

## What is “Good” Meditation? (Part I)

By Rev. Master Seikai

Almost everyone that I teach how to meditate says something along the lines of “Well, I’ve tried meditating, but it’s just so hard. My mind keeps wandering off.” To approach this problem, perhaps it would be good to ask the question, “What is good meditation?” given that the difficulty seems to revolve around an idea of good versus poor meditation. It is that preconceived notion of good versus bad that we have to get to the bottom of.

For some reason many people come to think that in order to meditate well, they need to sit there with no thoughts going through their brain. Exactly who propagates such a notion, I don’t know, but it might simply be that we humans tend to approach things with an ideal in mind, and if we cannot achieve the ideal pretty early on, we give up the whole project as being too difficult. The problem here is that we are too goal-oriented, and need to look at meditation as being a process that one enters into, as opposed to the approach of “if I invest in this thing, I should get such and such a return on my investment”.

So there you are, sitting in a chair or on a cushion, trying to focus your mind and meanwhile all manner of thoughts just seem to keep coming, and they won’t go away! Thoughts about people who have wronged you, people you argued with, commentary on how stupid something is, commentary on what a crummy person or poor meditator you are, thoughts about the past, thoughts about the future – almost anything but just sitting in the here and now, breathing, being present. Sometimes I say to people: “Well, join the human race. This is how it is for people.” We find ourselves wanting to somehow *get a grip*.

That is not a bad desire to have. Whatever motivates us to sit still is good. We have probably been taught to just keep bringing the mind back to a basic awareness of this moment, letting go of thinking - “neither trying to think, nor trying not to think” – a paradoxical statement from Zen Master Dogen of 13<sup>th</sup> Century Japan. It is a simple little piece of teaching, but one that actually stretches to Eternity itself; if we keep at it, we will eventually start to realize that, in and of themselves, thoughts, feelings and emotions are not a problem; the problem is that we either hold on to them or push them away. Thinking, feeling and emoting are the stuff of being human and are not a problem. But another way to look at it is that “to think, feel and react are human, but to sit still in the middle of them, divine.”

What all this points to is an overall attitude which, if one can cultivate it, is enormously helpful in learning to meditate well, and that is to not try to gain anything. Pausing in my line of thinking for a moment, it might help to acknowledge that in American society, all of us, from Day One, have been conditioned to gain stuff. Our whole society revolves around the gaining of wealth, money, prosperity, health, toys, pleasurable experiences, especially sex, and an uncountable number of other objects of the senses. So, the result is that this conditioning goes very deeply into who we are, it orients all our thought processes towards competition and gaining, being better, being richer. What we are practicing when we meditate is to let go of this conditioning and learn to just **be**, which is not so easy – and hence the difficulty.

So, back on our meditation cushions, we realize that, actually, there is nothing to gain. Nothing to gain? Does this mean that there is no enlightenment to be realized? No peace of mind to discover? Yes, it means exactly that. But, looking on the positive side of it, when we actually can just sit there, give up gaining, accepting our thoughts and feelings for what they are, we discover our natural enlightenment and joy in life which has always been there! It has been covered over by the craziness of life, the competition, the striving for stuff, but it’s still there. And we can get back in touch with it! It took me a

handful of years of meditation, giving it my best effort, coming back again and again to the meditation cushion even if it seemed futile at times – in other words, not giving up – to discover this basic premise of human existence, and it was enormously liberating. It was a sea change; it was completely transformative.

### **Good Versus Bad**

In the Zen tradition we talk about good and bad as being mutually dependent opposites; in other words, without the polarity inherent in pitting good against bad, there would just be things-as-they-are. Things-as-they-are is a way of looking at our own minds which is free of judgment and bias, and this way of looking opens a door into a different reality and state of being. So although I haven't so far given an exact definition of what I think "good" meditation is, one thing I will say is that learning to drop all the judging we do puts us on the right track. And having said that, there is still the dichotomy of good and bad within the sphere of everything being relative to everything else; we have the relative and the absolute going on simultaneously, and they are both valid. Within the relative sphere, there is good meditation and there is poor (or bad) meditation, which is dependent upon effort and focus.

Rev. Master Jiyu used to say that doing five minutes of meditation really well, with full concentration, is better than doing a half hour with a distracted mind. This points to the effort side of meditation, and is not something to be ignored. Meditation requires effort, effort which is subtle but persistent. To gather up your mental energy and put it into paying close attention makes for good meditation. Nobody ever goes very far with this practice without considerable effort over a prolonged period of time.

So there are essentially two complimentary aspects of meditation: one is the attitude with which we approach it, and the other is the technique we employ within meditation practice. Some people downplay the role of effort and technique, but that is to have a one-sided approach; and conversely to think that it is all effort and does not really involve attitude is another mistake of one-sidedness. In Part 2 I will go into this matter in more detail.