

THINGS I DID WRONG

March 16, 2013

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

... in learning meditation, that is. Otherwise, it would take a book or two. Here are just a few of the many things I didn't get right. This has to be a little bit humorous. Otherwise it is too depressing.

One thing I did wrong (way back in the 1960s) was to make up my own idea of what meditation is. I mean, everyone else I knew seemed to be doing it too. We all had our own idea of meditation and these ideas were all over the board. No one knew what I did in the privacy of my meditation, sadly, probably including me. Only later did I find out that most of us did not know what we were doing, but we each thought everyone else did and wanted to keep up with the Joneses. How common is that?

It was only when I began meeting the actual Zen and Tibetan Buddhist teachers that I cleaned up my act, like when I realized that these folks actually had a consistent idea and method as to what meditation was. I kind of stopped trotting out my own version of meditation and was forced to take a second look at what I was doing, which really was pretending to meditate. My own private (and supposedly ingenious) ideas on meditation did not last long around real meditators. They knew what they were talking about. I did not.

TRY TOO HARD

Another thing I have lived to regret was trying to go along with the popular idea back then that you really had to meditate for long periods of time, until it hurts. This was the "no pain, no gain" approach. The pain of effort was good for you, I was told. This approach was all the rage back in the early 1970s, but not with me it wasn't.

All that pushing too hard did was make me not like meditation and (subconsciously at least) try to avoid meditation as much as I could and still look myself in the mirror, still be a "New Age" person. I liked the idea of being a dharma person, and so I tried to keep my hand in, but pinching myself has never been my idea of a good time.

THINK I KNEW

One of my worst habits was to actually believe my own BS. In the beginning, after sitting for a short time, I promptly labeled (to myself at least) what I was doing was "meditating." Everyone else did the same thing. People seldom talked about what we actually did in meditation. It was a little like the confessional of my Catholic upbringing, secret. In truth, mostly I was sitting there waiting until the time I had set to sit expired. All too often I was waiting to get out of there and on with my day.

Sure, I half-heartedly tried to learn the basic technique, but mostly I was daydreaming, totally lost in one thought or another. I even knew this was what I was doing, but somehow thought that a little bit of meditation (whatever that was) would rub off from just sitting there. Not much ever did. Why?

Mainly because I did not really know how to meditate or what kind of effort (how hard to try) it took. What I was supposed to be experiencing (i.e. meditation) was an unknown for me. I had no real idea or experience what it was, and my feeble efforts seemed lost in the expanse of daydreaming that went on. I was just sitting there, kind of looking around and waiting until the meter expired.

When Buddhists use the term “turning the wheel of the dharma,” they refer to the activity of the Buddha, but the Buddha pointed out that we each have to turn it for ourselves. It was not like my Catholic upbringing, where (supposedly) Jesus could touch me on the forehead and a miracle might happen, and I would be saved, enlightened, or whatever that touch does.

Buddha makes it clear that no one will ever just show up and enlighten me. Not only will we wait forever, but Buddhists claims we already have waited forever, that we are the stragglers. Enlightenment is a do-it-yourself project and some day we each have to enlighten ourselves. I mean, that’s the whole point!

The Buddha pointed out to all of us how we can enlighten ourselves, the method. That is what is called the “dharma,” a path that someday we each have to enter, and it’s not a zap on the forehead. We can sit there forever, daydreaming (and apparently have been doing just that), and nothing will ever happen. That was a tough concept for me to get my mind around. I kind of liked delinquently sitting there, hoping I would get enlightened by something or someone -- somehow struck by enlightenment. No such luck. This was the old “the world owes me a living” syndrome so popular with young people.

For me (and for all of us), sooner or later, it is a case of pick up your bed Lazarus and walk. Someday I actually had to get serious enough to practice the dharma for real, and in earnest. And I had to do it by myself because I want to do it. I sat there waiting for something to happen, for someone to enlighten me from the outside, for like thirty years. Imagine that!

It must be some kind of record. I bet few (if any) of you reading this have sat that long and come up with so little results. Well, I did that. That’s how much of a quick learner I am. I first had to admit that I knew nothing about meditation, and back in the 1970s that was not a cool thing to do. LOL.