



Education Series

Meditation for Athletes: A Daily Path to Being a “Good” Athlete



I've learned a lot about being an athlete through meditation. Or rather, I've learned a lot about being an athlete through the process of failing and succeeding and failing and succeeding to cultivate a daily meditation practice over the past few years.

I've learned to let go of progress as my barometer for success. I've learned to sit still(ish) for ten to fifteen minutes a day. **But most important, I've learned to fail.**

What do I mean by "I've learned to fail?" During my meditation, I periodically find I fail to keep my mind in check. I fail to focus on my breath. I fail to count my breaths, or if I do

succeed at this, I lose count at five or six. If I make it past five or six, I usually forget I was going to start over at 10 and go until 14 or 15 until I realize my mistake.

I fail to visualize warm sunlight filling me up from the tips of my toes to the top of my head. Sometimes I visualize the warm sunlight starting at the top of my head and going the wrong way. Sometimes I visualize it outside of my body completely. Usually I visualize the steaming mug of coffee I will drink when all of this is over, or the witty retort I'm going to make when responding to that rude email comment about how I know nothing about ski racing/coaching, or whatever the current complaint involves.

7 Meditation Tips for Beginners:

1. Start with 5 minutes and increase as you get to like it
2. Don't get caught up in the how, just sit in a quite place and be still
3. Do it in the morning as soon as you wake up
4. Focus on your breath and your smile, while you slowly inhale and exhale
5. Don't worry if you wander; simply return gently to focusing on your breath
6. Follow guided meditations; a soothing voice and smooth music often helps
7. Have fun and enjoy your time with your Self.

But for nearly every day this year, I have sat down in the morning and failed. I have never once made it through a ten-minute session without at least once thinking, "Oh crap, what am I supposed to be doing right now? Empty mind? Warm sunlight? Counting breaths? Get it together!"

But here's a thing someone told me about meditation once — **"The only way to be bad at meditation is to not meditate."**

In other words, if you are showing up and sitting, then you are doing all that is required. It's kind of like being an athlete. If you're

showing up and doing your training and putting in the work, then you are an athlete. All those other details like results and rankings and max wattage are irrelevant. You don't have to be an Olympian to be an athlete. You don't have to be a monk to meditate.

Meditation teaches you to fail and to put those failures into perspective. The even bigger failure, meditation teaches you, is to dwell on those failures and let them affect the present moment. So, you were supposed to be focused on your breath and instead you're thinking about what you're going to have for dinner? That failure is already in the past, so who cares? Let it go. Focus on your breath NOW. So, you were supposed to do a workout yesterday, but life happened, and the workout didn't? Who cares, let it go, do the workout NOW. So, you crashed in the first turn of your first race run? Who cares, let it go, race your best NOW.

Is this the lesson you're "supposed to" glean from meditation? I don't know. It certainly "seems" like most other people are better at sitting still and connecting with their inner-breath. Then again, isn't the entire point of meditation letting go of all those "supposed-to's" and "seems" and just focusing on what *is*?

So maybe the path to enlightenment is not as complicated as we make it sound. Maybe it's just showing up, day after day, failing, and then — without judgment — starting again.

A few weeks ago, I stumbled upon the following sentence in a book I was reading, and it kind of summed up everything I've been trying to say with this.

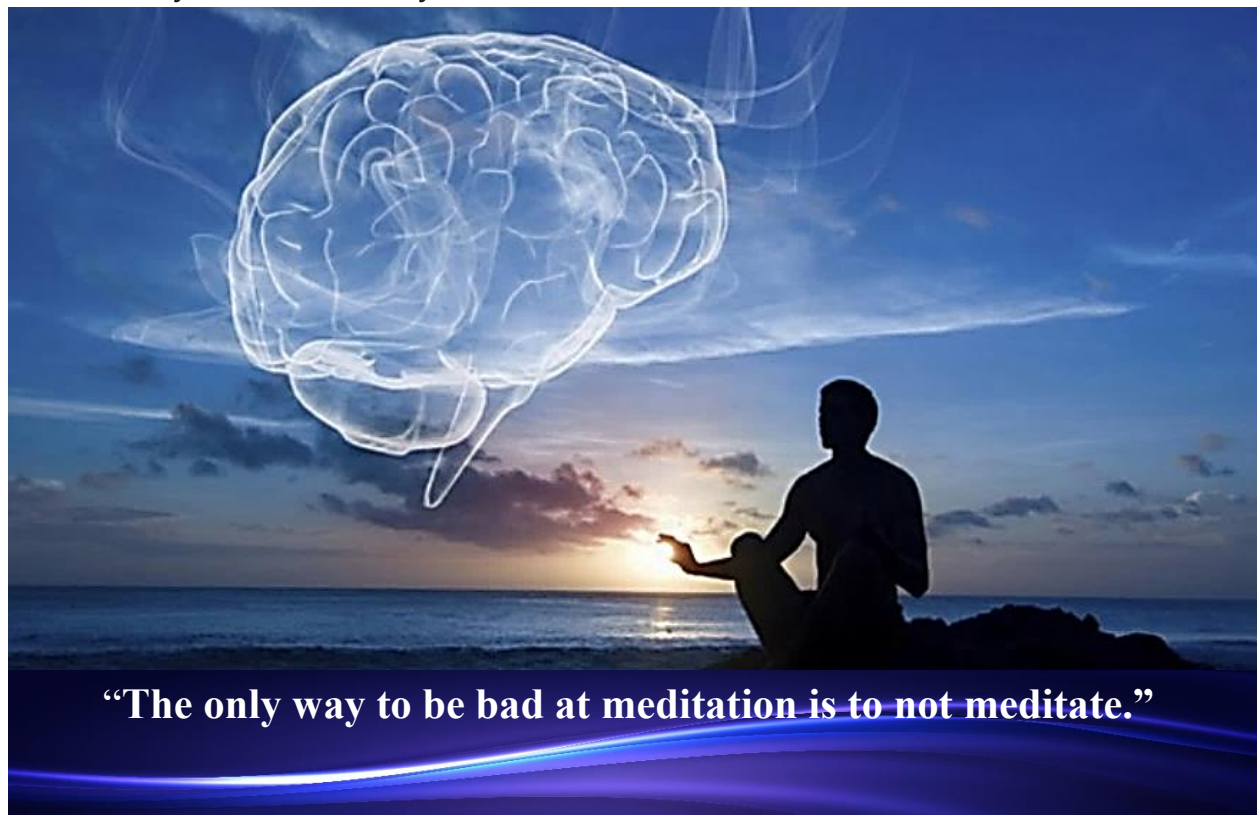
"We don't sit in meditation to become good meditators. We sit in meditation so that we'll be more awake in our lives." (From *When Things Fall Apart* by Pema Chodron)

And maybe, at the end of the day when we peel away our goals and results and rankings and all those external motivations, we don't really ski to be "good athletes", either. Maybe we just ski to be more awake in our lives. And maybe that's enough.

SIMPLE MEDITATION FOR BEGINNERS

This meditation exercise is an excellent introduction to meditation techniques.

1. Sit or lie comfortably.
2. Close your eyes.
3. Make no effort to control the breath; simply breathe naturally.
4. Focus your attention on the breath. Count ten of them... repeat... If your mind wanders, return your focus back to your breath



"The only way to be bad at meditation is to not meditate."