UNLEARNING MEDITATION BLOG

This is a collection of short pieces that Jason Siff wrote for his monthly blog from July 2010 through November 2013. They are organized according to content rather than posting date.

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THE SIMPLE MEDITATION INSTRUCTIONS

The simple meditation instructions found in “Unlearning Meditation” are seeds for many things to grow and change in one’s meditation sittings and in one’s life. Sitting in a still posture with awareness of one’s body (contact points, the hands touching) while allowing one’s thoughts and feelings sets up certain conditions. These are conditions in that they influence how one’s experiences unfold and how one relates to those experiences. Such conditions as gentleness, permission (flexibility), tolerance, and interest are supported by the initial instruction to allow one’s thoughts and feelings, one’s life, into one’s meditation sittings.

There is also a quality of renunciation in this way of meditating. One renounces self-agency. That is, you do not try to make anything happen. But then again, you might experience trying to make something happen. You allow that as well, so that you can see how you try to make things happen. By doing so, you are allowing your experience to unfold according to conditions instead of making your mind do what you want it to.

The distinction between doing and allowing is not so clear. When you have many opportunities to choose what you will put your attention on, and you make different choices, then there is a quality of flexibility. This is doing that is based on the conditions you are aware of. You are not doing something because that is what you were told to do, but because you are aware of the conditions in your experience in such a way that you can choose to do something that meets those conditions.

RE-DEFINING MEDITATION

Meditation is fundamentally an introspective activity. It includes the experiences of our senses, but is not limited to a mere noticing of sense impressions or a focused attention on bodily activities. If that were the case, the Buddha would have stopped at the first foundation of mindfulness, that of the body, and not gone on to teach the awareness of pleasure and pain and their absence (the second foundation); the awareness of thoughts, emotions, and mental states (the third foundation); and the awareness of all that which needs to be known to understand the Dharma (the fourth foundation).

We learn through our thoughts and emotions, not just from our sense impressions and intuitions. But it seems that the world of thoughts and emotions often gets excluded from meditation practices as that which people are trying to transcend or eliminate, rather than as the arena for growth and wisdom. The criticism that meditation would become too psychological if it included our mental activity is one that I face often. The mind one experiences in meditation is the same as the one that presents itself in psy-

chotherapy, so perhaps the difference between meditation and psychotherapy has nothing to do with the contents of one's mind, but with the different formats, techniques, and agendas of those two fields. As those two fields become closer together, and more intertwined, the differences actually become less defined, though there are two key differences I would like to point out: 1) meditation does not require interaction with another human being, while psychotherapy generally does, and 2) meditation does not require the immediate articulation of one's experiences, while psychotherapy generally does. These two differences are related to each other, and only apply to "silent" forms of meditation.

Using "silent meditation practice" as our reference point, I would like for you to consider these two definitions of meditation: 1) Meditation is what follows upon the intention to meditate, and 2) Whatever one experiences in meditation is meditation.

Meditation is what follows upon the intention to meditate. When we learn a set of meditation instructions and then use them in our meditation sittings, whatever follows from that is meditation. The instruction can be to be aware of the breath, recite a mantra, practice visualization, observe bodily sensations, contemplate a teaching, perform an inquiry into one's experience, focus on emotions, notice one's thoughts, allow anything to come up, or any number of meditation practices. Adopting a meditation posture with the intention of doing a particular meditation practice is the basis for calling what you are doing "meditation."

I would add however, that the experiences one has of doing that practice don't have to be restricted to the experiences of doing the instruction correctly for it to be deemed "meditation." Any experiences one has while doing a particular meditation practice is meditation. This brings me to the second definition: *whatever one experiences in meditation is meditation.* Under this definition, if one were to practice *metta* meditation and find ill-will and dislike arise around a person one is generating loving-kindness for, then one might sit with the ill-will and begin to accept it as part of the practice of doing *metta*, since it came up while doing it. The same would hold true with the breath, where one might find in trying to hold one's attention on the breath, a certain tension forms around doing that, and that tension can become a focus of the practice. But when there is no particular instruction that one is supposed to follow in the meditation sitting, then the whole array of experiences that occur upon the intention to meditate is meditation. This is the most inclusive form of meditation: nothing is excluded. That is the direction I believe the Third and Fourth Foundations of Mindfulness are addressing.

THE AUTHORITATIVE OBSERVER (a fictional portrayal)

As I was sitting and thinking one day, I became aware that I was sitting and thinking. This awareness of thinking was a bit sudden, but I surmised it had been there all along and I just wasn't aware of it. As I got to know it, I began calling it, "My Observer." He would notice everything, every little thing. I couldn't think a thought without being immediately told that I had thought this thought. And, usually, the thought was considered a mundane thought, or a bad impulse, or a wrong notion. This observer is a great authority on thoughts—he knows the right label for each thought and whether it is wholesome or not.

It sounds like I am familiar with this observer, but that is not the case. I really know nothing about him. He doesn't seem to have a past, at least one with pictures, places, and people. His past is an indefinite expanse of time, without beginning, without events, and without places where he has lived or things he has done. In fact, I don't recall he has done anything in his life other than observe the life of someone else. He seems so skilled at observing that I doubt I could be his first subject. But how could he go from life to life, person to person? No, he must be my observer. If that is so, then he is very young indeed, maybe but a few days old, for how could he have been around longer than that without my noticing him? But he acts so mature; he knows so much about human behavior.

I wish he had a face, so I could see how old he is, where he comes from, what kinds of facial expressions accompany his comments, judgments, and directives. But he just sits there in the background of my thoughts watching and noticing and announcing his observations. When I try to get to know him by listening more closely to his voice, I can conjure up a picture of a big man, a towering being who looks down on me. He never whispers, always speaking as though addressing a large audience.

We do not have intimate dialogues, my observer and me. We've never shared a joke or willingly let slip a confidence. He knows my faults when they happen, while I never know any of his imperfections, believing that he is flawless. The relationship is a bit one-sided. But he is the authoritative observer after all. Perhaps the only way to get to know him is to acquire the services of another observer. But then wouldn't there be an observer observing the observer observing me?

COMMENTARY

In the short sketch, "The Authoritative Observer," I portray the confusing situation of discovering an observer in one's meditation sittings. I believe that such observing or witnessing "selves" are developed through mindfulness meditation techniques by simply following the instructions to be

mindful of one's experiences. The notions of being unattached (or detached), equanimous (non-reactive), and clearly comprehending what one is observing are all important features of much Vipassana meditation instruction. This way of practicing however can support Vedantist views on inner experience, such as there being an unchanging pure self, a permanent transcendent reality, and an eternal higher truth.

The character in this story becomes aware of the "faceless" and "all knowing" aspects of this observing consciousness, but does not end his investigation there. He wants to know this observing consciousness' history, his appearance, his actions, etc. The observer is not a separate higher self in his eyes, but rather a more or less ordinary self that has taken up an exalted and privileged status within his psyche. In some ways, this observer is the super-ego of Freudian psychology; it is also the "ideal self" which the character aspires to become. The character's skepticism is never fully satisfied with what he finds, so he appeals to another "authority", though his direction to create another, better observer will no doubt repeat the same scenario.

It is fairly common for meditators to fall into states of mind where there seems to be a separation between the observer and the observed (whether the observed phenomena are bodily sensations, perceptions, thoughts, or emotions). In the present moment, that often seems to be the case, but upon reflection one might see that there is no separation between the observer and the observed. That is one advantage of a meditation practice that emphasizes recollecting one's experiences—one can see that if knowing a thought occurs at the same time as the thought then they must be inter-related and not separate.

If one meditates in a way that I recommend, allowing thoughts and feelings into one's meditation sittings, these experiences of a separate detached observer will occur with much less frequency. And when they do, one would have been so accustomed to reflecting back on one's experiences and questioning one's assumptions about them, that it is unlikely one would develop beliefs in a higher self.

CONFLICTING EMOTIONS

We hardly ever feel one way about something. "Conflicting emotions" aptly describes this situation—so rarely do our emotions cooperate and bring harmony and peace.

Perhaps that is why most meditation techniques advocate creating some kind of distance from any emotional conflict. Some may even teach that from the perspective from Ultimate Reality, emotional conflict doesn't exist, it is just an illusion. Others may teach that conflicting emotions are

just fabrications, imaginations, unwholesome states of mind. A minority of meditation teachers may grant emotional conflict some space while still teaching that the point of meditation is to get beyond emotions that cause conflict.

In all of this discussion, I haven't really said what I mean by conflicting emotions. If one is honest about one's emotions, none of them seem to arise in a pure form. Some people just can't be annoyed without being impatient, without wanting something different to happen, without some guilt or shame for feeling that way, and some neurotic need to change their mood from annoyance to something more presentable. Their trouble with being annoyed may not be the feeling of annoyance, but the interaction of impatience, desire, guilt, self-consciousness, and other less pronounced emotions that might find their way into this particular emotional cocktail.

When such emotional cocktails present themselves in meditation, choose to sit with them. Let them stir, flow through your system, even intoxicate you if they will. That is the only way you'll find out what they are made up of. You may not feel at peace, your emotions won't be harmonious, but you are listening to each emotion tell its story, and that is a kindness to yourself.

MEDITATING WITHOUT A STRATEGY

Most of us think strategically and find it unnatural to approach situations, such as what may come up in meditation, without a game plan. No one wants to be ill prepared for a foreseeable problem. Several of the questions people ask me about meditation have to do with finding a good strategy for what might arise in their meditation sittings: "What should I do when an emotion gets overwhelming? How can I get my mind to stop obsessing? Which train of thought should I choose to follow?"

When someone is new to this approach to meditation, I give pat answers to these questions as a way to help them at the beginning. It would be unkind of me not to. But these initial strategies will run their course and become ineffective. For instance, bringing your attention to the stillness of your body sitting may help when an emotion gets overwhelming, but at some point it will stop working its magic, and you will have to find some other way to meet that situation.

I suggest you go through your experiences in meditation, reflect back on them, and learn more about the ways you were with them. This kind of trial-and-error learning is often done in the service of creating new and better strategies, but here it is done to develop trust that you didn't need to have a strategy for what arises in meditation—that you will be able to meet your meditation experiences, whatever they may be, with qualities of mind

that will help you with them.

There is a kind of courage to go into meditation without a strategy. Some may think it reckless not to know what you are going to when certain things happen, but it may not be reckless if you have sufficient trust from what you have experienced in meditation that your mind will find a way through any difficulty. That is one reason why the recollection of your experiences in meditation is very important—it enables you to know your mind in meditation, and to know how it has attended to an experience.

GETTING IT

Every meditation practice seems to have a particular experience of getting it. That experience may not be the goal of meditation, but it is a defining moment—it is when the meditation practice makes sense, it is full of possibility, and all you have to do is keep meditating. Whatever meditation practice a person does, this experience of getting it, and becoming grounded in it, is essential.

What does this look like in Recollective Awareness meditation?

First of all, people tend to go back and forth a good deal with this type of open meditation practice. They go through periods of doubting it, even though they may have had experiences that were positive and confirming. They also go through periods of trusting it. It is one of the few meditation practices that truly lets the student open up to doubt and confusion, and those who teach this approach support their students going through periods of doubt rather than discounting or dispelling the doubt. So one way in which people seem to get this approach is by working through their doubts about it.

Secondly, the inner experience of meditation seems to be more effortless and there is less resistance to what may emerge. I often hear people say how they can sit with unpleasant thoughts and emotions without much problem. That doesn't mean they no longer get overwhelmed by certain intense emotions. There is just less of a need to do another form of meditation to manage or diminish such thoughts and emotions, and more willingness to sit with and explore thoughts and emotions as they naturally arise in meditation.

Thirdly, various meditative states arise within people's sittings that were not present before. For some folks, all they needed was permission to let their mind drift in meditation and allow thoughts and emotions to go on. When they do, they find themselves going into tranquil states instead of falling asleep as they had feared. They also find that thoughts can be fragmented and not make sense, and that doesn't mean they're going crazy; it just means that the states of mind they are entering allow for

more fluidity and variation in their thoughts and images. There are many kinds of meditative states that people go into, and in teaching this approach, we try to make each one an area of interest, something to explore, and not states of mind to be avoided, praised, or made into things. Some people feel that once they have had some profound and unusual states of mind in meditation that they have gotten a taste of what meditation can be.

Lastly, while confidence, effortlessness, non-resistance to unpleasant experiences and the cultivation of meditative states are all good things to emerge from meditating, there is still something else we need to get from meditation. And that is how meditation can profoundly change our lives, our relationships, our work, the ways we are in the world. If people don't get how their meditation practice affects their life and how their life affects their meditation practice, then the meditation practice is understood as something separate from their life. When meditation is done as something separate, your life is kept out of the meditation sitting. In Recollective Awareness meditation the opposite is true—your life belongs in the meditation sitting. "Getting it" is then not about getting the practice "right," but rather, truly getting how your life can come into your meditation sittings and be positively transformed by the meditative process.

QUESTION & ANSWER

"When I meditate, all I do is think."

"Then think."

"But how is that meditation?" You ask.

"At first, it isn't. But after a while, as one's relationship to thoughts changes, it becomes meditation." And then I go on to explain.

Allowing thinking to continue unimpeded in a meditation sitting might initially feel no different from ordinary daily ruminations, obsessions, problem-solving or planning sessions. It doesn't fit into any definition of meditation one is aware of. The whole experience seems to be the opposite of what meditation is supposed to be. But, then, let's look on the bright side. You are not constantly monitoring and interrupting your thoughts with reminders to bring your attention back to the breath, or a mantra, or any primary object of meditation. You may feel less pressured to do a meditation instruction correctly, to be productive and get results. You may have little or no resistance to your thoughts and not be in any kind of battle with them. The atmosphere of your mind might actually be a bit more peaceful.The relationship with your thoughts has begun to change, and with it, meditating with thinking becomes less of a problem, if a problem at all.

"That is nicely said, but how do I get my relationship to my thoughts

to change?"

You work on that relationship, like you would with another person. You listen, take in, and feel what your thoughts are saying. You become interested in your thoughts. You don't want to get rid of them, but rather, want to learn how to live with them. You want to get to know them so intimately that you understand more of why they show up at certain times, what keeps them going, and how harmful ones may actually begin to diminish their influence.

"Didn't the Buddha advocate quieting the mind and going beyond thinking?"

It appears he did. But we can quiet our mind in a variety of ways. Meditating with gentleness towards your thoughts and interest in them can create the conditions for your mind to quiet down just as much as being aware of the breath or any such calming practice. Becoming wise regarding the process of thinking is, in a way, going beyond thinking—you have less belief in the validity and solidity of your thoughts when you understand their dependently arisen nature.

"Are you saying that the way to go beyond thinking is to look into the nature of thinking rather than arriving at a transcendent state where thinking vanishes?"

"Yes."

DON'T WE NEED TO BE AWARE?

For some kind of psychological change to occur, don't we need to develop greater awareness of that which is to be changed or eliminated in order for it to change or disappear? Another way of putting this question is: Do you have to be aware of a behavior for it to change? Or can it change by being aware of something else in your experience, such as the breath in meditation?

You might suggest that such questions would be better answered by scientific research. But am I not posing these questions to come to some kind of final conclusion, but rather to explore two opposing views regarding psychological (or spiritual) change in meditation. One view is that particular practices will produce sought after change, such as less anger, less reactivity, or less craving and attachment by the practitioner faithfully and ardently doing a particular meditation practice, such as awareness of the breath. The meditator, in this instance, does not have to be aware of his anger, reactivity, or craving, but rather brings his awareness to his breath, and through that practice experiences, as a kind of by-product, a reduction in anger, reactivity, and craving. The other view is that for anger, reactivity, and craving to actually reduce and cease, instead of being only tem-

porarily suppressed (which in itself provides needed relief from the distress these things cause), there has to some awareness of how anger, reactivity, and craving function. That is, there has to be some awareness of what feeds them and keeps them going, and what leads to their diminishing and fading away.

As with opposing views that both make sense, the solution may be to say that both are true. Sometimes just awareness of the breath or bodily sensations may lead to the lessening or loss of some kind of suffering, while sometimes the awareness and understanding of the dependently arisen nature of anger and craving does indeed lead to their lessening and disappearance. Both are good. They can work together. A practice of being aware of the breath and that of being aware of thoughts and emotions can support each other. Sometimes desires subside when given attention and explored, while at other times they may subside after a period of being focused on the breath. Both are meditative experiences people have.

A person will make choices as to which teachings to follow, and which practices to do, based on whether he or she believes that greater awareness of a behavior leads to exploring and understanding it in ways that diminish its hold, or, that awareness put on a "wholesome" object of attention will have a way of diminishing or eradicating that behavior. Those who believe that change occurs through awareness, discernment, and investigation of all mental states will be more likely to consider practices that lead to tolerating and accepting negative or unwanted behaviors (as thoughts and emotions experienced during meditation), so that they can explore them more fully. Those who believe that placing one's attention on what are taught to be wholesome objects as the way to change or eliminate negative behaviors will most likely choose practices such as awareness of breathing, metta meditation, tonglen, and other similar practices. Then there are those who believe both are proper ways to meditate and seek to combine these two contrary approaches in their meditation practice.

I consider these approaches contrary because they can often get in the way of each other. Always bringing your attention back to the breath will clip your thoughts in a way that will make awareness of them and further exploration of them difficult, if not impossible. Allowing your thoughts and emotions to go on and on in your meditation sitting will interfere with attempts to keep your attention on your breath for any length of time. These two approaches may then only become compatible when done separately. When engaged in a practice of allowing thoughts and emotions in meditation, there may be periods where your attention becomes drawn to the breath and you could then decide to focus your attention on the breath as you would in a conventional awareness of breathing practice. The reverse

of this, shifting from a focused awareness on the breath to a broad open awareness of thoughts and emotions has been taught as an advanced form of some Vipassana, Zen, and Tibetan practices.

One difference between these two approaches is that the first one, allowing thoughts and emotions to be the initial objects of meditation, enables you to be with the thoughts and emotions as they normally present themselves in daily life. It provides an opportunity to develop awareness of certain behaviors, and to explore them within your mind in meditation more thoroughly. The second and more commonly taught approach, of moving from the breath to awareness of thoughts and emotions, usually pacifies or inhibits thoughts and emotions—so that what is then known tends to be a more manageable, more sedate version of those behaviors. The meditator will often have difficulty exploring those behaviors due to the related thoughts and emotions (as well as memories and intentions) having become diffuse and slippery. It is fairly common for intense emotions and their related mental verbalizations to die down and subside when one's mind has become extremely tranquil. However, those behaviors have not gone away for good.

The skillfulness of your meditation practice may lie, practically speaking, in how well each of these approaches compensates for what is lacking in the other. Your periods of exploration into a particular mental state, such as ill-will, adds knowledge of that state of mind that you cannot get by always putting your attention on your breath. Likewise, your periods of being with the breath can provide added calm and focus, which may not arise from staying with your thoughts and emotions for extended periods in your sittings.

There is a particular twist here however. By meditating with problematic emotions, such as ill-will and lust, you may actually be putting your attention on compassion for yourself experiencing those emotions, or on the patience you have while sitting with them, or your interest in understanding them more fully rather than the perpetuation and gratification of them. This awareness of "wholesome" mental states within the experience of so-called "unwholesome" mental states may actually lead to a similar calm and focused state as would awareness of the breath.

STRANGE THINGS THAT HAPPEN WHEN WE MEDITATE

This is a subject that is dear to my heart. If it weren't for strange things happening when I began meditating, I probably would have lost interest in it. That's not to say I would have stopped meditating if nothing strange had happened; it's just that I don't know if I would have been as interested in my mind if it was plain, normal, or ordinary throughout my meditation sittings.

What kind of strange things are we talking about here? Well, for one thing, we are talking about our mind shifting sideways, lurching into some kind of altered state, when just a moment ago all was ordinary. This can happen when you are sleepy or relaxed in meditation, as well as when you are alert and focused. It can happen early on in the meditation sitting or a few moments before the bell. And it can happen many times throughout a meditation sitting, where you are going into some kind of a strange unusual state of consciousness for some seconds and then pop out of it into a more or less ordinary state, only to be drawn in again some moments later.

I was talking with a student the other day about his experiences of going into a short-lived fog and emerging from it with greater clarity, which would last a minute or so before that inner fog would roll in again. Instead of talking about why that was happening or what it meant, for that would be speculation on both of our parts, we talked about what he remembered from that experience. It wasn't visual for him. He was hearing other people talk. They were having a conversation within his mind, but what they said was difficult to recall. A few words came back after he emerged from the fog, and they were usually names of people, or short, simple comments. As he recalled these snippets of inner conversation, he became aware of what he knew about this foggy state of consciousness. He knew he did not create it, that it arose of its own and left of its own, that he was none of the people conversing in his mind, but he really didn't know whose voices they were. Very strange indeed. But quite common.

Another strange experience, which many meditators get used to and some fall in love with, is that bright light shining in your eyes, though often it seems located in the center of your forehead. For some people these bright lights might even come from behind or the sides or from deep within. It may just be a beam, or a ball, of light, but it can easily be a sheet of light or an image that arises and stays a moment before vanishing. People like to make things out of these experiences as well, for we reason that there must be a reason for them. Once again, I prefer to ask questions about what you might have recalled when this light or image arose. This kind of inquiry leads to greater awareness of the state of consciousness and how it functions, taking the emphasis away from what the light or image might mean.

The last strange thing I'll talk about here is the odd, and initially unsettling, experience of your mind getting slippery and having moments of losing consciousness. When this happens, some people experience fear, as if they have lost complete control of their consciousness. No one who has reported this experience to me has ever lost his mind, but it does feel as though that can happen at first. You can't hold onto thoughts or sensa-

tions, they just keep slipping out of your grasp, and you may feel a slight speeding up at times or a sensation of falling, of slipping and sliding, or of vanishing. What people often recall from this experience is the sensation of returning to a more ordinary consciousness and/or that initial period of experiencing slipping, falling, vanishing. Often, it is not possible to recall what happened during any period of not being conscious. All that we can recall are the borders on either side of the gap in awareness. And that is enough to know these experiences better. Once again, we try not to make any meaning out of such strange happenings; we trust that our recollection and discernment of such experiences will lead to further exploration of them.

THE 2 WHEELS

I was sitting in meditation the other day and during a tranquil stretch of time a memorable thought arose. It had a rather compelling voice and an interesting message: "Knowing the wheel and knowing suffering are not the same." After the sitting, I was struck by the word "wheel" and how I usually use it in reference to *samsara*, the wheel of existence. But the Buddha's the notion of "wheel" is that of a *"chakra,"* and in his case, it is not about chakras on one's subtle body, but of the *"Dharma chakra,"* the wheel of the teaching. This wheel can be seen as having eight spokes, each one signifying a factor of the Nobel Eightfold Path.

The cycles of experience that give rise to suffering are thus not the same as cycles of cultivation that are conducive to liberation from it. But that does not mean that they operate in isolation from each other. Going into angry thoughts and feelings may be accompanied by a kindness and patience with the anger, as well as an interest in it. When that is so, you are turning the wheel of the Dharma, not the one of samsara, for that just may running on its own steam. You will then begin to recognize when the Dharma wheel is absent, as the wheel of existence pushes into being more of the same kind of experiences in the world. With the Dharma wheel present, the wheel of existence is checked, halted, and slowly dismantled.

Side by side, these wheels turn, and we just keep on sitting. At times, we may know when the wheel of existence is about to pick up steam, and learn what qualities to bring to that experience so the wheel of the Dharma can also move to overtake it. Other times, we may know when the wheel of the Dharma is about to lurch into motion, and we can learn what qualities can gently support it. It may not always be the same qualities. Sometimes awareness helps the wheel turn, while at other times kindness moves in that direction, and then there are those times when a combination of qualities and faculties are needed. There is so much to learn about how to turn a Dharma wheel.