

Permission to do Any Practice

PREAMBLE

We have been working with creative ways to reflect before and after our meditation practice. One way we discovered is through free-form writing. In the piece below, we chose the topic of permission to do any practice in Reflective Meditation and wrote for 15 minutes, then shared our writing with each other. We then wrote again for another 15 minutes and did the same thing. This is the result, with a little editing, of course.

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LINDA

Meditation Teacher: We will be sitting in silence. You can have your eyes open or closed, and please choose a comfortable posture that you think you can hold relatively still with. You can move if you need to, and you can get up from the posture and stop the meditation at any point. You have the permission to do any practice you would like. This is a chance for you to sit quietly and allow some kindness and gentleness to your practice. Curiosity about your choices in the meditation sitting and in your life are important. Your physical and emotional needs are important. You may become more aware of them, and if so, you can attend to them during the meditation sitting.

Meditator: Wait these are not the typical meditation instructions! You are saying them wrong. I have sat with many teachers and they always tell me what I should do in the meditation sitting, and they even guide me and remind me throughout the session. And, I must say, usually in a very pleasant voice. Now, I really don't know what to do. How could you just leave me here alone with my own mind? I don't think you really understand how painful it is for me to keep listening to myself. It just doesn't shut up. Are you saying that is OK? That it is alright for our minds to swing like monkeys from tree to tree? That you like monkeys? Well, I don't! That is the reason I am coming to meditation. I think you are mean, withholding. You think you are better than me because you trust your mind, and it has become your friend.

Meditation Teacher: Wait. There is another part to our instructions. Maybe I leave it out, or don't touch upon it enough. Maybe it gets lost in the invitation to befriend your mind and emotions and sensations. Maybe it is difficult to hear because it is embedded within the method, and these instructions put you into trying to figure out why I am saying what I am saying. We support grounding yourself in meditation. In any way that you do. And, if you don't know how to ground yourself, we will give you a place to start. When your body is sitting still, and your mind is moving, you become more aware of what is moving. It seems so obvious. So, what are your choices? You can focus on your body, or a part of your body. It is still so maybe that will enhance your stillness. You can focus on the breath. It is moving and that can be soothing. You can repeat a word or phrase to yourself. That can be focusing. You can scan your body. You can let your mind wander. You can imagine an image.

Meditator: But I am telling you I don't know what to focus on. Or what will work for me. Each time I go to meditate it is different. It drives me crazy that I can't just do the same thing each time and feel better. Feel relaxed. Because if I can't feel relaxed or calm at some point, I will not be able to continue doing this. This is irritating at best, and torture at worst. Are you listening to me? Do you really understand what it is like to have so much going on? So much resistance and aversion? To be so self-critical of myself and others, that it feels dangerous? I don't want to increase that!

Meditation Teacher: Yes, I am listening. And, I am not sure what will work for you. This is a trial-and-error process, meditation is. I hope that you can give this a try - sitting still and becoming more aware of what moves, what stills, reflect upon it and then talk about it with us. I hope the comfort of the practice comes after the meditation sitting, if you did not find it within. I hope that you will find your authentic, creative way of practicing that leads you to greater wisdom and compassion. Is it enough that I am sitting with you, and to know my own practice and direction? Is it enough for me to offer you a space to find your own direction?

NELLY

You have permission to do whatever meditation practice you want to or try a more open, unstructured "approach". I confess, sometimes I don't want to hear about how you use meditation as an escape from the troubles of your life. But sometimes I use meditation that way and it can be relieving. Honestly some of our troubles are too hard to bear. That's the definition of dukkha "that which is hard to bear". Staying with that which is too hard to bear can be dangerous, the route into trauma and nervous system dysregulation and all the mental, emotional and physical symptoms that accompany it. This neither an onward-leading direction (in the language of dharma) nor a healing direction (in the language of psychology). How do you know what is too hard to bear? How do you find the line when rather than stretching, you have truly harmed yourself? Reflection within and after meditation helps you discern this. We aren't suggesting you "tough it out", though this view is deeply embedded in our culture and within meditation perspectives. Though we are suggesting you find new ways of relating to that which is hard to bear and that which is too hard to bear. In our instructions we suggest you identify and develop a perch, a neutral vantage point from which to either immerse your attention or be with your troubles in a more bearable way, with a bit of distance. The ongoing practice of meditation and reflection helps you discern the ways you naturally calm and cope, as well as develop new ways that are more possible with the inward focus of meditation. Ah, this is the art of meditation. Art is learned from trial and error. Art is in the eyes of the beholder.