

Reflection Essay #5: Meditation

I've always had trouble quieting my mind. Sometimes when I lie down at night to sleep my mind races and I'm unable to sleep. After several Traumatic Brain Injuries and insomnia-inducing work schedule regular sleep patterns have eluded me. Being able to stop the chatter and be mindful is something I've always wanted to achieve and I've attempted various forms of guided meditation but have never been able to commit to one form and fully realize the benefits of meditation. For my fifth essay I chose to practice Zen meditation, known as Zazen, in the Buddhist world, for seven days.

Every morning I woke up around five and worked on homework for two hours until my wife and daughters woke up around seven. The early morning was the only time of the day when I had quiet time to finish school work or read. So I decided to meditate for twenty minutes upon waking every morning, while the house was still quiet. When I was in the Army I was taught a method of breathing called tactical breathing, also known as box breathing, where a person breaths in for a four count, holds their breath for a four count, exhales for four seconds, maintains empty lungs for four seconds and then repeats the process as many times as necessary. The point is to control the sympathetic nervous system during stressful situations that require decision making or the use of fine motor skills. I used this method with great success as an infantryman and as a firefighter, both jobs require the ability quiet your mind during times of great distress. I've noticed that the only time my mind is truly quiet and undistracted is during a structure fire, medical emergency or other high risk call. The reason I mention this is because when I began researching Zazen, I noticed the similarities between my level of calm awareness on fires or other emergencies and the Zen concept of Zanshin, the state of being fully vigilant in mind and aware of ones surroundings. This concept Zanshin is also prevalent in several Japanese martial arts especially Kendo. I also saw similarities in the concept of Fudoshin, or the 'immovable mind', a state of complete composure and fearlessness. The Samurai were said to attain this state of heightened focus and awareness during battle and were able to fight without anger or rage.

When I began meditating I consulted several websites which all suggested counting inhalations and exhalations for a count of 10 while maintaining some level of lotus position. I was able to maintain a full lotus position but it became rather uncomfortable after ten minutes and prevented me from reaching a clear mind so after the first day I switched to half lotus and found this position much more comfortable and easier to maintain for twenty minutes. The first three days were the hardest - my mind wandered frequently and I found myself repeatedly starting the breathing process over. I was so worried about whether my posture was correct and that my hands were in the correct position that I couldn't achieve quietness. It wasn't until I reached the height of frustration that I was finally able to let go and quiet my mind. Allowing my thoughts to enter my mind, recognizing, acknowledging them and then moving on without dwelling on them allowed me to reach a tranquil state and when my time was up I felt relaxed, focused, and more productive with my course work.

One of the most important concepts of Zen is Mushokoto, the state of mind where a person does not seek to obtain anything, does not get attached to objects, and does not seek personal profit. In order to practice true Zazen one must reach this state of mind. Giving up the self is the most important aspect of Zen Buddhism. During this exercise I realized that meditating for my own self interest was the wrong approach and when I truly let go was I able to obtain peace.

Daily meditation in the Zen Buddhist style is something I plan to continue doing after seven days. I feel calm and patient with my kids. I'm able to realistically analyze my thoughts and actions without emotion. I'm pretty sure my blood pressure is lower throughout the day. I have a friend who is also firefighter and a practicing Buddhist, after completing this exercise I plan to seek him out and inquire further about Buddhism.

Works Cited

"What Is Zen Buddhism?" *ZEN BUDDHISM*. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Nov. 2015.