

Craig Harrison's

Confessions of a Beginning Meditator



Because Nothing Succeeds Like Nothingness

Originally written in 1999.

This month marks my first year of meditation. It's not like other anniversaries of birth, marriage or moving into a new house. How do I celebrate it? A room full of celebrants, ensconced in silence? Presents unwrapped to reveal...emptiness? In meditation it seems that nothing succeeds like nothingness.

It's been an odd year for me. When I compare my practice of meditation to other skills learned or activities I've devoted time to I can't say similarities abound. Learning to ride a bike, to speak a foreign language, to play a sport or musical instrument, after a year of each the results are tangible. But what of meditation?

It Began In The Dark

For me it all began with the movie *THE JEW IN THE LOTUS* and an invitation to a local meditation center, Chochmat HaLev. "How do I prepare?" I asked, prudently, expecting certain prerequisites. "Wear comfortable clothing and be prepared to take off your shoes." That was it. So off I went, open minded if not empty headed.

I remember the first time I joined their sitting group. It hadn't even begun yet people were already entranced. Some were chanting, others looking Buddha-like with their eyes closed. Was I late? Who was leading? What was I to do? My self-consciousness was palpable. There I sat, in the midst of twenty other meditators, lonely in my uncertainty.

My initial attempts at meditation with this group misfired. As I tried to follow the directions of the instructor I found myself, rather than focusing on one thing, gradually becoming aware of *everything*. My hyper-awareness itself became a preoccupation. I was acutely aware of the heavy breathing of the woman to my right. As I breathed deeply through my nose I was quite cognizant of the body odor of the man to my left. I was trying to focus on myself yet was ever-distracted by others around me. With eyes closed the sounds of latecomers became a mystery my mind could not let go of: male or female? Are they coming toward me? When will their noise stop?

After a month of group meditation I have finally weaned myself from focusing on others while meditating. Still, distractions abounded. The meditation center was near train tracks. How do I train myself to ignore the train sounds? More distracting for me was a periodic, sporadic pinging sound coming from a nearby factory. I felt as though I was on a submarine running silent and deep, being pinged by the sonar of a surface ship. Oh, mind: please be still! Just when I've conditioned myself to ignore the pings and things a good meditation is ruined by the cacophony of the center's telephone and answering machine responding to a phone call in mid-meditation. You'd think they'd turn the volume down for meditation sessions; was I the only one who heard it?

There's something paradoxical about finding emptiness with others. And that was but one of many paradoxes I found on my journey to inner peace. Many a week I found myself racing across town so as not to be late. I had a date to dwell, an appointment without points, a commitment as much to be as to do. My fervor to arrive on time resulted in increased heartbeats, sweaty palms and an irritated demeanor. Now I was the one whose body odor arrived before me.

Here was a group of people seeking enlightenment through silence, and yet there was the natural chitchat one finds when seeing old friends, the energy of a coming together, and it was confusing to me.

Despite my difficulties in "getting it" I was making progress. I was definitely in more of a groove after a meditation than before it. Things went a bit smoother. I had a low grade "buzz" after meditating. I could accept with equanimity whatever came my way after having meditated.

Over time I began to know myself better through meditation. Morning meditations were difficult as I struggled to set aside the pressure of each day's ambitions and to-do lists. Evening meditations required a greater "stilling" of a mind. Some constants endured. Soon I developed my own little meditation ritual. While other meditators sat in the lotus position, with legs folded and palms facing upward, I always made sure to have a handkerchief on one knee, to brace for the inevitable sneeze that accompanied my deep breathing. My meditation was christened each time with a sneeze.

Meditation isn't just expanding my consciousness, but also my lexicon. There's a whole new Language: mindfulness, nothingness, being. Some words are new, from the Kabbalah and Far East, while other words are familiar, but take on new meaning. It all comes into focus when I attend my first meditation conference in San Francisco. There's excitement in the air as we congregate at a large synagogue. I meet dozens of new people. Remarkably, everyone has a practice. I felt as though I was at a medical convention. "How long have you been in practice?" "My practice is five years old." "Where do you practice?" "I'm in practice with my partner." As a beginner still consumed with whether I am "doing it right" I begin to ponder the new meaning of malpractice!

My summer is particularly harried and I can't seem to still the busyness in my brain. I decide the peace I seek must be found elsewhere. Should I seek the sea? Or perhaps a spirit walk? I decide the solitude I crave is likely at altitude. So I pack my car and set out to ascend spiritual Mount Shasta, in search of the perfect place to meditate. I drive the highways, the roads and finally ascend the glorious snow-capped mountain, five hours after leaving the hustle-bustle of the city. Its presence is commanding, rising 14,179 feet from sea level. I drive as far as I am

allowed on the mountain. Then I pop my trunk, grab my backpack and start hiking upwards. Finally I am alone! I find a giant rock on the side of the mountain, with great views in several directions. The air is crisp and clean. The scenery...splendid. I scale the rock. I congratulate myself on finding the perfect location. I assume the position. I still my mind. And all I can hear is...buzzzzzzzzzz. What is that sound? It goes away. Quiescence returns. But soon, so does the buzzing. It's a bee. A big one. And he's seemingly fixated on me, and my rock.

I am beyond annoyed. Doesn't he know how far I've come? The pains I've traveled to find peace and quiet! Somewhere where I can just be? Claiming squatter's rights, I say out loud, "I was here first." He's resolute that I am the interloper.

It's just not fair. This little bee — well, not so little, he's more like a bumble-bee, is ruining my meditation. Hours of planning, preparation and driving, hiking and climbing has gotten me to my perch. All to be thrown off by this bee.

And then the irony of it all stings me. It's comical. I came to be. And he just is. Did I really need to travel 300 miles to find peace in my mind. Wasn't there an easier way. Wasn't it ALL IN MY MIND.

And then I found the calm I was seeking. I meditated, avoided being stung, and reveled in nature, enjoying Bunny Flat and the other marvelous trails of Mt. Shasta.

It's not easy being a beginning meditator. As I continue to learn the A's, Bees and Sees of meditating, I am continually challenged to still myself and my mind, empty my head and open myself up to inner peace.

Blessings to you on your journey!