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Unlearning Meditation: What to Do When the Instructions Get in the Way

Jason Siff
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Although studies and anecdotal reports abound about meditation's value, for many people there's still one sticking point to developing a consistent practice: following the directions. Meditation instructions can differ in wording, but most teachers tend to direct meditation students in similar ways, prompting them to observe emotions and thoughts, and then let them go. The only problem, notes author Jason Siff, is that when the mind rebels, students feel a kind of "meditator's guilt."

"When we learn how to meditate, we try to do the instructions perfectly, setting high standards for ourselves," he writes. "We consequently experience periods of failure and inadequacy, along with the occasional moments of success, but it all adds up to guilt at not meditating often enough, not doing it well enough, not being the ideal meditator."

Subsequently, he adds, meditators tend to push themselves too hard or sit in pain or get angry at their own emotions. Rather than guide people back to the standard instructions, or try to find different words to make the directions clearer, Siff encourages meditators to become receptive to the discipline in a new way, and to see so-called obstacles like compelling thoughts, daydreams, sleepiness, and physical discomfort as tolerable rather than annoying.

Siff blends his Eastern and Western experience—he was a Theravidin monk in Sri Lanka in the 1980s, but then came back to the United States to study psychology—to give the work spiritual rigor and grounding, while still appealing to a broad audience. Readers don't need to be Buddhist, or even familiar with its philosophical concepts, to benefit from Siff's clearly articulated, thoughtful advice.

A particularly useful aspect of his approach is in paying attention to personal stories. He notes that many meditation practices in the East discourage students from paying attention to their personal narratives in practice, but that Western psychology sees them as valuable. "Why not let our internal narrators take the stage and perform?" he writes. "They will do it anyway, without asking our permission. And there may be things for us to learn from ourselves from enduring their performances."

By making a change from what's traditionally done in a meditation practice, Siff frees meditators from their own expectations, and ultimately, any guilt about not following the rules. With a gentle style that's encouraging, wise, and even playful at times, Siff provides a very useful guide for those who want to meditate, but need to "unlearn" in order to move forward.

ELIZABETH MILLARD (June 15, 2010)

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