



How Do I Meditate When I Can't Meditate?

Keri Pederson

Many years ago I was helping to care for a woman who was quite ill and who knew she would likely die soon. On one particularly challenging day, and with a sincerity and directness that made my heart leap up, she looked right at me and asked: "Honey, how do you pray when you can't pray?" Although we had our homes in different spiritual traditions, I understood her question. She was trying to connect with a practice that had provided her with meaning and nourishment during her life, but was having difficulty in the midst of what she was facing. I would guess that nearly all of us can relate to that.

In meditation circles, we might simply (or not so simply) recognize a mind-state like this as 'doubt' and try to continue on. But the beauty of being with people who don't share the same spiritual language is that we have to use whatever degree of creativity we can find to get to the heart of the matter -- without relying on an archive of shared concepts and phrases. I started by asking her about some memories she had of her late husband, because I knew there was deep kindness there, and generosity. We lingered there, drinking it in. We talked about where she felt her longing to pray, and what that was like. She brought to mind moments in which she had felt connected, and then disconnected, and the humanness of that. We felt the warmth of our hands just then, listened to the sounds of our own voices and the ambient noise. We were quiet for a while. We acknowledged the deep aches in her body, the sadness in the wake of her many losses. It was not all graceful and easy. But we were aware, together, moment to moment. This didn't make her a Buddhist (God forbid!), but it did allow a sense of softening, of refuge in kindness and shared humanity, and a wider context within which her suffering (and longing for relief) could be held and known for a time. Isn't this how it works?

This inquiry is not so different, if less urgent, for people who insist with declarative certainty that they "can't meditate." They've tried it but it just doesn't work. And for those of us who have been at this for a while, there are often periods in which our practice seems to have lost its momentum. One young woman described her efforts to continue a daily practice as trying to penetrate an "invisible fence" around her cushion. Or our efforts to be aware seem to be overwhelmed by the intensities of our personal and collective situation. I've often thought that for us as meditators, our approach can be much the same as with my client who was dying.

Start with kindness.

The heart-mind doesn't respond to commands, especially in the long-term. It responds to kindness. We can test this for ourselves. Sometimes we can be reluctant to actually let in the nourishing and enjoyable aspects of practice. In the face of difficulty, they can somehow seem beside the point. But they are essential. When we let the heart incline, gently and without insistence, towards what is good (kind, generous, beautiful) and let ourselves linger there, even for a short time, isn't there a greater sense that it's actually okay to stay, to open, to look?

Safeguard our intention.

My client and I talked for a while about the possibility that the desire or longing to pray must certainly be at the heart of prayer. In a similar way, we can deliberately call to mind why we practice. Refreshing, or reconnecting, with our own deep wish to be free, to understand, to deepen in wisdom and love — whatever words we use - can bring energy and keep practice from being another item on the checklist. It's easy for formal practice and the effort to stay aware in daily life to become another 'doing,' another 'should,' and often there is rebellion against that (or discouragement at what we're not doing). Yet, at the heart of the Buddha's description of wise intention is non-harming, non-ill will towards ourselves and others.

Reflect on cause and effect.

Our practice isn't just about us. The state of mind, of being, that we carry into situations and relationships has an enormous impact on the minds and hearts of others. We know this, but we forget. In this sense, when we protect and take care of our own minds we really do impact others in the most immediate way. There have been many moments in my own practice life in which the intention to practice for my own benefit simply wasn't enough - the only thing motivating enough was to reflect on how it benefitted others as well.

Expand our view of what practice is.

Meditation is not about maintaining or eliminating certain states. We may have heard this countless times, and yet it can remain a subtle expectation and frustration. A yogi at the young adult retreat this summer insisted that he wasn't cut out for meditation because "it's just a complete circus in there" (in the mind). We can't give up every time the circus (inward or outward) comes to town. Seeing that whatever arises is not a personal problem of ours, but instead a natural result of conditions can bring greater lightness and ease. Then nothing is truly an obstacle to practice, but can be included within it. We can be aware of anything, in this moment, now. We can read and know we're reading, type and know we're typing. Hear, see, feel, and know it as it is occurring. It doesn't have to be a certain way. "Oh, agitation is like *this*."

Welcome failure.

We need to repeatedly question our well-worn ideas about success and failure in practice, and how they might affect us. What would it actually mean to finally 'get it right?' We can instead become more interested in the wider process of how remembering and forgetting ebb and flow. How even when we are forgetting to remember for a large portion of our moments, the practice can still bear fruit. Every moment that we recognize that we've left in some way, we've already returned. I heard Ajahn Sucitto say once, "Any practice that doesn't allow you to fail peacefully is not the right practice." It seems that our practice often works even when it "doesn't work." Is this true?

Recognize the flavor of grief.

Sometimes when we lose our enthusiasm for practice, we have given up on ourselves (or the world) in small or large ways. Maybe we have let our losses and disappointments accumulate, and, un-recognized - this has dimmed our energy and sense of connectedness. Both doubt and disappointment can solidify into grief. So we may resist sitting down, or looking deeply, fearing that it will be too much. These layers of accumulated experience need our attention, our deepest care. This is not separate from practice. We can always inquire: What's here now? What is this? What does it need?

Last year at my son's preschool, one of the three-year-olds became deeply committed to searching for and collecting small round marble 'jewels' that had been scattered over the years throughout the wood-chips and dirt on the playground. The dedication with which he undertook this was admirable. He would stop and play frequently in the sand pit or run around with the other kids, but he would always come back to this primary task. He was not frenzied, but persistent. His small bag got more and more full, and with each discovery there was new delight on his face. The bag was not infrequently lost or completely overturned, but he was undeterred. Often other kids would stop and help him, and he would only grow more radiant, more committed. Although I don't think of the meditative journey as an acquisitive process, I think in some ways practice is like this. Remembering to be aware is our primary task. Every time we do remember there is a kind of re-discovery of value. We do this again, and again, and again. And we need each other.