognize and work on. And here is a key thought: this assumes we don't know what meditation is, and for most of us that is a fact. Before we manage to actually meditate, we have no idea of how to become aware of the natural state of the mind that we already experience, but are not yet aware of.

How do we learn to be aware of something that we are not already aware of? That is the question. The Buddhist teachers attempt to point out the nature of the mind to anyone who will pay attention, and this is even called the "Pointing Out Instructions." The nature of the mind is so close to us that we can't get enough distance or perspective on it to see or be aware of it. That is why the first major step in true meditation practice is called "Recognition," recognizing the true nature of our own mind. We can't work with something we don't know exists.

And "recognition" is not enlightenment or anything close to it. However, it is the means through which we can at last actually meditate and make progress on our own, AND without a teacher. A teacher is just that, a teacher. Once we are taught to recognize the nature of our own mind, we can see for ourselves how to work it. Sure, after recognition, the teacher can then help us further with techniques to more readily work the mind, but essentially their job is done.

So we "practice" meditation until we achieve recognition of the mind's nature, after which we no longer "practice," but instead we then actually begin to meditate, but without the training wheels of blindly practicing. Recognizing the mind's true nature is the first step on the road to realization, to what has been called enlightenment. However, recognition is not enlightenment.

If we learn a dance step, there is a point where we no longer are learning it and instead are just dancing. Meditation practice is like that. It is a practice (a "sounds like this") that hopefully eventually gives way to a natural awareness of the nature of the mind. After that, we are actually meditating and can begin to perfect our meditation. Before that we are just practicing, and kind of blindly.

When we practice a musical instrument, we already know what music sounds like. However, when we practice meditation, we have no idea what actual meditation is or feels like. To make matters worse, most of us have formed our own opinion (from books and friends) of what meditation should be like, and unfortunately we hold that preconception up as a standard we are supposed to meet. This is a (or perhaps "the") major obstacle to actual meditation.

Here "practicing meditation" means finding our way in the dark, more or less, until we somehow recognize the true nature of the mind and how it works, and then begin to actually meditate. One of the scariest teachings I have ever heard is that we have virtually NO CHANCE of ever just stumbling on the nature of the mind. The greatest Buddhist teachers I know have made it crystal clear that we need a guide, someone who actually knows the nature of the mind to work with us and point out to us (if we can grasp it) the true nature of the mind. If we are afraid to seek help, we should change our mind about that and get that help.

The meditation practice we do should help us form a mental habit that facilitates actual

meditation, while not becoming a habit itself. That is what the following little didactic poem is about. The habit we want to form is meditation and not the habit of practice. Make sense?

PRACTICE A HABIT

Meditation,
While not practice,
Is a habit,
That can be practiced.

Practice builds habits,
But should not itself,
Become a habit.

In other words:

Practice,
To form a habit,
But don't make,
A habit of it.

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