

Winnie the Pooh and the Art of Doing Nothing

Retreat, Sunday, October 7th, 2018

“Don't underestimate the value of doing nothing, of just going along, listening to all the things you can't hear, and not bothering.”

Doesn't that sound pleasant? What is it that is so appealing about Just Going Along and Not Bothering? Maybe it's that it sounds so easy. There's no effort involved. You aren't trying to get anywhere or achieve anything. It's like a lovely Sunday afternoon. You aren't napping – you're listening to things you can't hear - but you also aren't expending a lot of effort. There is a lot of value in that sort of intentional ease.

In our meditation practice (indeed in every aspect of our lives), there is a time for effort and a time for ease. A time to bear down and a time to loosen up. A time for rigor and a time for gentleness. Some of you may know the buddhist parable of the lute. In this story, a monk goes to the Buddha asking why, despite his diligence, he was not progressing along the spiritual path. This monk had been a musician before entering the monastery, so the Buddha likened the spiritual life to playing a lute. If the strings are too tight or too loose, you cannot play the instrument, but when they are adjusted just right, then you can make beautiful music.

I would expand on this analogy by saying that every time you play the lute you have to tune it. Whether the strings need to be tightened or loosened, a lot or a little, depends on when you last played, what the weather is like, and which songs you want to play. So it is with our meditation practice. Every time we sit down, we need to adjust our meditation to the current situation. Sometimes we need to bear down. Sometimes we need to loosen up.

Different teachers, styles, and schools of meditation emphasize these to varying degrees. Zen buddhism, for example, is very rigorous. There are lots of rules, so many that they seem pointless, like which foot you have to move first when you walk or where you place your spoon before a meal. And if you do something wrong, a senior monk will shout at you.

At the other end of the scale, there is the Dzogchen school of Tibetan buddhism, that teaches that we are already enlightened and any attempt to *gain* enlightenment is counterproductive. In fact, some teachings go so far as to say that “effort is the disease which keeps us from recognizing our Natural State.”

Now both of these schools have been around for centuries and are still thriving, so clearly both approaches to meditation work. Me, I like to go back to the lute parable in which we are encouraged to do both, as and when appropriate.

So although I do not wish to diminish in any way the benefit of rigor and effort, today I want to talk about the Value of Doing Nothing. The importance of ease.

What exactly does it mean to Do Nothing in the context of spiritual practice? In Dzogchen, it means calling off the chase. Giving up the search for freedom. No longer looking *for* something. No longer trying to achieve something. No longer having goals or expectations, because this moment is perfect the way it is, and so are we all. Stop *trying*.

If we go back to the Zen meditation hall, we find that despite all the rules and discipline infusing every moment of activity, the instructions for meditation are “just it.” That’s it. No rules, not even any guidelines. Don’t try to meditate. Don’t try to do anything. Just sit. But this doing nothing doesn’t mean you just daydream or doze off. If you doze off in the zendo, a senior monk will hit you with a stick to wake you up. So you don’t *try* to do anything, but at the same time, there are some things you have an intention to not do. The key here is that when you Just Sit, you have an intention to Just Sit. You do not have an intention to sleep or daydream. Once you start, you don’t try to not sleep, but having set an intention before hand points you in the right direction for getting value out of Doing Nothing.

This kind of “just sitting” meditation is sometimes called Choiceless Awareness. *Trying* requires making choices about what you are trying to do. Choiceless Awareness is about allowing awareness to happen without choosing what you are aware of. You don’t go looking for something. You receive what comes to you. What eventually happens is that awareness just arises spontaneously. You are not trying to meditate, but meditation is happening. It’s like you are being meditated. Because you are open to receiving whatever is there, and you are not limiting yourself to particular experiences, you are able to

receive everything. As Christopher Robin says in his recent movie, “Out of Nothing can come the most extraordinary Somethings,” that might have otherwise passed you by.

Let’s explore this idea of choiceless doing nothing a little more. Many buddhist monasteries engage in the practice of monks going on alms rounds to get their food. Every day, the monks will go into the town near their monastery and stand quietly and still. Townspeople put food or money into the monk’s bag. When the monks return to the monastery, whatever they have collected is what they will eat that day. While they are on their rounds, they do not speak or make eye contact with the townspeople. They do not ask. In fact, they are not even allowed to touch the food. The giver must place it in the bag directly. The monk has no influence at all over what is given to him to eat. He has no choice. And back at the monastery, he is required to eat all that is given. He can’t ask for anything in particular, and he can’t refuse anything either. He receives whatever comes to him and eats it with gratitude.

Having no control might sound scary, but there is a lot of freedom to this choicelessness. No effort is expended in trying to make decisions. No preferences or aversions can interfere with the experience just as it is. If preferences or aversions do arise, they may be observed, but they have no influence on what is consumed. All the decisions are made without any effort from you, so you can spend your entire attention on what is before you, being totally in the present experience.

If you spend your energy seeking after one thing, you end up missing a lot of other things. Have you ever noticed that? If you’re out birdwatching, you are likely to miss all the amazing insects at your feet. The monk may have to eat some things he doesn’t like, but he also gets to eat things he’s never even known about before. If you spend a lot of energy directing your attention toward seeing or hearing particular things, then there will be a lot of things you miss. But if you Just Go Along, Doing Nothing, you’ll see things you couldn’t see before, and you’ll hear things you couldn’t hear before. You recapture the wonder of childhood, when everything was new and exciting and you didn’t want to miss a thing.

I am impressed with how well A.A. Milne understood the mind of a child. There’s something that happens to our minds as we mature: the more experience we have of being alive, the more our mind draws on that experience to make sense of the world each moment. It is much more efficient,

from a cognitive point of view, to be able to look back at memories of similar events make conclusions about the present based on the past. For example, you look at a creature on the street, and because you've seen lots of similar looking things that have all turned out to be cats, you can quickly conclude that this is also a cat. You don't have to take in every piece of information that's in front of you right now, sort out what's relevant, analyze all the possibilities, and finally decide that this fits all the criteria for a thing that is called a cat. Your mind just quickly looks back on past experience and says "looks like a cat." That's a really useful thing to do when you see a tiger charging you. You don't have time to take in everything and come to logical conclusions. Your brain flips through it's rolodex of experiences and says "looks dangerous" and you run away. This is called *predictive thinking*, and it dominates the adult mind.

Young children haven't had enough experiences to do this yet. They are still learning, gathering information. As a consequence, young children tend to take in everything without discrimination. There's no immediate judgement about what's important and what's not. By adolescence, though, the rolodex is full enough to be able to trust past experience to interpret the present. As we mature, we lose this ability to see everything broadly and receptively and become more and more dependent on predictive thinking. The older we get, the more often we come to our quick conclusions, the deeper the ruts grow and the narrower our focus becomes.

There is a developmental psychologist at Berkeley called Alison Gopnik, who studies the consciousness of children. In her book, *The Philosophical Baby*, she describes two kinds of awareness: *spotlight consciousness* and *lantern consciousness*. Adults have spotlight consciousness. This is the tendency to focus your attention on a narrow goal. Having outgrown the need to pay attention to everything, adults tend to default to a narrow view, and tend to focus on things that require figuring out or achieving. In other words, adults are goal oriented and narrowly focussed.

Children have lantern consciousness, in which the attention is widely diffused. The child takes in information from the entire field of awareness, learning all there is to learn. They aren't solving problems. They don't have a goal. They are just experiencing everything there is to experience in that moment and that environment. Children aren't really able to focus attention and use conclusive reasoning; on the other hand adults aren't very good at experiencing what Gopnik calls the "vivid panoramic illumination of the everyday." It is *possible* for adults to have lantern consciousness, but it is

uncommon and not something adults would think was valuable. We believe that broad, receptive consciousness is childish and perhaps a waste of a mature brain, but most adults have no idea what they have lost. Gropnik says, that because “the young child has comparatively few... preconceptions to guide her perceptions down predictable tracks... the child approaches reality with astonishment...”

This indiscriminating, non-judgemental, broad receptivity inherent in children is what Zen is trying to teach through “just sitting” and what Dzogchen is encouraging by avoiding effort. Of course, being still young, Christopher Robin and Winnie the Pooh did it naturally, and it never occurred to them that it wouldn’t be a pleasant and worthwhile thing to do. That A.A. Milne was able to maintain this point of view and express it so beautifully in his books is a gift to all his adult readers.

So what’s this about “not bothering”? Is it somehow connected to receptive choiceless awareness? It is indeed.

There’s a British idiom that I used a lot when I lived over there. The phrase is to “not be bothered.” You’d say “I didn’t do the dishes last night because I couldn’t be bothered.” Or “I should do my homework now, but I just can’t be bothered.” This turn of phrase means that you have neither interest nor motivation to do something. It’s a great excuse for a lot of things (and probably more honest than many other excuses). But this sort of “not being bothered” is decidedly NOT what Pooh is talking about.

When Pooh uses the term, it is in reference to things about which he was a lot of interest and motivation. It’s usually something like, “Oh, bother. I’m out of honey.” Or, “I am a bear of very little brain and long words bother me.” Pooh gets bothered when something is not to his liking, or is mildly distressing: if he is expecting something but is disappointed, or if he is confused. It’s his response to a situation that he wants to be different. He *could* react to the same event differently. He might say “I’m out of honey, but I’m not bothered, because there are so many other wonderful things to experience today instead.” There is an element of natural response and an element of choice in the final reaction. The natural response may be disappointment, but the chosen response is to Not Be Bothered. Or perhaps after some meditation training, Pooh’s natural response to No Honey is actually no longer disappointment. Then he doesn’t have to make a choice to Not Be Bothered. Maybe after a while he becomes comfortable with the confusion of Big Words, so the use of Big Words no longer causes a

natural reaction of being bothered. What's nice is that the more you *choose* to Not Be Bothered, the more it happens naturally. I'll be honest, though. Sometimes it can take a lot of effort to decide to not be bothered by something.

Say Pooh and Christopher Robin (and Piglet, too – why not?) go for a walk and do nothing. They have no expectations, because they have purposely not chosen any goal or made any plan. Then there is nothing that can disappoint them, so there would be nothing to bother them. Perhaps they see something they don't understand, but they have already decided that on this walk, they aren't going to let confusion get to them. Whenever they are confused, they say “oh, I don't understand that. Oh, well. There it is.” And they just keep going along toward whatever comes next.

Children often act like this. To be sure, they often have expectations, too, and get Very Bothered. Indeed when their expectations and desires aren't met. But watch kids when they're just out playing, running from one thing to the next, getting distracted by a caterpillar or a dead leaf, and then moving on when they lose interest. No expectations. No Bother. All wonder.

“Not Being Bothered” is a beautiful way of defining one aspect of Equanimity. It's not apathetic disinterest. It's tremendous interest, but also being OK with whatever happens.

Pooh's decision to Do Nothing and Just Go Along encourages his experience of Not Being Bothered, by intentionally creating a situation in which Being Bothered is unlikely to occur, and by deciding to Just Go Along when something might. In this way, Not Being Bothered is as effortless as Doing Nothing. Similarly, Choiceless Awareness tends to create effortless Equanimity.

We are all old enough to be well entrained in Predictive Thinking. But we can learn to have lantern consciousness, to wonder, to experience the astonishment of childhood. I will teach you one technique that can develop this sort of attentional skill and doing it can help develop equanimity, too.

There is a time for effort and a time for ease. We in the West are really good at effort. By this afternoon you will also know how to meditate with ease.

Then whenever you want to, you can go for a walk in the woods and Do Nothing, just go along listen to all the things you can't hear, and Not Be Bothered.

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