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The Value of a Daily Meditation Practice

The first time I meditated was in Thailand. I was on a gap year between high school and university, and I'd been leading a fairly dissolute life for the past five months. I figured a 10-day meditation retreat would be just the thing to break some bad habits and develop some better ones.

I showed up at the designated time and place, handed over a few *baht*, and committed to the rules that would govern every aspect of my life for the next ten days. No talking, no drinking, no drugs or nicotine, daily chores, an extremely hard bed (think no mattress – just a stone slab with a straw mat on top), and meditation from dawn until dusk every day. After five days, we would have the option of meeting one-on-one with one of the monks, but otherwise, just do your best.

So, I sat. And sat. With increasingly bad posture. After five days, I arranged a talk with one of the monks. I described my experience of meditation and asked him if I was doing it right (I was pretty sure I wasn't). He shrugged, as I recall, and gave me not one bit of useful advice. And I didn't meditate again for 20 years.

Now, every morning, at 6am, I sit.

In front of me is a wooden Buddha. The Buddha sits on a wooden block that I once intended to turn into a lamp. But it has found its place now, and has no desire to move.

In front of the Buddha is my mat and cushion.

I fluff the cushion before I sit, and tuck it high under my bum so both my knees rest on the mat. I wiggle from side to side to get

comfortable, as I know that once my 30 minutes begins, there will be no opportunity to adjust. I could, of course. There is no one here with me. I would not be disturbing anyone if I did.

I focus on my breath. I have tried other forms of meditation. I worked with a teacher on *koans* for a while. I counted breaths, I named thoughts. But now I simply focus on my breath. My mind wanders, of course, but I bring my focus back.

Why do I do this every morning?

For several reasons.

1. It feels good

It didn't always feel good. It was incredibly painful when I started. Physically and mentally. I would get cramps in my legs, I would find it impossible to concentrate or focus, and I would feel like I was wasting my time. But now it feels good.

2. It delivers results

On the rare occasions that I don't meditate in the mornings, I notice the consequences. I find myself making mental lists of things to do, or asking myself, 'What am I doing tomorrow?' This self-talk seems innocent enough, but what purpose does it serve? I believe it's my ego's way of convincing me that I'm busy and important. When I meditate, my ego doesn't need to feel busy and important.

3. It builds fortitude

Meditation has taught me how to be with difficult things. Agitation, distraction, anxiety, discomfort, all these and more regularly arise during meditation, but I've learned to let them go.

4. It has positive health benefits

Both my parents suffered from Alzheimers' disease in their old age. Research has shown meditation slows the progression of dementia, and that it has many other mental and physical health benefits.

5. It improves focus and attention

Meditation is to mental energy as a workout is to physical energy. Just as going for a run in the morning sets you up for a more active and energetic day, so doing meditation in the morning sets you up for a more focused and concentrated day.

6. It helps relationships flourish

All those distractions you put aside for the sake of focusing on your breath pass through your awareness before you put them aside, so you really get to know yourself. You become more intimate with yourself and are consequently better able to be intimate and vulnerable with others.

These are some of the reasons why I meditate.