Meditation Is Not Mechanical

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Meditation is not a mechanical process. You don’t just take a technique and then let it take over. You have to be in charge. You have to develop your powers of evaluation so that you can be in charge intelligently. Sometimes you’ll find teachers who tell you to let go of some of your sense of control, largely because your sense of control is not yet skillful. But the opposite extreme is also not helpful either, where you just kind of let the technique take over. Don’t adjust it. Don’t monitor the results and then adjust what you’re doing. That way it can lead to disaster in some cases. This evening I was talking to someone who had a friend who had been on a meditation retreat and had extremely strong, intense physical sensations that were aroused by the technique. The people running the retreat had encouraged her to get those strong intentions and let them come out, because they’re purifying your system. She found that she had a lot of saliva coming out. She had a little cup right next to her. She had to keep spitting out all this impure saliva, which they told her. The Buddha didn’t spit out his defilements. His defilements, even though there is a sort of a physical reflection of the defilements, they’re basically in the mind. You just can’t spit them out by way of the body. The Buddha himself says that when you have, in his instructions on breath meditation, after you are aware of long breathing, short breathing, and learn how to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and out, he says the next step is to calm the bodily processes. Whatever strong, intense sensations come up, you allow them to grow calm. You don’t encourage them. Sometimes it takes a while for them to calm down, but you want to make sure that you’re not encouraging them. They’re going to rise and then they’re going to subside, because the kind of work we have to do in the meditation requires that things be really quiet. It’s very skillful, very refined work. If you’ve got a lot of intense physical sensations running around, they can often get in the way, especially if your powers of mindfulness and alertness are not up to the task. So you have to monitor things. What kind of breathing feels good? What kind of breathing feels calming? What kind of breathing feels like it puts the mind in a state where it really can be steady and can see things and evaluate things with more skill? That’s the kind of breathing you want to encourage. When things like visions or intense physical sensations arise, you have to have the techniques for gaining control of them. You have to learn how to turn them off. With a vision, it’s pretty simple. You just breathe deep down into the heart a couple times, and the vision will go away. As for intense physical sensations, if they arise, you let them subside out through your hands and your feet. You don’t encourage them. Sometimes you find that if you try to discourage them, it makes it worse. So sometimes you do have to sit there and watch them. But the general trend is that it’s going to subside. Allow it to subside, however long that may take, in order to stay as consistently with your breath as possible. This way you develop your own powers of alertness, your own powers of evaluation. What kind of results? Those powers of evaluation are the things that give rise to insight and discernment as they get more and more developed. Again, insight is this basic issue of skillful causes and undesirable results. You’ve got to see cause and effect, in particular, the relationship between your intentions and the things that you experience. That’s the most important connection you want to evaluate. Again, to see that connection, you’ve got to learn how to evaluate what’s skillful and what’s unskillful, what are desirable results and what are undesirable results. You’ve got to develop your own sense of this. The teacher is there to help guide you and point you in the right direction, but your own sensitivity is what’s going to make all the difference. So it’s largely a question of being sensitive to what’s just right. They give an example in the text of a person holding a baby chick. If you hold a chick too tightly, it’s going to die. If you hold it too loosely, it’s going to fly away. So you have to have a sense of what’s just right, and you have to develop this sense of just right in all aspects of your meditation. How much pressure to put on the breath, how long the breath should be, how heavy the breath should be, how deep it should be. Where is just right right now? This is why we practice meditation so much, so you can develop your powers of evaluation on these issues. Because sitting down for five minutes, you don’t really have a good sense yet of what is just right. It takes time to see the connection between cause and effect, and then which effects have their own long-term effects. So this element of control and evaluation is not a bad thing. It’s a question of learning how to use it properly, use it skillfully, so you have a sense of when you are being too controlling, and then when you’re giving in to the sensations too much. Again, it’s a matter of balance. The whole point is that you develop your powers of sensitivity, you develop your powers of observation, so that they can give rise to the kinds of insight you really want. That’s what developed insight is. It comes from your ability to evaluate. When you see when insight starts getting sharper, well, you really do see the power of your intentions. They are not totally a victim of past habits. There is something new added to every moment. There is an element of choice. All too often those choices are subconscious. We’re not aware of them, or only dimly aware of them. But as the mind gets more and more still, you begin to see, “Okay, this little movement of the mind gives rise to that result. That movement gives rise to this result.” And there is an element of freedom in there. If it weren’t for that element of freedom, there would be no point in practicing at all, because everything would be totally determined, totally preordained. Then all we have to do is just sort of give in to the flow of things coming from the past. There would be no point in practicing. We’re going against that flow when we practice. We’re bringing more mindfulness, more alertness to the processes of the mind. So that, one, you can gain a sense of, “Okay, where is the freedom in each moment?” And two, what are you doing with it? Are you doing skillful things with that element of freedom, or are you doing unskillful things? And what would skillful things be? How can you become more skillful? How can you get so skillful to the point where you’re not putting anything into the present moment? What’s that like? How can you do that? These are the important questions in the meditation. And they can’t be answered just by means of a technique. The technique will help get you to that point, but then as you’re doing the questioning, that’s when you really are discovering things. We have to remember that meditation is not a question of programming yourself to see things in a certain way. It’s more like a treasure hunt. There’s something really valuable here in the present moment. And you’re given the tools and the techniques to help search for it. But there has to be that element of discovery. And the only way you can discover things is by developing your own sensitivity, your own powers of observation and evaluation. So this is why we start out with that. Observe your breath. Evaluate the breath. Learn how to make adjustments so that your powers of observation and evaluation get more sensitive and you begin to get a greater sense of where you can trust them and where you can’t. Once you have that sense more and more developed, then you become more and more independent in your meditation. And you really do become ready to take things on on your own, evaluate things on your own, make your own discoveries. After all, that’s what the Buddha did. He discovered the Dhamma. It wasn’t that he thought it up or said, “I’d like a Dhamma like this or I’d like a Dhamma like that.” He said, “Okay, what is the principal cause and effect? How does it work in the mind? How can it be mastered to give rise to less and less suffering? How can it be mastered to the point where you gain total release from suffering?” These things are things he discovered by evaluating, observing, discovering them on his own. He discovered that he couldn’t force that moment of discovery on other people. He had to give them the tools and the techniques and the proper questions so that they can come to their own discoveries. It is a matter of skill. You can’t develop skill for somebody else. Each person has to develop skill on his own, on their own. It’s through the developing of the skill that insight arises, and from the insight comes release. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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