Good Meditation

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What makes a good meditation? It’s a meditation where you learn. A meditation where you develop good qualities in the mind. Sometimes it happens that the good qualities are not the ones you’re looking for. You’re looking for bliss, peace, stillness. And you find that you’re ending up developing qualities of endurance. Just having to endure a very rampant and wandering mind. But still, you’re learning. You’re developing. And that’s the important part. They talk about ten perfections that every meditator should develop. And some of them sound really good. Goodwill, insight, equanimity. And others sound like more work, persistence, determination, endurance. But we have to realize that all of them are worth developing. You find that, of course, in meditation sometimes you’re learning the lessons you want to learn. Other times there are other lessons you’ve got to learn, but you may not want to learn them. They’re not pleasant or easy lessons to learn, but they’re important. They give strength to the meditation. For example, developing endurance. If you don’t have endurance, the concentration doesn’t come. The stillness doesn’t come. If it does come, it wobbles. It’s wavering. The slightest little thing can knock it off. But if you learn endurance, then when concentration comes, you’ve got the strength you need to keep it going. When insights come, they don’t knock you off balance. Being knocked off balance is when you get really excited about a particular insight, drop your concentration, get carried away with the insight, and don’t really look at the next step. What does that insight do to the mind? If it got it excited, well, it’s not quite yet the insight you really want. The more useful ones are the ones that you can watch. When this insight comes, then see what happens next and what happens next. It’s part of a causal chain. Sometimes the more important insight is the second one, the one that comes after. If you don’t have powers of endurance and equanimity, you miss them. You get carried away by the first insight, and the follow-up insights get lost. So we’re doing foundation work here. It’s like building a monastery here. People have said, “Twelve years? Where has all the money gone? What’s going on underground? We’re in infrastructure.” And it’s not exciting work. Putting pipelines in, putting fire hydrants in, putting roads in, and all that. But if you don’t have the groundwork done, if you don’t have the septic tank, you can’t have the huts, you can’t have the buildings. So some of the work we do in the meditation is just that, underground work, infrastructure work, that you may not notice, but you find that it’s really necessary as the meditation develops. But it’s not all drudgery. There are other lessons you’ll learn that really are enjoyable, because the meditation we do here is not one of simply programming the mind or forcing it into a particular mold, but teaching you how to play with the breath, the way a young child, say, first picks up a guitar and plays around. At first it may not sound particularly good, but if you get fascinated with it, you get intrigued by the different sounds the guitar can make. You find that you get better and better. And you don’t have to ask anyone as you’re playing, getting anybody. You can begin to hear it feel, hear it get better. You find it more and more entertaining, more interesting. Then you start exploring other possibilities, different chords, different tunes. First you might play the tunes that you’ve heard other people make up, but then after a while you make up your own. And the exploring is, is really enjoyable. Just as you learn things about the guitar, when you meditate here, you’re learning a lot of things about the breath. And the more time you spend with it, the more you find the subtleties of the breath get really interesting and have all sorts of implications. You find that certain ways of breathing can put you in a particular mind state. Other ways of breathing can put you in another kind of mind state. That’s useful knowledge. When the body’s tired, good deep breathing sometimes is what you need. When you’re tense, sometimes short in and long out is the kind of breathing you need, where you can think of the breath going in and out the pores. And you find that after a while you’re playing not only with the breath, but also with the way you focus. You get a better and better sense of how the mind relates to the present moment. When it’s focused on one point, when its range of focus gets larger, when it encompasses the entire body, what’s that like? Can you maintain it? That’s a really useful mind state to have, being aware of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out. And can you have it enlarged and centered at the same time? That’s also a useful mind state. Remember, when I was with Ajahn Foon, there was one time I got into a totally blanked-out mind state. You don’t learn much there. But even that kind of mind state has its uses, as he pointed out. He says, “If you’re in a lot of pain, it’s a good place to go. You can blank out, just as long as you don’t think that it’s anything special.” But there are lots of mind states that you can get yourself into. And if you realize that they have their specific uses, more useful knowledge that you can file away. Even though that blanked-out mind state is wrong concentration, even that has its uses. As long as you’re observant, use your powers of judgment. We often are warned against being judgmental, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be judicious. They’re two very different things. Judgmental is when you pass judgment before you’ve really looked at things carefully, when you make blanket judgments about things without really looking into them. But judicious means that you look at what you’ve got, look at the results of what you’ve got, learn to develop the sensitivity to realize whether or not they’re worthwhile, and if they are worthwhile, what they’re good for, when they’re useful, when they’re not useful. That’s judicious meditation, and it’s an important distinction. Being judicious means that you’re observant. You look for cause and effect. You use your powers of judgment, but you learn how to use them skillfully. This is so much of what the meditation is all about. We’re not turning off, say, our thinking faculty or our judging faculty. We’re not even turning off desire. We’re just learning how to use these things more skillfully. Apply them more appropriately, like the desire. If we didn’t have the desire to practice, we wouldn’t be here right now. If we didn’t have the desire to get results out of the practice, we wouldn’t be here. The question is not to let that desire get in the way. How does it get in the way? You focus on the results, “I’d like it to be this way, I’d like it to be that way,” and you don’t notice what’s really happening. Sometimes the beginning of concentration comes, but you say, “This isn’t good enough for me. I want something better than this,” and so you go off and create all kinds of problems. But if you focus your desire on the causes, what are the causes for good concentration? Well, there’s mindfulness and alertness and persistence. You put those together. You focus on those. You don’t have to anticipate what good concentration is going to be. You don’t have to try to clone your preconceived notion of what a good meditation is. Just do the steps. Focus your desire on doing them meticulously, doing them scrupulously, being really observant. The results will have to come without your dressing them up, without your prefabricating them. There are lots of good lessons to learn in the meditation, and it’s useful to know the steps, the things you can do to bring them about. You can have a few warning signs about where dangerous territory is in the mind and where useful things might lie. But the real point of the meditation is that you’re exploring. You’re learning things about your own mind. You use the steps in the meditation as a road map. But a lot of the important lessons are things that are very particular to the way your mind works. You can’t learn that simply by following one, two, three, four steps. You learn them by being observant, watching for cause and effect. And the fact that you’ve discovered these things on your own makes them that much more special. After all, the problems that you’re dealing with are particularly your problems. You may have the same problems in common with other people, but it’s the fact that they’re your problems that you’ve got to work with. And as you find solutions to them, it has a meaning specifically for you. And as I said at the beginning, sometimes there are lessons you wouldn’t particularly want to learn, but you’ve got to learn them. Other times they’re more enjoyable. But as long as you’re learning, that’s a sign of good meditation. And when you get good at that, you find that you don’t have to ask other people what good meditation is. You’ll know for yourself.

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