

Contemplative Lawyering

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Reflections on Developing a Meditation Practice (9.15.2015)

I wanted to share a few reflections based upon both my own experience and your comments in class and in your journals. Some of you are settling into a practice that seems to work for you; others are still unsettled and/or uncertain. I want to assist you in your efforts and encourage you.

1. **Be clear about the goal of mindfulness meditation:** The objective is subtle and unlike most of our activities. We are training our minds. **The practice is to pay attention to whatever is actually happening in the present moment—nothing more and nothing less.** The objective is only to take this time to focus your mind on your breathing while you are also open to thoughts/feelings/etc. and, when you realize your mind has moved to something else, gently and without judgment returning your awareness to your breath.
 - a. We are not trying to “stop or suppress” our thoughts or feelings. Rather, we allow them and acknowledge them. We just don’t follow them, give them energy or hold on to them. In this sense, there are no “distractions” during meditation--only what is actually happening in our inner life. In mindfulness meditation we allow ourselves to experience whatever is actually going on for us in the present moment (“I’m upset”) without expecting ourselves to do anything about it right then (or at all). By listening to what goes on in our minds, we’re not committing ourselves to acting on it, we are just monitoring or witnessing what is going on. Later, after the meditation, we can decide if we want to do something about whatever came up in the meditation.
 - b. We are not trying to achieve a particular state of mind or feeling (e.g. peace, relaxation, etc.) (In contrast, Zen meditation does seek to attain a state of “no thinking.”) If you do experience those feelings, that’s great. You can be grateful for a moment and then return your attention to your breathing. However, if your meditation time seems like one distraction after another, that’s fine too. Really. It does not require a sterile or perfect (e.g. noise-free) environment. Again, the practice is to pay attention to whatever is actually happening in the present moment—nothing more and nothing less. Once we let go of these other goals/desires, the practice feels much easier. The holding on to or resisting our inner experience takes energy; we can relax into the meditation when we accept that we are not trying to “achieve” anything other than being present.
 - c. The primary “benefits” of the practice come not as deliberately sought after experiences or feelings (like peace), but as by-products of doing the practice regularly. When you have been practicing for a while, you will develop the capacity to be OK with whatever is actually happening in the present moment, whether it be joy, sadness, peace, anger, boredom, a fun memory, fear, satisfaction, loneliness, or panic. You will accept yourself more. When you experience that you don’t actually melt or explode (or whatever you might fear will happen) when you are just present in the moment, you will no longer need to avoid the present moment. This experience will give you confidence that you can be OK with whatever is actually happening in the present moment (“I can handle it.”). It may be uncomfortable--scary even--but we can just let it be and let it go during the meditation. And this confidence that you can

be OK with whatever is inside you provides you with great freedom to feel/see/be present to whatever is actually happening inside you and outside you, and then to respond (rather than react) and to initiate from your own deepest values. Finally, this self-acceptance enables you to be more accepting of others, which opens up lots of other good dynamics in relationships.

2. **Be patient with yourself.** This is really hard. It is not going to happen in a week. It's like any other practice, you have to do it regularly; thinking about doing it doesn't count. I urge you to use this course as an opportunity to establish such a practice for yourself, since it's the primary assignment anyway.
3. **Be curious, not judgmental, about your inner life.** We've been judging ourselves and others since we were very little. It's difficult not to react to whatever we think, feel, etc. Nurturing a non-reactive and non-judgmental space in our lives is a radical act. Imagine you are an anthropologist encountering a new culture. "I'm feeling sad now....hmmm....I'm a little hungry....hmmm....I'm frustrated that I'm not better at this....hmmm"
4. **Be generous with the practice.** We're all very busy, but 10 – 15 minutes per day is always doable if we really want to do it. You can do this; you are the master of your own schedule. And, trust me that your life is unlikely to ever get less "busy," so the busyness of your life now is probably the norm going forward. So this is precisely the right time to establish a sustainable meditation practice, especially in the context of a course that is supporting you to do it. Getting up 15 minutes early or carving out 15 minutes from some other activity (e.g. time spent on Facebook) is possible for everyone. Consider the meditation not as another duty or obligation demanding more of your precious time, but as a little gift that you can give yourself every day, that you deserve and that is actually really good for you.
5. **Be practical.** Some of you have realized that doing some activity (e.g. exercise, yoga, having a snack or journaling about the day) before you meditate helps you. Great. That's an important insight. Use a nice-sounding timer to help you keep track of the time rather than taking occasional peeks at a clock. There are downloadable tones that are nice for this. If you find you are completely distracted and frustrated, use one of the techniques I've suggested (e.g. a mantra like "breathing in, breathing out"; placing one hand on your belly and one on your heart; counting the breaths to 10 and starting again at 1 if you get to 10 or if you lose track). Or, find a different focus for you mind—a candle, the sounds around you (as just noise coming into your ears), etc.
6. **If you find yourself resistant to meditating daily,** acknowledge the resistance and be curious (but not judgmental) about it. What is underlying my reluctance? For example, if it's a fear, what am I afraid of? What would happen if I just do it today?
7. **It's also OK to enjoy it.**