

Active Meditation

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I was very fortunate when growing up in that I had a very benign upbringing. I didn't have traumas that I've been dealing with ever since; my existence was basically happy. But as I got older, that began to get jogged and a little frayed around the edges, and ultimately I looked into Buddhist practice in an effort to help understand the inconsistencies that were appearing.

It's odd how we can look back and see little incidents in our lives that seemed small at the time, but actually had significant effects on us. In my case I can remember being in high school, and one of my classmates was expelled because she was wearing blue jeans, which wasn't permitted at the time. I guess she was a bit of a rebel. For me, being on a middle-class conveyor belt to college and career, the idea of

being expelled from school was a big deal. I imagine I would have felt that my life had been derailed if I had been expelled.

I did carry on to university, but came back after a year or two to visit the school. The teachers were all wearing blue jeans! I thought that there was something not right about all this; that something can be so set at one time, and then a very short time later, well, 'It's all OK now.' But what about the person left in the wake of all this who may have had her life affected so deeply?

This incident was part of what caused me to want to find something that was less changeable than this field of ideas that seemed so absolute at one time, but not at another. I wanted to find something more solid, a more fundamental way of seeing things, and I was 'pulled' by the promise of Buddhism of finding something less changeable — which I could then add to my life that was basically fine, but was starting to have its underpinnings challenged. At the other end of the spectrum would have been someone who had had a very tough life and who wanted to make some sense of it to assuage the pain or confusion. I view that as being more 'pushed' from behind: being pushed by your suffering to go forward, rather than being drawn forward by something, which, in my case, was a wanting to know more. I think we all probably partake of varying proportions of both, and that whatever form the wanting takes, it is an expression of a deeper longing for true peace.

However we come to Buddhism as adults, or to meditation, or to religion in general, I think there's an

underlying desire for change that's within us regardless of whether we are being pushed or pulled. We bring the assumption that something about our lives will change, and that's what we're hoping for. That's why we are willing to do all that we do, including this odd practice of looking at a wall (meditation).

Fortunately for us, Buddhism emphasizes and works especially with this concept of change. It recognises that everything is changing, and that it's not doing so just willy-nilly. Everything is as it is because of a long traceable stream of causes: things are as they are because of a process of cause and effect. And that includes why we are as we are. In whatever state we find ourselves, we didn't get there just by accident; it was the result of a stream of causes and effects. This process is something we can engage with and, by wisely modifying the causes, there will be different effects.

So it's very hopeful to have the assurance that if we want to change we can — but it's not done by just wishing. It requires effort, and attention to the many aspects of our inner and outer behaviors. But often the reality of doing the work of changing ourselves clashes with our preconceptions of how it's all going to play out. Usually we bring some expectation; some idea of what the changes are going to be like: "I'm going to be happier," "I'm going to like myself better," "I'm going to be wiser." We think of how much better it's going to be; what we're going to get out of it. I think the bringing of expectations to things that are before us is common; and common to any major endeavour we undertake, be it our religious life, a job, or entering a marriage. We imagine an

ideal, but experience the actual. Doctors may spend half their time doing paperwork, and we may not have anticipated the amount of work and sacrifice a marriage may take.

As a new monk I was not without the bringing of expectations, and eventually they clashed with the reality of the actual training. It's said that there are three ways to go in a religion: via works, via meditation, or via study. The proportion of 'via works' was very great in the early days, since in a new monastery there is a lot that needs to be done on a practical level. I'd find myself lying under a building doing plumbing because the pipes had burst while everyone else was having tea or relaxing, and I'd think: "What am I doing here? Is this what I signed up for?" But because I'd made a commitment to being there, and a deep commitment to my Teacher, I couldn't just walk away because it wasn't working any more.

On these sorts of occasions I had to look within and ask, "OK. This is what I'm doing now; what did I really come here to do?" And when I looked more deeply, I would tell myself that I had come here to meditate; that I had committed to meditating all the time, not only formally, but throughout the day; to take what I'd been given, what I'd been asked to do, and just bow and say "Yes" to it, and use it as a vehicle for weakening my self-centeredness.

So when I honestly looked at what I was doing and I had to say, "Well, I guess I can do that here, can't I? Instead of just sitting looking at the wall, I can just turn the wrench, or just whatever." So it began to become less about what I was doing externally, and more about what I was doing internally.

I became less fussed about what the day brought as I saw more clearly that I wasn't being stopped from meditating. No matter what was going on, I could use the situation as my place of practice.

And for those of you who have your religious practice as a cornerstone of your life, there's the same opportunity for you. If you find yourself in a circumstance where you are saying "I didn't sign up for this," take a look at what you're doing in terms of your practice, and see that it may be a place where you can still work on yourself.

Another aspect of active meditation in my training was taking one step at a time and listening — 'listening to the heart' as I called it — and just responding without argument to its promptings, moment to moment. Which meant that if I kicked my shoes off in a corner, and something said "Well, maybe you should put them straight," I would try to just do it, to just say "Yes" and pay attention to the details of life, no matter how small, and accept the flow, the direction of something that can guide one's actions, without fighting it, without jumping in there with rationalizations.

Driving down the road at night, a sign reads "no left turn." You want to turn left, and you think, "No-one is around, no-one is looking; I can make a left turn." But something says "No, you shouldn't do that — just go down to the next block and turn left." Active meditation is just letting go of all those options that the self throws up, and doing the usually unremarkable and sometimes boring 'right thing.'

Yes, I have the form of a monk. But more fundamentally, I'm a human being trying to be the best human being I can be, within the form that felt right for me. Being the best human beings we can be is what I hope we are all doing with the offering and opportunities of human life.

It's really a very rare thing, human life, as is the being here with like-minded people any time we want. We take it so much for granted, but get on a rocket ship and go out into the universe, and you can travel for a lifetime of lifetimes and you'll probably never find another group of people like this. It's really a remarkable thing that we undervalue just because we've had the great luck to have it put in our laps. Buddhism repeatedly reminds us 'Don't waste time, don't waste the gift of human life because it is very rare.' It is something that we should take very seriously.

So if you're in a circumstance where there are the 'I didn't sign up for this' feelings, you can go deeper and say "OK, I'm here to be a good human being. Now, here's what's in my begging bowl."

When the monks go out begging, they don't pick and choose; they accept whatever is in their begging bowl, and they're grateful for it. Whatever is happening in your day is what's in your begging bowl, whether it's tasty to you or not. And the idea is to accept where you are, accept the reality of what you've got, and say: "OK — how do I use this to further myself as a human being, to live a good life?" Now living a good, noble life isn't always enjoyable or fun, but I think that fun and personal pleasure ultimately have to give way to what is meaningful. A person will work day and night

to send his or her children to school because it's meaningful, not because it's fun. Many things we may not particularly enjoy can be seen as very meaningful if we look more closely, and the meaning in them becomes more nourishing, more satisfying in the end, than what the self gets out of them.

Another way to get a sense of what it means to lead a good human life is to imagine yourself towards the end of life, and imagine the things that would be on your mind if you were on your deathbed. You probably wouldn't be bragging about the fact that you'd been a big corporate executive. The things that would be coming up in your mind would be how you lived your life: whether you could leave this world with a clear mind and a clear conscience; that you hadn't left behind a lot of people with hurt feelings; that your family loves you, and that you love them. These are the sorts of values we can bring to mind as we try to live life now so that there isn't a lot of regret at the end.

Which means 'how' we do things is more important than what we do. It's better to be the humble shoemaker who is a considerate and decent human being than someone who has success in a loftier field in which they had to step on others on the way up.

I turned the radio on this morning to hear the news; to see if the world was still spinning on its axis — and it was. There was a church service on the air, and the minister was talking about contrition. I thought: "Oh yes, we have that in Buddhism," which of course we do, but it tends not to be talked about as much as meditation. It's important to

recognise that it's part of the whole process. If any of you have gone to a Ten Precepts retreat (Jukai), you will know that we don't approach contrition in a self-blaming, negative way. During Jukai there is a series of ceremonies that are very powerful, and to my mind are ceremonial at its best. The ceremony that focuses on contrition is called Sange; it's *The Ceremony of Contrition and Conversion* in which we recognise that we've made mistakes and resolve to train ourselves to the best of our ability from that moment on. There isn't a lot of room for guilt in Buddhism, or dwelling in the past, but there is room for honest assessment and acceptance of the harm we may have caused to others or ourselves. Assessment and acceptance are the first half of a movement which is completed by the commitment to move forward positively.

And as I said, it's done without self-condemnation. When I think about this, I think of a baby that's in its highchair learning how to eat. Food's all over the place, but you don't chastise them — “That's not how you eat!” —

because they're figuring it out, and making a mess is part of the process. A certain level of innocence has to be seen in their actions. Learning how to develop our full potential as human beings is similar. Most of us take time to develop a sense of moral right and wrong, and the learning process involves throwing our behavior about to some extent and making messes. However, when we or the child know better, the consequences of willful wrongdoing are of course very different, and are harder to undo, especially if we wrap them up in guilt.

Sometimes the religious process is described as clarifying one's sight, or removing veils of ignorance so that we can see clearly — see reality in an unclouded or unshrouded way. The substance of these veils is profoundly complex, but is essentially the accumulated result of levels of cause and effect; one of them being the effect of knowing we've done things in the past that we knew were wrong. All those little things that we brush aside and say, "Oh, that won't matter." You know, the unkind word, or the untruth. All these things are as if weights on the spirit (for want of a better word), and it's the act of contrition, of saying "Yes, I'm sorry for that," and letting it go with self-forgiveness that frees us, lightens our hearts, and clarifies and brightens our vision. Although I wasn't raised a Catholic, it makes sense to me that this is a function of the confessional — to give people a chance to unburden and re-orientate themselves. But it can't be forced on you; it has to be coming from your own heart.

So, I hope that you understand from what I have been saying that if we want to change, the deepest changes come when our practice includes not just formal meditation, but active meditation, contrition, and honest assessment of our behavior and thinking in light of the Precepts. Admittedly Zen writings tend to bring sitting into the forefront, but there are these other aspects. You can't 'just sit,' and then go off and get up to whatever you want, because you'll just be weighing down that which has just been stirred in meditation to be released.

Over time, the process of change becomes less one in

which there are goals to be met, and more of a continuous process done for its own sake. You're just naively taking one step after the other. Because we are human and can always make a mess of it, so we still have the Precepts, but more and more they become something that is seen in our behavior naturally. Buddhism has a lot of doctrine, a lot of analysis: "What is the self? Is the self real or not? What is emptiness? Do things have a self-nature, or are they empty?" etc. These are some of the questions that Buddhist thinkers try to answer. However, when the underlying sufficiency of our basic nature is known, when the mind is fundamentally at peace and does not grasp after concepts, the intellectual answers to these questions are of little interest. Thinking becomes something that just arises naturally out of our being; we don't have to think our thoughts so much any more. We just live, and the thoughts arise and pass, and help us in the moment, and then they're gone. There's just the 'that' from which everything arises, including the feelings of self or other, and one is not attached to whatever is there.

Aspects of life become easier, but an effort is still required. And I doubt life can ever be completely easy for a thoughtful responsible person. A common theme I hear is how crazy life is, and how busy it is, and how there's always so much to do. While no doubt there may be some practical changes in life you can make, I think life has always been busier than our ideal of how we think it should be. I saw a popular TV reality show on which a family lived in a 17th century house, just as it was back then. These poor people seemed to work day and night, with no small amount of time dedicated to just

making soap! I'm not sure that a bygone age when things were slower and simpler ever existed. Everyone probably looks for greener grass.

Which brings us back to what's in 'our' begging bowl: life as it is. And to seeing that whatever is there — even if it's lying in the mud, or trying to pay bills with money you're not sure you even have — is something of value. Because whatever it is, it offers the next opportunity to do what we all are doing when you look beyond the forms: leading a good life, each as we are called. Human life is an ongoing process of meeting change. It's a 'going on' we can be one with, but it doesn't do it itself. It takes our effort, and that's what needs to be accepted.

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