

Motivation for Practice

Carl Fooks · Tips of the Day · 2 min read

What happens when you sit down to meditate? How do you feel? Are your meditations a chore to be slogged through, or a holy hour (ten minutes?!) of heavenly angel choirs singing a harmonious “ahhhhhhhhh” in appreciation of the sanctity of your intentions? Or maybe somewhere in between? Sincerely, I don’t intend any criticism in asking these questions. I can assure you that, at times, I have related to my practice in all of the above ways! The interesting question that sits behind those posed, is what kind of expectations or requirements are secretly infiltrating your practice, and how might these be affecting your ability to keep practising? Indeed, what does keep you practising, and what would happen if whatever that is wasn’t present any more? A powerful motivator can prove to be an equally powerful demotivator. For me, these last several years have been a barren wasteland of on and off practice that has, frankly, until relatively recently, mainly been off. When I was first practising, the primary motivation for my practice was to alleviate my suffering. As time went on it turned to unlocking the secrets of the universe, and it has alternated between these across the decades. For some time though, I have felt that these are not skilful motivations. I now find that if there is any requirement or expectation infiltrating my motivation for practice, at any time, or in any way, this disturbs the practice itself; practising to not suffer now brings suffering! So what keeps me practising? This is a good question, and one that doesn’t really have a simple answer. While it sounds very much like “to not suffer”, I find that I practice now because, simply, I’m better doing so, and that’s enough. Actually, it’s more than enough. I have no requirements of it anymore, no heavenly angel choir, not even a need to feel that “I’m better doing so”. As I say, if anything like this creeps in, it is clearly seen as unskilful and therefore unsatisfactory. But motivation is important, and this is just my experience now. No doubt it will change again. The various relationships I’ve had with it over the years has brought me to practice and, generally, kept me practising. It’s been appropriate at the time. Whether that’s been to alleviate my suffering, being spiritually enthralled, or seeking the secrets of the universe, they’ve all been a tremendous source of energy that has motivated my practice. It’s when these have surreptitiously turned into expectations and requirements that problems have arisen. I’ve had fallow years of infrequent practice because of this. We need to be careful to make sure that we’re not setting ourselves up for the future abandonment of practice because of an unskilful relationship to our practice, of having expectations and requirements that can only disappoint us when not met. In the Mahāsāropama Sutta, the Greater Discourse on the Simile of the Heartwood (MN 29), the Buddha points at the serious business of practice. He says “So this holy life, bhikkhus, does not have gain, honour, and renown for its benefit, or the attainment or virtue for its benefit, or the attainment of concentration for its benefit, or knowledge and vision for its benefit. But it is this unshakeable deliverance of mind that is the goal of this holy life, its heartwood, and its end.” No heavenly angel choirs celebrating our holiness,

no attainments of special attributes or powers, not even virtue, just “this unshakeable deliverance of mind.” How can we orientate to our practice so that it is skilful, sustainable, and isn’t secretly setting us up for disappointment? Gently.

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