
Yang Xing

English 101

Professor Heather Julien

Feb 22nd

Meditation and Life

About two years ago, I was totally shocked when I knew one of my acquaintances Jie, who has long been a sincere Buddhist and practicing meditation diligently, abandoned his job as an engineer and decided to live inside Zhongnan Mountain as a recluse ever after. Jie used to be an optimistic and passionate person, and apparently the reason for his escape must be related to his religious belief to some extent. I was totally confused. Why did Buddhism bring him escapism? How can meditation become the enemy of mundane life?

As a semi-Buddhist myself, I somehow felt the responsibility that I must do something for my colleagues. I firmly believed that if I know how to deal with Jie's problem, I might be able to help other Buddhists who are going to meet the same situation in the future.

To begin with, I bought many theoretical books about Buddhism philosophy and meditation, and I studied them carefully one by one. After reading tons of long and obscure books, I finally realized that what is behind this simple word "meditation" is not simple at all.

If one searches the word "meditation" on Google, he or she will get more than 149,000,000 results, and a large number of these websites differ in their explanations towards "meditation". Commonly, meditation refers to a group of spiritual practices that aim to train one's mind in order to find inner peace, promote relaxation and happiness, and build positive characters such as compassion, courage and forgiveness.

However, although most forms of meditation have the same goal, depending on different schools of thoughts, different forms of meditation can vary largely in regarding to their specific methods. For example, in the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, monks train themselves through the use of thoughts. In other words, their typical way of training includes thinking about how they love their enemies, and how they can be compassionate about creatures including even the smallest insects. This type of cognitive-based training often results in the gaining of some moral characters.

In contrary, other schools such as Zen Buddhism will not focus on thoughts, since they believe the chase of the truth is post-rational. That is, it is beyond our binary logical thinking system, and can not be attained through mental activity. As a result of that, Zen Buddhism will train people's choiceless, non-dual awareness, and they believe through this unbiased awareness people could truly eliminate their sufferings and obsession, and finally become free.

Other schools of Buddhism also have their unique forms of meditation. For instance, Chinese Zen includes the practice of martial-arts meditation in order to cultivate practitioners' persistence, and at the same time let them realize the transiency

of their body life. Even many ancient Western wisdom systems adapt meditation, and those include new-Platonism, Patristic philosophy and Biblical Hermeneutics in different eras.

Despite all those differences, various forms of meditation still maintain many basic similarities, and their tools for meditation, a mat and a cushion, are one of them. Although nowadays people have invented all sorts of gorgeous equipment for practitioners, a mat and a cushion still remain the simplest and the best tools for meditation practice. Often, the mat is made into oval or circular shape in order to illustrate the Buddhism idea that we all have the potential to achieve the state of perfection through our practice. The mat is often filled with hard particles, partially due to the comfortable reason, and partially due to the Buddhism idea that everything is as transient as small particles.

The cushion is usually made into deep colors, particularly blue or black. This choice of color is also intentional: it represents the darkness that covers up our true heart, and by meditating using a dark cushion, practitioners will be always aware that they need to cross over the darkness to find their true nature.

After all those theoretical studies, I already gained more than enough knowledge about meditation; nevertheless, I still could not find any single description of Jie's situation in any book, so although reluctantly, I knew that I had to give up on finding the solution by myself and try to ask others for help. At that time, I was still in my high school in Beijing; as a result, I decided to ask Buddhism teachers in China first.

Although nowadays China has been criticized for its loss of beliefs, it is worth

noticing that religions, especially Buddhism and Taoism, still play important roles in our life styles and cultures. Especially in places such as Tibet and Xinjiang, where people at those places even keep religions as unalienable parts of their life. After careful consideration and discussion with my parents, I finally decided to start from Tibet.

After I graduated from my high school, I instantaneously implemented my plan. I travelled to Tibet with my parents, and while visiting beautiful natural sights and monasteries that have long history, we also talked to local practitioners and monks about Jie's situation. However, to our disappointment, after travelling around nearly the whole Tibet, we still could not find anyone who can give us any valuable suggestions. They either promoted themselves as saviors or masterminds, and required us blindly follow them, or they just recited long and tenebrous poems from some ancient book and let us think by ourselves. Finally, after we finished the trip, I still had no idea about Jie and his case. In August, being filled with doubts and worries, I finally walked into the plane that will cross the Pacific Ocean, and prepared to face my college life in a new country.

After I had arrived at Emory and settled down, my desire urged me to continue studying Jie's problem. I was totally aware that America is a completely different country, and before I begin with anything, I should firstly learn about Buddhism in America.

I checked some famous websites about American Buddhism, and, since the history of American Buddhism is much shorter than Chinese Buddhism, it did not take

me so much time to learn everything. Since the beginning of 1950s, a number of famous Buddhism teachers including Shunryu Suzuki Roshi and Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche traveled across the sea to promote Buddhism in America. Although Buddhism had already been a part of America since 1840s, it was only until that time did people fully start to recognize the importance of authentic and orthodox spiritual practice. After more than half a century, meditation has now become more and more popular among Americans, and various scientific studies have also shown, in many ways, the positive effects on physical and mental health associated with meditation.

However, while reading all those historical texts and experiment results, I suddenly realized that, in this country, people's interests mainly lie on the objective and scientific side of meditation, and often the inner achievements and subjective feelings of practitioners are, to a large extent, neglected. I did not think it is right, for Buddhism is not only about science and facts. Trying to explain everything about Buddhism in lab reports is just like explaining Jesus Christ's resurrection in biology. From that point on, in addition to the wish to use my knowledge in helping others, I had another reason that drives me to study Jie's problem: my aspiration to present meditation in a more plural way to others.

In order to do this, I figured out that I would try to ask some Buddhists in Emory University, and there are several aims that I wished to achieve through talking to them. On the first place, I wished that I could find my answer to Jie's problem, and in order to do that, I must also understand the relationship between spiritual practice and daily life to a deeper extent. In addition, as a semi-Buddhist myself, I also

wanted to learn something about this university's Buddhist community and, especially, their spiritual practice. Finally, I wanted to inform people more about the benefits of spiritual practices.

I have chosen three individuals that I was going to talk to, and they were Andy, Sonam and Geshe Damdul. I believe that, although all belong to Emory's Buddhists community, these three people could individually represent three different small groups. Andy represents an American Buddhist who is just a beginner in meditation; Sonam represents a monk who has been practicing for longer period; and Geshe represents a very experienced Buddhism teacher. I was convinced that by talking to these three people, I could get opinions from various perspectives, thus fully solve the problem that has troubled me for nearly a year.

Indeed, I did get very different answers from them. Especially in regarding to the question of Jie's experience, everyone of them responded in a different way. Andy, as an American, believed it is mainly because of the difference in attitudes. He suggested that American people only use meditation as a supplement to their daily life, so there will not be any conflict, and only who bases his or her whole life on Nirvana or the ultimate goal will have this problem. In contrary, Sonam, based on his experience in a monastery, asserted that the problem can be solved since people can practice in a community as good as they do in a mountain, and he also added that, sometimes the vows of Buddhism will make people more difficult to reconcile their mundane and spiritual life. Last but not the least; Geshe Damdul explained the situation in a more general way based on his knowledge and

experience. He explained that this pessimistic attitude is only one particular phase of people' s practice, and sometimes this attitude can be important in rooting spiritual practice in people' s life. However, he also suggested that although this attitude is justified at a special level, practitioners cannot grow too obsessed with it and need to make progress, and gradually back to the community.

By synthesizing their viewpoints, I believe that I have known more about this situation, and I am confident to help anyone who has this difficulty in the future.