

Bear Down or Ease Up in Meditation? ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 What are the great masters of the past?

00:00:07 The great masters of the past have never really been able to get around this.

00:00:15 Some of them will emphasize the bearing down aspect.

00:00:20 Certainly the Buddha was in that camp.

00:00:24 Some of them will emphasize the easing up aspect, like Papaji.

00:00:30 I love the title of his book, Call Off the Search.

00:00:33 That's my term for the sort of like ease up and stop striving for enlightenment.

00:00:47 So the Buddha talked about the noble quest.

00:00:51 Papaji talks about Call Off the Search.

00:00:55 Which one is right?

00:00:57 Well, they're both right.

00:01:00 So then the question, well, how do you know when to bear down?

00:01:04 How do you know when to ease up?

00:01:07 I don't have any magic formula for that.

00:01:12 I can tell you how I, in my own teaching, attempt to deal with the paradox.

00:01:19 My way of dealing with it is to give people techniques that allow them to bear down,

00:01:30 that would emphasize that aspect,

00:01:33 but also to give them a very clear description of how to practice in a non-efforting way.

00:01:41 And the non-efforting practice, which you can read about on my websites, I call do nothing.

00:01:48 It's basically my reworking of that whole choiceless awareness, dzogchen, just sit,

00:01:57 what some people would call just sitting anyway, that whole approach to things, the Call Off the Search approach.

00:02:04 I call it do nothing.

00:02:06 And so my way of dealing with the paradox is say,

00:02:09 okay, I'm going to give you these techniques that involve noting, touch site sound or feel image talk, etc., etc.

00:02:20 And there's some effort involved in that.

00:02:24 You're trying to separate phenomena,

00:02:26 and you're trying to soak your attention into the phenomenon when it arises.

00:02:32 So here are some techniques within which it's natural to somewhat bear down.

00:02:40 Here's another approach, which gives you a description of how to let go of the intention to do anything at all,

00:02:49 without having an intention to let go of the intention, which is sort of tricky.

00:02:55 If you read the description of how to do nothing, you'll see how I try to get around that.

00:03:02 I give people both approaches, and I encourage them to do both, to try both.

00:03:09 My stock phrase is, if the noting makes you racy, then do nothing, as I define do nothing.

00:03:20 If the do nothing makes you spacey, then go back to the noting.

00:03:24 So now you have both approaches worked into the system, or worked into a system, so that they can sample both and work with both.

00:03:40 I think because it is a paradox and because both are true, that the single most important thing is to not get one-sided.

00:03:52 I see this all the time. Yes, indeed.

00:03:57 One of the characteristic dangers that you can get with mindfulness practice is that people get goal-driven,

00:04:07 and there is a drivenness in the way that they do it.

00:04:14 You can actually get that in any spiritual practice.

00:04:18 The medicine for that would be to learn that you don't have to practice that way.

00:04:27 On the other hand, I have also seen people get addicted to the have-no-goal approach.

00:04:37 They spend their whole life, in daily life, they are unconscious and driven, but they are afraid to do any noting technique in their formal practice,

00:04:50 because somehow that is going to pollute their consciousness.

00:04:54 They actually develop an aversion or a phobia of any bearing down whatsoever in formal practice.

00:05:03 As I say, it is sort of ridiculous, because in daily life they are constantly giving in to those kinds of forces of drivenness,

00:05:17 but they are afraid to have any even hint of a goal in practice.

00:05:21 That is a kind of phobia.

00:05:23 I think that my way of trying to deal with this is, well, get familiar with both ways of working,

00:05:30 so that there is a kind of freedom that you could do either one.

00:05:35 In fact, I would say that the test for either of the approaches is your ability to do the other approach.

00:05:45 If you have been doing a high-efforting approach, how do we know it is working?

00:05:52 Well, you should be able to drop all effort if it worked, and do a no-effort, no-meditation form of meditation.

00:06:03 If you have been efforting and you claim that it has been successful and

productive,

00:06:09 then you should be able to do a non-effort practice without any problem at all.

00:06:18 It works the other way, too.

00:06:20 If you claim that you have been productively doing a non-effort practice, a call-off-the-search practice,

00:06:30 then the result of that should be that you have this very high concentration, clarity, and equanimity skills,

00:06:40 even though you have had no particular goal to develop those in any systematic way.

00:06:47 Therefore, the gold standard for testing, in my mind, the efficacy, the progress in a call-off-the-search approach,

00:07:01 would be can you implement highly systematic focusing techniques like noting?

00:07:10 Are you able and willing to do this?

00:07:14 Well, then your call-off-the-search has been successful.

00:07:19 Conversely, if you have been searching very hard and bearing down,

00:07:24 that should result in the ability to completely let go of all direction and goal in practice.

00:07:32 If not, then you have been making efforts without the progress that you should be making,

00:07:41 and maybe you need to balance by doing the other approach.