

WHY I'VE ALMOST STOPPED MEDITATING (PART 1 OF 2: PERSONAL ISSUES) - by Paññobhāsa Bhikkhu

(This extraction is from Paññobhāsa Bhikkhu's web article: "WHY I'VE ALMOST STOPPED MEDITATING.")

<http://politicallyincorrectdharma.blogspot.com/2019/12/why-ive-almost-stopped-meditating-part.html>

I have deleted some quotes and just kept his account.)

By temperament, inherently by birth, I tend to be a bad meditator.

I remember long ago walking through the University district in Seattle, and a person stopped me and asked if I'd like to take a personality test. (The person was proselytizing for the Church of Scientology, but I didn't join, and that part is irrelevant anyway.) I like taking tests, so I took it. The test was the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, or MMPI; and when I received the results I was surprised and a little confused. My scores under all categories except one were well up into the healthy range, near the top even, but in one—the category of "nervousness"—my score was so low that it was literally off the chart, well below the rating of "very unacceptable."

This confused me at the time because I'm not a habitually jumpy or fidgety kind of person, and in fact I'm lazy as hell and can sit still for hours. For years I've been able to give a talk to a room full of strangers without much stage fright or apprehension; I just sit down and give the talk. I remember when I was a kid my mother, who was lying on the couch watching TV at the time, suddenly announcing, "I feel nervous today," and at the time it made no sense to me, considering that she had no obvious reason to be nervous; but now I understand. Over the years, as I've professionally observed myself, my mental states, and my behavior, I've come to understand what the test was indicating, and what I have inherited from my mother. I have a hyperactive or supercharged brain that usually does not tolerate much stillness, even though my body may be lazy as the proverbial hound dog. I'm more of a compulsive thinker than even the average westerner.

When I first started meditating as a high school student, and when I started a second time after giving up, and shortly before going to the monastery, even sitting still for fifteen minutes with my mind concentrated on a meditative object was an ordeal. Nevertheless, I have long felt that it was my destiny or "fate" to become some kind of meditating renunciant monk in this life; and it has been as though an invisible hand guided me in that direction, protecting me from such disasters (ahem) as marriage, children, drunken car crash, drug overdose, a big scholarship from the Navy (on condition that I train as a nuclear technician and join the Navy), a brilliant professional career, etc. I still have no regrets in that regard, although I do occasionally daydream about what it would have been like to marry and raise a family.

Despite my early floundering in meditation, as a very junior monk I even cultivated a strange idea that I could master jhāna within around six months of being a full-time meditator. The idea was that all I had to do was practice practice practice, and before long, with intelligence and unwavering perseverance and determination, I'd be able to master it.

I tried hard, went radical, went to Burma, and lived alone in forest caves practicing meditation. I also spent some time at Panditarama as well as other, less famous meditation centers. In those days I was extremely strict, partly with the notion that of sīla, samādhi, and paññā, I might not have enough of the latter two but could at least max out my morality by conscientious self-restraint and by following the rules of monastic discipline. During my first ten years as a monk I would not be surprised at all if I averaged six hours a day of formal sitting meditation. It was certainly more than four.

But despite all the sitting practice, in full lotus position, and often alone in forest caves, I eventually reached a kind of impasse. It was as though I had reached some kind of limit; I was like a bird that just can't fly any higher. It got to the point that I had to practice hard just to maintain my place and avoid backsliding. Even before then my meditation was very sporadic and unreliable in its results. I have attained meditative states which, at the time, made just a few moments of it seem well worth decades of sweating, floundering, and struggling; I've attained states that probably most meditation teachers have not—but even so, it came and went, and I had no mastery over it. My consciousness expands and contracts like the Buddhist cosmos, although more quickly and less regularly; and when my mind is contracted trying to meditate is somewhat like trying to balance a marble on the tip of a sharpened pencil. I even experimented with taking Prozac for a short while, because it's supposed to reduce excess activity in the frontal lobes, but it didn't work. It just made me sleepy.

So, I was continually crashing from relatively good meditation back down to practically a beginner's level, and it was damned frustrating having to return to the ABC's, labeling my breaths and so on. My situation was a little like that of the monk Godhika described in a Pali sutta: He was continually attaining jhāna and then losing it again, until he finally became so desperate that he committed suicide. But I doubt that I was as good a meditator as venerable Godhika. I remember in one of the books of Saint John of the Cross, who himself was pretty clearly a great meditation master and father confessor to many others including Saint Teresa of Avila, San Juan says that contemplatives who are continually getting to real contemplation and then losing it again are just not intended by God to become proficient in it. So apparently, from a Catholic perspective anyway, God has other plans for me than the high station of a contemplative adept.

And so, in large part because I was at this impasse in my practice, practically beating my head against an invisible stone wall, I decided to try a change of lifestyle. (Remember Einstein's definition of insanity: Trying the same thing over and over and expecting different results.) Consequently in 2011 I returned to the USA, with the

intention of interacting with other humans and maybe teaching what I had learned. But anyone who has been reading my blogs over the years will understand that my strategy of knocking loose some spiritual blockage was not entirely successful. In some respects my progress became retrograde. One strange thing that I learned about karma from my own experience is that after twenty years and more of living in seclusion, most of it in tropical Asia, upon return to America and hanging out with American laypeople, my old habits from pre-monastic days quickly came back. In Pali Buddhist philosophy this is called *anusaya*, or karmic underlying tendencies that don't just disappear through lack of use but rather lie dormant, awaiting a convenient opportunity to revive.

My situation with regard to meditative sitting practice hasn't improved recently, and I haven't enjoyed any first rate meditation in literally a few years. I experience the occasional glimmer of good meditation, but that's about it. This impasse combined with frustration has resulted relative loss of motivation, and in my sitting practice being much reduced. Since returning to America especially I meditate usually only once a day, and often that amounts to less than half an hour. There is one mitigating factor though: Decades of mindfulness practice have improved my basic awareness of my own mental states etc., so in a sense I am meditating to some degree most of the time simply by being aware of what's happening in the present moment. Or as some meditation masters say, even knowing that you are being unmindful is itself a manifestation of mindfulness.

WHY I'VE ALMOST STOPPED MEDITATING (PART 2 OF 2: UNIVERSAL ISSUES)

Some of you who have read my old, more specifically Buddhist blog may remember a three-part [miniseries](#) I wrote there about people in recent years who have claimed to be fully enlightened beings; and the guy who made the quote above was one of the people I mentioned. The information he provides in his first book (the only one that I've read), *Spiritual Enlightenment: The Damnedest Thing*, is very fishy, partly because "Jed McKenna" is apparently a pseudonym and the ashram he describes in the book evidently doesn't exist—but even so, he makes some intriguing observations, including the one (and many others like it) quoted above in italics. He's right. To some degree at least, spiritual systems purported to lead practitioners to enlightenment in this very life are not necessarily a huge sham, but nevertheless they are *extremely* inefficient.

The fact is that not only the overwhelming majority of Buddhists, but the overwhelming majority even of conscientious, strictly practicing Buddhists fail to become enlightened, or even to come anywhere particularly close to it. This is true not only for Buddhists but for the followers of *all* established spiritual systems of which I am aware. I'm not claiming that nobody ever attains enlightenment; I'm just saying that almost everyone who tries, fails, even when they try very carefully and diligently and in accordance with the ancient texts. As I've mentioned elsewhere, most westerners in particular who attain some high spiritual state or realization do so accidentally, as the unintended result of some profound emotional crisis or near death experience or some such.

Another bleak observation I have made elsewhere is that many meditators, maybe even most of them, apparently accomplish little more through meditation practice than becoming good meditators. Some folks can sit like a statue for hours, and when they stand up and start making noise they're just as delusional and messed up as they were before. This is true not only of samatha, or cultivated trance states, but also of so-called vipassana. Even many reputable meditation teachers, some of them considered masters, are still rather messed up individuals when not sitting crosslegged on a mat, and that's setting aside the deliberate frauds and nutty charlatans.

Sometimes I consider the possibility that spiritual practice is as much a symptom of wisdom as a cause of it; in fact this has to be true to some extent, because without some wisdom one wouldn't practice in the first place, and the greater the wisdom, the deeper the practice. So I'm not against meditation practice, but I must admit that the highest results of it are not realistically to be expected by just anyone, or even by most sincere practitioners. Once a beginning meditator gets through the superficial messy stuff, which meditation really is good for—meditation can help beginners profoundly and change their lives radically for the better—then what remains is a wall of lifelong habits and character traits that stubbornly refuse to go away. Once one digs through the soft debris and hits bedrock, then digging becomes much more difficult.

So I guess what I'm trying to say is that formal, organized spiritual practice is beneficial and can really help people at a samsaric, worldly level, but that if one is trying to become fully enlightened, to realize Nirvana or Brahman or Tao or God or whatever, then one's chances, statistically, are minuscule. (Maybe in ancient India it was easier than now, or more effective, because wandering around homeless and sleeping on the ground in forests may have induced the necessary emotional crisis to trigger the ultimate awakening. Plus of course back then the spiritual system of Buddhism was fresher and less ossified, with presumably more enlightened teachers as well.)

Anyway, I have found that it is rather naive to think that one can become a saint or sage through mere force of will and the cultivation of new habits. Not that Dhamma is necessarily wrong, mind you, as many dropouts choose to believe; more like most people just can't practice correctly enough. They're not "ripe" for it. They can't even whole-heartedly want to abandon lust or fine food or unnecessary comforts, or for that matter the fundamental desire for samsaric existence itself. It has occurred to me in the past, when I've been in a cynical mood, that the only ways to become enlightened, or anything approximating it, is 1) to be born almost enlightened, or 2) to be the subject of some kind of divine miracle. I suppose the extreme difficulty of self-purification is a major reason why Christians came up with the notion of Divine Grace, and why so many Mahayana Buddhists began praying for rebirth in a pure land in the west.

I remember almost twenty years ago, while living under a huge rock ledge in a Burmese forest, I was already getting frustrated and a little desperate, since things don't work out the way we plan them; and so I formulated for myself the Rocky Balboa school of Buddhism: Remember that in the first Rocky movie the guy has no real intention of

defeating the world's champion. Instead his humble ambition was simply to refuse to give up, and to remain on his feet the full twelve rounds. I'm also reminded of a Pali sutta describing various sorts of monk; and one of them lives the Holy Life as strictly as he can, despite the fact that it is difficult and painful for him. He continues onward with tears streaming down his face, struggling and floundering perhaps, but in the end he is rewarded with existence in a heaven realm and, rather ironically, a harem of divinely gorgeous, big-titted celestial nymphs. I have no doubt that some monks are motivated by such dreams, as are some Islamist terrorists.

Consequent to all of this, plus what I wrote in the previous installment, not only do I meditate much less nowadays, generally just once per day, but I don't study Buddhist texts much lately either, just a little, sometimes, when I'm looking something up. But despite this decrease in motivation for practice, I am still relatively strict with regard to monastic discipline—for example with money, robes, food, and orgasms. In fact I'm considered by the Burmese monks with whom I associate to be dauntingly strict, if only because I don't want to handle money, don't wear extra clothes, try not to eat food that isn't properly offered, and don't eat goddamn dinner, let alone the "dawn meal."

Bearing all this in mind, I'm unsure of what road lies before me. Should I try to find an enlightened (or very wise) teacher and throw myself at his feet? (That hasn't worked in the past, partly because most "masters" really aren't that advanced.) Should I just seek out the company of other western monks? Should I just go back to Burmese caves and tough it out, be like Rocky, if only to make what relative progress I can? But again, after decades of trying and not attaining mastery of high contemplation, so to speak, my motivation for intensive practice has pretty much dried up. At present I'm still a monk mainly because it's conducive to relative peace of mind, and because I haven't found anything better—which, I must admit, are pretty good reasons.

There is still a chance, though, that I could eventually drop out and lose myself between a woman's breasts. I don't know. Even when I was young and more idealistic and optimistic than now, I already had what I called the Great Comforting Thought, namely: "Even if I make no significant progress in this life, at least I'm staying out of trouble." Another comforting thought for me has been a Christian one, even the first words of the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are they who know their spiritual poverty."

Now don't get me wrong here. I reiterate that I'm not saying that Buddhism is wrong, or that Buddhist practice is a waste of time. Buddhism provides one of the wisest interpretations of right and wrong, and of reality itself, of any system invented by human beings, and meditation practice can change lives for the better. What I am saying is that Buddhist practice, though beneficial, almost always fails to get anyone fully enlightened. And consequently my motivation for intensive practice has atrophied considerably.

So anyway, I have lightened up quite a lot over the years, so much so in fact that now I follow the insane political news, and serve as a spiritual guide to Euronationalists,

and may post another risqué pictorial post sooner than some of you might feel comfortable with. Cheers.