

When the Practice Gets Difficult  
by Rebecca Dixon  
July 25, 2021

You've probably always been aware that our practice is challenging. It certainly has been for me. The hundreds of people I've helped begin meditating have almost all complained how hard it is to control their attention.

The mind can be like a young wild animal that just wiggles and runs around in any direction. It takes motivation even to try to concentrate for just a few seconds.

This is true despite the widespread idea that sitting in meditation is peaceful and relaxing. In fact, both perceptions are true. Meditation can be difficult, but every second our attention is focused is peaceful, even delightful, like when the puppy finally settles down in your lap.

Once we are able to turn the attention inward and hold it there, we start to see a different dimension of our lives. It turns out that the wild attention running around in our minds has created a massive mess.

A lot of students see what goes on in their minds and don't want to look at it anymore. They say, "I can't do this, my mind just can't settle down."

Others spend years looking for the "zone" where their mental state is steady and serene. They try and try to concentrate. But once they stop trying, the mind seems to go back to the mess it was.

Some people manage to concentrate for part of their sitting, and then for the rest of the day, hold on to the serenity this brought them. The mind may revert to a wilderness in the background of their awareness, but they can recall the peace that period of concentration brought. This is nice, but it won't lead to great progress toward liberation.

Some concentration is necessary for mindfulness to be established. We have to be able to notice when the mind is just playing around with passing thoughts. Noticing this is invaluable. I think of this as the vein of gold that meditation lets us access. But, you know, mining that gold can be really hard.

The process takes us right up to, and through, some of life's hardest experiences. When something awful happens, we respond with a long list of difficult thoughts and emotions. Some of them trigger feelings we had in past experiences. The dukkha multiplies like a virus.

This past week my wife was in a collision with our relatively new car. Fortunately, no one was injured, but it was still bad, the car may be totaled, and Carla felt terrible even though it was clearly not her fault. For a couple days, every time I meditated, I was bombarded by thoughts and feelings about this event, and almost all of them were unpleasant.

I noticed that I needed to focus – really concentrate – before my mind could do anything but make me feel worse. It took most of the sitting for the mind to steady, and then I was able to see that a lot of the thoughts swirling around were not true. It was like junk messages I could just delete without reading or listening to. With a little more serenity from concentrating again, I could then deal with my reactions to problems that were real.

These negative feelings were like injured children that just needed to be heard, and held. I needed to sit with them and embrace them until they calmed down. This was difficult, but actually easier than it sounds. A parent or older child will feel compassion as they try to sooth an upset youngster, and that state of mind is filled with love. It nourishes our hearts to feel love, and this makes compassion relatively painless, even when we feel it for ourselves.

It helps to bear in mind that our suffering is not the event, but our reactions to the event. Part of the event that upset me was knowing all the phone calls and paperwork I would have to deal with. But that was in the unknown future. I realized I would just need to deal with things as they happened.

The challenge of mindfulness is to hold our focus on the day-to-day ups and downs, rather than avoiding them through distractions such as pleasant fantasies, or by retreating into outright denial. The more we can be mindful during the day, the more often we can make peace with the truth of our ongoing internal experience.

At the end of my first 10-day retreat, Joseph Goldstein congratulated us for staying for the whole retreat. He got a good laugh by noting that it wasn't the way most people spend a 10-day vacation.

We laughed because during that time we all had encountered deep places within us that were distressing. And we had accepted the challenge to just stay there with those difficult feelings, to be with them and accept them, and to let them heal.

Joseph told us about a friend whose son was sitting his first long retreat in Barre, MA. About mid-way, the man called and asked how his son was doing, and Joseph said he was doing just fine. His friend asked Joseph how he knew, and he answered, "Well, because he's still here!"

If we have learned to focus our attention more or less regularly, then we're sure to encounter *feelings*, many of which we once tried mightily to escape, or hide from. When we've had this practice a while, we can count on coming face-to-face with our dukka, our suffering.

Holding the attention on our dukkha is a challenge daunting enough that many people choose not to practice mindfulness. Instead they spend their meditation time striving to concentrate, or they stop practicing altogether.

It's very brave to keep practicing mindfulness, whether it's all day for many days or occasionally over years. Many people have remarked, when I've told them I was going on a retreat, "Oh, that sounds so wonderful." I've replied, "Well, it *can* be."

We don't know what we'll encounter when we turn our attention inward. So, to open ourselves to that experience again and again takes confidence that we'll be able to see it through.

The way to end our suffering, or dukkha, is not to avoid it but to go through it, mindfully – feeling every bit of it, understanding it as best we can with the support of the teachings and our spiritual friends.

It is challenging. But aided by confidence and faith gained through experience with this practice, we can accept that challenge, repeatedly.

I need to point out that there can be things lurking in the backs of our minds that are extremely difficult to process. Memories of trauma, for instance, or less shattering but still wounding events. It can harm us further if we force ourselves to confront them when we don't have support.

Usually, the mind has a way of warning us that we're in dangerous territory, and we should heed those warnings. If this kind of material is coming to the surface, it's best to talk with a teacher, a therapist or a close and wise friend.

It's often said that the practice will eventually practice us, but until then it's best to pause and use wisdom when we encounter powerful things like this in our Path.

If we trust ourselves and our practice enough to stay with the difficult parts of our lives, then our way of regarding life itself will begin to shift. To get to this point is brave, and you will deserve all the benefits which flow from accepting this challenge.

What are those benefits? Well, for starters, confidence, which has allowed our practice to get us this far. It keeps us here, like the young man in Joseph's story. It keeps giving us the strength of heart to accept the challenge of this practice again and again. This faith in ourselves is a big help as we cope with our daily lives.

This faith is not an unquestioning belief. It is built on investigation and experience. The Buddha said that we can be confident our practice is right for us when we try it and see that it works. With this trust, our practice will, by itself, gradually resolve mental habits that have plagued us for years.

Let me emphasize the word gradually. The dharma offers ways to work with mental habits that cause dukkha. On my website, [RebeccaDixon.org](http://RebeccaDixon.org), there is a course about the Eightfold Path. The part on Wise Effort offers exercises to end or avoid negative states of mind and to cultivate positive ones.

After working with these for, say, a month, you'll be able to use them when future events call for them. Then one day you'll realize that some habits that reduced your quality of life have finally dropped away.

As we continue to return to mindfulness regularly, we'll go through transformations in how we respond to situations that used to torment us. There will also arise new patterns in how we handle our emotions and relationships, and how we treat other beings and this planet.

This process of change may at times involve some tumultuous emotions. That doesn't mean our practice has failed. It means we have learned to recognize and engage with our misunderstandings, and the truths that are newly revealed to us. That can be difficult but sticking with it pays huge dividends.

However our practice grows and unfolds, it is fundamentally disruptive. It changes us. Meditation and living mindfully alter our perception of our world and our selves. And it keeps doing so more and more profoundly, until all the causes of our dukkha are burned out – the literal meaning of Nibbana. But don't worry, that doesn't sneak up on us. It doesn't happen until we're entirely ready.

Thank you