



TIPS FOR MAINTAINING YOUR PRACTICE

by Tim Burnett

QUESTION SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE IN MEDITATION

Recognize that the mind desires pleasant experience and don't assume that difficult or unpleasant conditions during meditation mean "it isn't working." Be curious about whether you can really know about your "progress" on the path. This is not to say we can't make choices that lead to pleasant experience during meditation – we are more likely to continue if we enjoy positive experiences in meditation – but remember that "pleasant" really doesn't tell us if our meditation is helping us or not.

OUR RESISTANCE TO PRACTICE IS TELLING US SOMETHING - LISTEN BUT DON'T LISTEN TOO MUCH

Be curious about that voice that's telling you you don't have time, aren't good enough, etc. Is there a part of you that would rather wallow in familiar patterns of suffering than see change? Meet that confused child with kindness and wonder what he or she needs to let go. Be firm but nurturing in your aspiration to practice. And at times, "Quiet! I'm sitting down to practice" may indeed be skillful.

MAKE PRACTICE ROUTINE - IT'S SPECIAL AND IT ISN'T

Having a regular routine helps us with other good habits. Flossing before bed, for example. Apply the power of habit and consistency to meditation practice. Creating a regular time is helpful. But then notice if we become dependent on that regular time. Can we circle back later if we oversleep or miss our regular practice window, or focus on informal practice that day?

DAILY IS EASIER

This is counterintuitive, but practicing every day (or perhaps every day but a clearly established day off) is easier than every other day or a few times a week

as it helps to shift us out of the evaluative frame of deciding if this is the right day.

HAVE A FALL-BACK PLAN, AND A FALL-BACK-FALL-BACK PLAN

Doing something near-daily that's just about mindfulness, awareness, and unconditional self-care is very powerful. Rather than skipping a day because you're running late, do less. Even a lot less. Consider ritual action (lighting a candle, offering incense, daily recitation, bowing, etc.) as a part of your daily practice routine: ritual comes to deeply symbolize your intention when done consistently over time. A daily routine of a ritual action, a few yoga stretches, and 30 minutes of sitting takes about 40-45 minutes. On a tight morning, just doing the ritual action and one slow stretch with a spirit of kindness and forgiveness can keep you very much on track. Or just the ritual action. Or simply going to your practice spot and taking three mindful slow breaths. Drop down to something that takes so little time it's almost impossible to talk yourself out of it!

A NICE SPACE HELPS, BUT CAN BE VERY MODEST

A pleasant, clean, quiet place to practice is supportive. But just like our regular routine or our desire for a positive subjective experience during meditation, be careful not to give this too much priority. We can practice anywhere and anytime. Don't feel like it's a barrier if you don't have an entire room or aren't able to maintain fresh flowers on an altar. At the same time, remember that caring for your space is caring for yourself, so give it some energy if you can.

SEEK SUPPORT!

Recognize our deep patterning about "I should be able to do this myself." We are deeply individualized and oriented around self-power. We need the help of others to keep up our practice. Seek support. Possibilities include: joining a weekly sitting group, scheduling annual retreats (one or two weekend retreats/year is a great goal), taking classes, telling your partner or close friends of your current practice plan and inviting their support in keeping to it, establishing a relationship with a meditation teacher, reading inspirational texts.

CELEBRATE GROWTH

Notice if patterns of reactivity change. Notice if you are sensing and appreciating more that passes into the senses. Celebrate when friends and loved ones notice

that you're changing for the better. Smile more. Breathe. Recognize that the patterning of life is incredibly complex and we don't know what changes us but that doing the practice helps. When we see the fruits of practice, have a (quiet) party to celebrate. A small change is big.

FORMAL AND INFORMAL PRACTICE SUPPORT EACH OTHER

Find ways that work for you (most critically: that you can remember) to touch into the feeling of practice in body, breath, emotion and mind regularly during the day. The formal practice done regularly allows you to explore this territory. Touching into it regularly in informal practice – it just takes a few minutes – can powerfully shift patterns, especially patterns around chronic stress or “revving up” through the day. This motivational one-two is powerful: being able to taste the feeling of practice during the day, even a little, supports the aspiration to do formal practice.

CULTIVATE YOUR SENSE OF HUMOR

The mind's incredible ability to understand and misunderstand our experience is a serious business for sure. And yet it's also pretty funny. How easily we get mixed up, how quickly we fall into dumb patterns that cause us stress and grief. Feel when the “second dart” goes in and allow yourself a foolish grin. We won't be able to bull our way out of this. It's going to take humor and patience as well as taking mind-care a lot more seriously.

USE DIFFERENT PRACTICES BUT DON'T JUMP AROUND TOO MUCH

When you sit down to practice (or lie down, stand up, or walk), consider what would be helpful. Learn a “tool box” of practices – and learning a practice means you have to do it many times, ideally with some teacher feedback. Pick something helpful from your toolbox and respond to your current state. But it's also helpful at times to stick to one consistent practice through thick and thin. This is an area of discernment where teacher feedback is helpful.

REMEMBER THE BODY

Mindfulness isn't just in the head. Include the body and care for the body as part of the practice.

NOTICE OTHER CHOICES THAT SUPPORT - OR UNDERMINE - DAILY PRACTICE

Back up from the point of sitting down to practice and see what seems to support or hinder. Do you go to bed on time? What is your relationship with alcohol/drugs? Are you taking on more than is reasonable at work or in family or friend obligations? Where is there tension during your daily routine? Are you exercising? Eating well? The decision point for early morning practice, for example, is not in the early morning – it's in the choices we make the day before that set us up for following through or making it harder.

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