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My Experience with Meditation

(talk given to the Bastrop Buddhist Sangha 9-29-11)

I became interested in meditation in College. I was attending Mississippi College a Southern Baptist School in Clinton, Ms. I began exploring other faith traditions as my disenchantment with fundamentalist evangelicalism of my youth grew. Drawn to the monastic tradition of the Catholic Church, I experienced the extreme demands of a structured religious life as strangely appealing. The writing of St John the Cross and other church leaders fascinated me. I found the long contemplative tradition as an attractive alternative to biblical literalism of my contemporaries.

By far the most captivating writer was Thomas Merton. He provided an almost sublime religious option. A hermit in the Kentucky mountain Trappist Monastery. He spent his days in Silence, Reading, and writing alone in a one room cabin. For a loner, intellectual, religious, seeker, it was Nirvana. I would be introduced to the East through Merton's writings. Exploring Eastern Monasticism I came into contact with eastern versions of meditation. Meditation captivated even if the theology of self negation was not appealing to someone who sense their own ego as too weak as it was. Nothingness scared me. Admittedly, I was reading about the East through Western Christian eyes. The inevitable distortions biased me against Buddhism at the time.

By my sophomore year I began attending a church that respected my religious curiosity, the Universalist Unitarian Church of Jackson. Even so I could not give up my local Baptist church. I continued to sing in the choir for early services while attending the UU church later. My grandmother attended my Baptist church and I did not want to disappoint her as well. During this time I ran across a book by Jon Kabat Zinn on the use of meditation to treat the chronically ill - Full Catastrophe Living. I was taken by his clinical use of meditation, so I started sitting for the first time.

This lasted about 6 months, but I gradually stopped sitting as my isolation from other practitioners weighted on me. Over the next couple of decades, through graduate school, marriage, parenting, jobs, I would get out a pillow and give it another try. But would again fall into non-use after a few weeks (days). Many times thinking I had a good reason to try again. But the lack of support really undermined my attempts.

Finally as my person crisis came to a head, I found myself in prison. Meditation became more than just a nice idea. The practice would become a critical life preserver. I read Bo Lazoff's We're All Doing Time. His encouragement for mediation was all I needed to restart again with new energy. I began to sit and use walking mediation daily. By the time I reached 6 months, it was a crucial not only for stress relief, but slowly began to be a time to begin to see my own self destructive behavior more clearly. Awareness of my own behavior and how my choices led me to my present state.

One person asked what is the difference between pre mediation and post mediation Allan? Awareness, was my response. Before I lived in a fog. Mindlessly reacting to what the day presented. I lived from the neck up, not really connected to my body/heart. Now I am becoming more conscious of how disconnected and fogbound I was. Identifying how I can make different choices and connecting with my has been healing. I ache thinking about all those hurtful choices I have made, but hopeful that I can make more healing choices now and in the future.

Mindful Prisoner