

The practice of doing nothing

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July 1, 2015

I've been leading a meditation group on Fridays at 4 p.m. for the past three years. It never really took off, though, until this year, when I became serious about my own meditation practice. It's fascinated me to witness more and more students who have been drawn to sit with me in silence each Friday. Honestly, it seems like exactly the thing this tech-addicted generation would avoid. So I can't really explain it, but the more I meditate, the more magnetic I feel—attracting students to this time and space of attentive stillness.

The whole experience of leading this group has been life giving for me. It's exciting to feel how the students are drawn to the group. It's incredibly easy for me to prepare—all I have to do is maintain my practice, and inspiration about how to lead the next group always comes. Also, the feedback I get oftentimes validates what I am learning.

For instance, a few weeks ago, following one of our meditations, I shared an observation. I had been noticing that as I meditated and focused on my breath, the thoughts that interrupted me that were thoughts of the future (things I needed to do, conversations I imagined having, dreams of what might come) always entered my mind from the right side. On the other hand, thoughts of the past (events I relived and replayed, memories, past hurts) entered my mind from the left. So the phrase “staying centered” took on literal meaning as I sought to focus my mind in its center, on what is right in front of me and in the present moment. This has been helpful to my practice, so I shared it with my students. As I did, one of them gasped, “Oh my gosh! That's exactly what happens to me!” Others affirmed a similar experience, so we paused to contemplate and marvel over the way our minds work and what we can learn when we pay attention.

I recently heard someone describe how his practice of meditation has “softened” him. This rang true of my practice as well. I've been surprised to discover meditation softening me to others—not just those who irritate me, but everyone: the colleagues I work with, my students, people I see on the news. At first, meditation felt like a

very me-centered, self-absorbed practice. But by diving deeply into myself and paying careful attention to all that is inside of me, I'm finding that I learn not only about myself but about what it means to be human and what we all hold in common. It's a gift I keep going back to for more and more and more. It's magnetic.

Originally posted at [Something to Say](#)