

Every-minute Meditation.

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Most students of Buddhism know that the practice of meditation is not something which is limited to the times each day we spend in formal seated meditation. But to bring the mind of meditation out of the meditation hall and into our everyday world of work and daily living is not always an easy thing to do. I would like to share with you a method for helping to do this. It is a practice common to many schools of Buddhism and is known variously as “mindfulness training”, “working meditation”, or “every-minute meditation”. The method can be summarized in five steps:

1. Do one thing at a time.
2. Pay attention to what you are doing.
3. When your mind wanders to something else, bring it back.
4. Repeat step number three a few hundred thousand times.
5. But, if your mind keeps wandering to the same thing over and over, stop for a minute; maybe it is trying to tell you something important.

That is all there is to it. It is incredibly simple and requires nothing more than the willingness to do it with some persistence, yet, at least for me, it has been second only to formal seated meditation as the most important method of practice in my training.

The reason for step number one is not hard to see: if we accept that Truth is One and undivided, then It can only be

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realized by a mind which is itself unified and aware. Such one-pointedness and mindfulness are, by definition, impossible when you are doing two things at once or are not paying attention to what you are doing. Thus, if you choose to try this practice, it means no more eating breakfast, talking to your spouse, and watching “Good Morning America” all at the same time; planning your ten o’clock meeting while you drive to work is out; so are thinking about skiing while you do the dishes, reading a magazine while you’re on the toilet, and worrying about your finances while you plant your garden.

This practice, you will note, is exactly what the schedule, rules, and ceremonial of a training monastery help one to do. For the new trainee in a monastery, the opportunities to learn this art are considerable. He or she does so naturally if he simply follows the schedule and keeps his mind on what he is doing. The postulancy and novitiate are times in a monastic career when the method of every-minute meditation can be most easily practiced. Not all of us, however, are attracted to a monastic vocation, and even those who are so inclined do not remain beginning trainees forever. For most people, therefore, the task is a little harder because there are usually many things which we could (or, worse yet, should) be doing at any given time, and the temptation to do more than one of them is great. A person in this position may find it helpful to add a “step zero” before the first step. Step zero is to decide what is the one most important thing to be doing at this particular moment; then, do it.

Not only must we do one thing at a time, but also we must pay attention to the one thing that we are doing. This attention should be the same as that used in formal seated meditation. One must not exclude thoughts, perceptions, emotions, etc.; yet whenever one is aware of having become attached to, or enmeshed in, them, one brings one’s mind back to focus on the task at hand. It is very important to

understand this statement. Mindfulness training is not the same as focusing the concentration upon one object to the exclusion of all other things. That would be simply a different way to create a duality, to divide up the world. It would also be dangerous: people who exclude things from their awareness tend to deceive themselves and to have accidents. This, by the way, is one means the teachers in a Buddhist monastery have of knowing if the students are doing the practice of mindfulness correctly. If they are doing it right, they become more efficient at their jobs; if they've got it backwards, they start having accidents or become inefficient. So, you exclude nothing from awareness, but when you realize that you have become distracted, then your attention is gently returned to the present activity. This is repeated hundreds, perhaps thousands, of times a day, and there is a certain amount of trial and error involved in learning how to do it correctly.

So much for steps number one through four. They are not hard to understand; with them it is really mostly a matter of whether or not one decides to do them. Step five, however, requires more exploration. Occasionally a thought just will not leave you alone. No matter how many times you bring your mind back to the business at hand, this thought keeps insisting itself upon your consciousness. There is sometimes a good reason for this: the thought is trying to tell you something. What I do in this circumstance is to stop what I am doing and take that "bothersome" thought seriously for a moment. In other words, I make thinking about that topic the one thing I am doing: I switch my attention to it and cease doing what I was doing before. The most common causes for such persistent thoughts are that there is something else that you could be doing which is more urgent than what you were working on at the time, that there is something left unfinished or wrong or dangerous in what you are doing, or that there is a nice ripe insight waiting to come into your awareness. If none of these things seem to



Working meditation.

be the case and there does not appear to be anything further to be learned from examining the thought, then switch your attention back to what you were doing before. If the thought still keeps coming up, allow yourself to stop again after a while and look at it another time, and so forth.

This ability to switch one's attention from one activity to another readily and without attachment does not come easily for most of us. With practice, it can be cultivated. In a training monastery the schedule is designed to help one learn this: when the bell sounds one stops what one is doing, bows, and goes to the next thing. You might think of certain aspects of your life as this bell: "intruding" but important thoughts, the boss's request to change everything you've just done, or the baby's crying. They are signals to "bow" and switch your attention to something else. I sometimes liken mindfulness training to driving on an icy road: keep a gentle, smooth control of the wheel, keep your eyes on the road—but don't ignore your peripheral vision, and when you see a truck skidding towards you, change course gently and don't insist on the right-of-way!

There are two common objections to the practice of every-minute meditation. The first is, "I'll never get my work done if I do only one thing at a time." This is a reasonable concern; fortunately it is usually unfounded. What actually happens for most people (after the initial few days of awkwardness when the whole thing can seem a bit strange and disruptive of one's habitual patterns of living) is that they can actually do more and better work by doing one thing at a time. I think what happens is that the time saved when one does several things at once is more than compensated for by the increased efficiency (and decreased tension) that results from devoting all of one's attention to the task at hand.

The second objection is that doing this is a lot of work and it interferes with customary social interactions. This is true, and it is for these reasons that I do not recommend doing it all the time, at least not for most people. Even in the monastic setting, a certain rest from this practice is built into the system, and the monks enjoy social conversation while drinking tea or eating an informal meal in the refectory. So, perhaps you may choose to eat breakfast and talk to your spouse at the same time, after all. Go ahead, and enjoy the meal together (but I'll bet you enjoy it more if you don't also try watching TV at the same time).

My advice, therefore, is to do one thing at a time (and pay attention to it) as much as it seems wise to do so, bring your mind back gently each time it wanders, but don't be so strict on yourself that you find the practice unpalatable. Done properly, the exercise of every-minute meditation is refreshing, liberating, and energizing. Together with formal seated meditation, it can make a significant contribution to increasing one's religious understanding. It is my favorite form of meditation.