



Are You Just Coasting?

If your practice has become a comfortable routine, you may be using it to prop up your life. **Jim Willems** has made that mistake. He reminds us not to lose sight of the ultimate goal of meditation.

If you're a longtime meditator, there's a danger you need to be aware of. At some point, once you get used to daily meditation, even comfortable with it, you may stop meditating with the goal of liberation and instead use it for maintenance. When that happens you may find that when you don't meditate, you feel nervous, wired, or even a little sick. Skipping meditation can result in a hypersensitivity to arising phenomena. So we can get quite good at daily meditation.

Do you remember when you achieved samadhi ("access concentration") for the first time? Samadhi occurs when your attention becomes single-pointed, not easily distracted by external or internal phenomena. With samadhi, whole new horizons open up for insight and realization.

However, for some of us, a new problem also arises in our practice, especially for those of us in the busy world holding down jobs, raising families, and investing time and energy in various relationships. We begin to use meditation to help us relax, lighten daily stress, and ease our relationship to suffering. There's nothing wrong per se with using practice in this way. The problem occurs when we allow this kind of practice to replace our intention for a genuine transformative insight into the nature of our existence. When that happens, our practice betrays our commitment to the dharma; we are no

longer seeking liberation. We're in a phase of "just coasting."

The dharma is not a palliative for relieving daily stress. It is intended for the deep exploration of the structure of our existence and for the radical transformation of our perspective on that daily existence. In a nutshell, its purpose is enlightenment. With realization, we cease to be solitary, alienated selves and instead become part of an integral whole; our suffering becomes transparent, and a profound joy at the heart of life is revealed to us. But that doesn't happen if we are just coasting in our practice.

So how can we tell if we are just coasting? If you have a daily practice that has been established over a period of time, you may notice that if you sit for a particular length of time, you begin to feel peaceful, relaxed, or simply present. This is not the same as samadhi. With samadhi, we are single-pointed in our attention and our awareness is clear and sharp; our sense of intention is present and awareness becomes a fine tool. We can begin to investigate arising phenomena, contemplate the four foundations of mindfulness, or sharpen our concentration and begin to practice the jhanas.

The just-coasting state is relaxed, not sharp, and resembles the drifting state between sleep and waking consciousness. In this state, intention is slack and time seems to disappear. We can remain in this

state effortlessly for minutes, and it is very easy to drift in and out of sleep. In this state, tension and stress can be released. In fact, it is easier to release tension in this just-coasting state than it is when we are sleeping, because intentionality is still present. We're able to focus on stress in the body or mind and then use the breath to release it. This state is similar to the relaxation states that some self-hypnosis programs use to help people relieve stress and promote sleep.

Using our meditation practice in this way can become habitual and even addictive. The mind's capacity to self-medicate is profound. Just coasting puts the mind in charge of our meditation and undermines the intention to achieve genuine insight into the delusional aspects of a separated ego. It is important to remember that the ego is seeking comfort, not liberation.

I can speak to this temptation from my own life experience. My body suffers from a painful, chronic illness. Vipassana meditation, in conjunction with pain medications, can greatly reduce the mind's and body's reaction to that pain and the resultant suffering that it sometimes engenders. Jon Kabat-Zinn has written books on this subject and developed a program called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction that's offered in hospital settings throughout North America. Today there is a whole movement using mindfulness to deal with stress and pain. I myself have used such techniques for years, and it has allowed me to live with significant, inoperable pain. But while I am profoundly grateful for the gift of mindfulness in my life, I can also see how using it in this way has permitted my desire for enlightenment to become dormant for periods of time. Only recently, I awakened from a period of using my meditation practice to cope.

Some of the ancient meditation masters suggested that in order to pursue enlightenment, one had to be well in mind and body. There is an argument to be made for that. When you are seriously ill

or even dying, it may be that all you can do is cope with your pain and discomfort. There is no moral judgment of you if this is the case. However, when you use meditation to cope, you may eventually attain an equilibrium position that allows you to once again address the question of enlightenment. I am in the midst of a radical period of increasing pain, but there are occasions still arising for attaining and using samadhi for investigation and insight into the actual basis of reality.

ASSESSING YOUR PRACTICE

To better gauge whether you are just coasting, first consider why you meditate and what meditation is doing for you. If at any point in your reflection (and you are doing this for yourself, so be honest) the image of maintenance arises in your reflection, you may be coasting.

The best way to be sure is to take the usual time you meditate and double it. Say you meditate for thirty minutes twice a day. Do an hour twice a day. Or if you are really brave, meditate for two hours in the morning, first thing. Many of us will notice when we do this that our meditation runs something like this:

First fifteen minutes: settling down, letting go of daily concerns

Next fifteen minutes: letting go of stress, becoming internally quiet and peaceful

Next fifteen minutes: mind begins to query why we are meditating longer, body twitches, mind may run scenarios about quitting

Next fifteen minutes: full-fledged resistance occurs, discomfort is extreme

Once you've gone past your normal threshold, it's important to keep meditating and noting. Just watch your mind react. If you can continue the meditation for a second hour, you will find that samadhi will sometimes occur. It's then that the investigation aspect of vipassana is possible. This is not to say that the first hour is bad meditation or that it is not meditation. If you pay close attention,



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you will have an insight into how the mind has co-opted the meditation period for comfort and relaxation. However, the deepest insights occur during samadhi. All too often, just coasting impedes samadhi and lets the mind stay in control. Meditation then becomes a script directed by the mind.

GETTING YOUR PRACTICE BACK ON TRACK

If you find you are just coasting in your practice, there are things you can do to get back on track. First, reflect on your meditation practice and deepen your intention. Turn your mind toward enlightenment, the extinguishing of all suffering. If we resolve to meditate in order to realize nirvana, our meditation practice will naturally deepen. We can do this very simply each time we sit by stating our intention as follows: “I undertake this meditation to realize nirvana in order to end suffering for me and all living creatures.” By doing this, we alert the unconscious and conscious aspects of our mind that we are intent on liberation. It is best to do this as sincerely and intentionally as possible. It should not become a rote exercise but rather be a genuine aspiration for freedom.

Second, there are meditation techniques that can help you improve your concentration. You can develop a relationship to the jhanas, a special state of consciousness in which the attention is very focused. In the Theravada teachings there are eight or nine jhana states, depending on the tradition. The first four jhanas have analogies to

the *brahmaviharas*, or the divine abodes: loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. There are four fine material jhanas as well: infinite mind, infinite space, emptiness, and neither perception nor not perception. In these states, the mind becomes still. Depending on how deep the concentration is, your attention may cease to be aware of arising phenomena. Ultimately, because the subjective self ceases to be present, duality ceases as well.

During these states, one experiences a deep rest and also a profound purgation of hindrances and other distractions. There are many resources and teachers for undertaking training the mind to use jhana concentration. For me, Buddhaghosa’s famous *Visuddhimagga* was an excellent guide.

Third, when you are dealing with significant interior resistance to establishing a quiet mind, you may need to undertake a retreat. During this period, you will have the opportunity to spend hours doing sitting and walking meditation. If you are doing a retreat under the guidance of a dharma teacher, she or he can help address your specific needs and challenges.

Lastly, in some cases therapeutic intervention may be necessary to become unstuck from just coasting in your meditation practice, particularly if you are using it to mask or soothe unresolved issues.

FOR THOSE OF US who are committed to a life-long practice of meditation, it is crucial that our practice be able to address our actual liberation. Enlightenment is not chimerical. It is a real possibility for any practitioner who makes it an intention of his or her practice. There is no better way to address the suffering in this world than to see the world as it actually is. With a clear insight into the causes of suffering, both personal and social, our action will be guided by true compassion. May your practice touch this liberation and free all living creatures from suffering. **BD**