

The Refuge of Sitting

A reader from Boise, Idaho writes: "How do I develop a disciplined sitting practice?"

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Developing a disciplined sitting practice is a matter of commitment and patience. For many practitioners, it is not easy, even for those who have been sitting for a while. Sitting every day must become a priority in our daily lives rather than just one more thing we have to do. This requires a great deal of dedication, because meditation is not supported by our culture at large. Watching television is rarely criticized as being selfish, whereas a common question that practitioners bring up is whether one "deserves" to sit, implying that it is selfish to do so. Here are a few tips:

Plan to sit at the same time each day. One of the benefits of doing this is that one gets to know the mind that doesn't want to sit. Personally, I like to sit immediately upon waking up in the morning. For many people, this seems to be a good time, before we become engaged in the activities of the day. But if you have small children or a demanding job, this may not be possible. And some of us have rebellious natures, so any routine presents a problem. Then we need to be flexible.

Another common question is how long to sit. Generally it is better to sit for a shorter amount of time than to sit way beyond our capacity. If we are constantly struggling to stay still, we may find ourselves wanting to throw our cushion against the wall instead of sitting on it. This should be avoided; after all, our frustration is not the cushion's fault. We should determine for ourselves the amount of time we sit - there are no set formulas. Too long, and we may never want to sit again; too short, and our practice won't develop.

It can be helpful to set an electronic timer rather than having to watch a clock. Because the practice is to let go of thoughts about the past and the future, this will free you from having to think or worry about time. You can simply set yourself a specific amount of time to sit and rely on an external sound to signal when the sitting is over.

It is important to sit with the clear intention to be present. At the same time, we need to let go of expectations. In a very real sense, what happens when we sit is none of our business. The practice is to accept whatever arises instead of trying to control our experience. What we can control is our wise effort to be present with what is. We can spend a lot of our sitting time dwelling on memories of past sittings or fantasizing of those to come. When we read or hear about the benefits of meditation, it is tempting to dwell on the stories of wonderful outcomes instead of doing the work of actualizing these possibilities ourselves. There can be a big gap between what we have read about and what is actually happening. Sitting is a way of putting our bodies behind our aspirations.

Some of us sit only when our lives are going well. When difficulties arise, we stop our practice rather than sit with disturbing emotions such as anxiety and anger. Others sit only when facing a big challenge, hoping that sitting will help us get through it. Being aware of these tendencies is part of what we face in sustaining a regular practice.

What hinders and intimidates beginners especially are experiences such as restlessness, sleepiness, and boredom. If we view these energies as part of the practice itself instead of what we need to get rid of in order to meditate, our sittings will be smoother and we will develop the inner strength to be able to be with all experiences with greater equanimity.

Even so, only rarely is sitting practice sustained without help from others. This cannot be overemphasized. To sit with others is a way to feel newly inspired and able to continue. Usually it is easier to sit for a longer amount of time in the company of others than to sit alone. Peer pressure can be a good thing. By sitting with others, even once a week, we reinspire our practice, while in sitting alone we learn self-reliance.

Whatever technique one is using, remember that the spirit of practice is more important than the technique. Finding a way to enjoy just sitting is key. Sitting meditation is a refuge, not a test.

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