Self-Reliance

December 23, 2003

The Buddha once said that his practice, after lots of trial and error, finally got on the right track when he learned to divide his thinking into two sorts, skillful and unskillful, in terms of the results that he gave. In other words, it wasn’t a matter of having a lot of clever theories or ideas, but it was just seeing what happened. As a result of holding to certain thoughts, keeping certain thoughts in mind, some thinking he discovered led to harm. Other thinking led to no harm. After a lot of observation, he detected that it was based on the motivation. If there was any sensual passion, any ill will, any harmfulness underlying the thinking, that thinking was going to be unskillful, no matter how much it might seem right or correct on the surface. If these motivations were lying behind it, then the thinking was going to lead to harm. As for thinking which lacked those qualities, thinking imbued with renunciation, no ill will, no harmfulness, that led to no harm at all. It sounds pretty simple, makes a lot of sense, but it’s not that easy to put into practice. One, it requires stepping back from your thoughts and watching them. Not only that, but also stepping back from your motivation and watching that, too. That’s an area where we tend to have a strong sense of identification. But without that ability to step back, you can’t really see anything. You can’t understand what’s going on. So this is one of the reasons why we meditate, focusing on the breath. They give you a place to step back. When you’re with the breath, you’re outside of all the words flying around in your head. If you can establish this as a good, solid basis, you’re less likely to get sucked in by the more seductive ideas. So focus on your breath. As for the thoughts that come in and out of your head, let them come in and out simply as events. You don’t have to pay any attention to them. You don’t have to get involved with them. Just give as much of your attention as you can to the breathing. This way you’re giving less food to those thoughts. Because sometimes even paying attention to thoughts to the extent of wanting to blot them out, that feeds them. So here you’re starving them, and it doesn’t matter if they starve. They don’t hurt when they starve. They’re just formations coming in and out of the mind, coming into shape, then dissolving, then coming into shape in another shape, and then dissolving. So just allow that process to happen on its own, without you having to get involved. Your responsibility right now is simply to be with the breath. That’s all. Try to be as continually with the breath as possible. You’ll find there are certain things that tend to knock you off. In the beginning, all you have to do is realize you’ve been knocked off the breath and then get back to it. After a while, you begin to get a sense of what kinds of things knock you off and how you can withstand it. But in the beginning, it’s simply a matter of learning to reestablish mindfulness. In order to stay established, there also has to be a sense of well-being. It feels good to be here with the breath. You can play with the breath in any way you want to get that sense of well-being. And how do you know what’s a good breath? It’s up to you to decide. You’re developing your powers of judgment here. The word “judgment” has a bad connotation in society right now. It sounds too close to the word “judgmental,” but it’s a different quality. Think of the difference between judgmental and being judicious. Being judicious is a good thing. And having good powers of judgment means you know when to make choices, when to make value judgments, and when to wait and watch. The whole problem with being judgmental is that you make a decision based on poor evidence or based on bad motivation. But being judicious means that you’re actually making wise choices. And this is a faculty you want to develop. Because without this, the meditation simply becomes something that someone else tells you to do and you follow the instructions like a good little boy or a good little girl, hoping that somehow it’ll all work out, that the people who are teaching you know what they’re talking about. But that’s not nearly as reliable as learning to develop your own powers of judgment. In the beginning, you start with simple things. “Does this breath feel good?” “It feels well. It feels okay.” “Well, how about changing it here? What will that do?” “We’ll watch it for a while.” You’re maybe not too sure yet, but follow it for a while and see. Be willing to observe. Be willing to experiment. Stick with it for a while. See what happens. If the results start getting unpleasant, then you can change. There’s always room for experimentation. There’s always room for changing your tactics. And over time, you develop a more and more intuitive sense of how much adjusting the breath needs, when it’s just right, how much adjusting is too much, how much adjusting is too little, what you need in order to adjust. Sometimes it’s simply a matter of changing your concept of the breath, and the breath will change. You can play with that for a while. See how your perceptions shape the breath. Start questioning your assumptions. Sometimes we feel that we have to pull the breath in. Well, do you really have to pull it in? Can’t it just come in on its own? After all, the body’s alive. It’s going to do its breathing on its own. You don’t have to get involved in pulling it like taffy. And exactly what would be doing the pulling, and where would it be pulling from? This is called de-perception. In other words, playing with your perceptions, trying to question them. And you learn a lot of interesting lessons there about the impact of your thoughts on your physical processes. At the same time, learning what kind of perception results in a sense of breathing that feels really good. It’s nourishing to breathe. It’s not a burden to breathe. The breath comes and goes, and it just gives energy to the body. When it goes out, it doesn’t drain energy away. That’s the kind of breathing you want. And as you do this, you’re developing your own bars of judgment, so they’re sharper. You get clearer about what you’re doing, and then you’re clearer about the results of what you’re doing. Seeing that sometimes you can sense the results immediately, and other times it takes longer. This is an important principle right here in the totality of the Buddha’s teachings on causal relationships. Some results are right away. Other results take longer. It’s a simple enough idea, but actually, when you work it out in practice, as the Buddha said, if you were to try to work out all of the ramifications of one act or two acts in your life, you’d go crazy. The principle of karma gets very complicated. But it comes out of this basic observation that some results come right away, other results take time. So as you learn to be judicious, learn how to use your powers of judgment, you get a better and better sense of what things you can pass judgment on immediately, what other things take time, what other things require patience. Once you develop this faculty with your breathing, then you can start turning on to your own mind, watching the thoughts as they come and go, and getting a sense of the quality of the motivation behind the thought. Sometimes you can see immediately that a certain thought is not one that you want to follow. If there’s any greed, anger, delusion, or passion, aversion, harmfulness, ill will, any of these things, once you learn how to sense that, you can know right away that this is not a thought you want to follow. You’d better drop it. Other times it takes time to watch. After all, you’re learning about a person here, and even though you may think it’s yourself, it’s not necessarily so. It’s the same when you want to develop friends or develop a friendship. It takes time. You have to be observant. You have to take time to get to know the other person. And your own mind requires a lot of time because, more than anything else, we tend to hide our motivations from ourselves. Here we’re learning about learning that habit, at the same time learning how to open things up judiciously in the mind. And you find that you make mistakes, but that’s how you learn. It’s the people who are unwilling to risk mistake who never learn anything. All they know is what they learned from other people, and it stops right there. They’re afraid to experiment. That, of course, means that they’ve had to totally trust those other people. And there’s always the possibility that they’re wrong. So this way you learn how to develop your own powers of judgment. And you get judicious in how to judge. And if you develop this much from the meditation, you’ve developed a lot right there. Because this is the factor of meditation that allows you to be more and more independent. Learn how to rely on yourself more. Learn how to see through your own self-deceptions. And learn how to develop the faculty of the mind that turns discernment or wisdom into something that really is yours. Otherwise, it’s just something you’ve heard from other people or something you’ve thought through. But when you put things to the test like this and learn to judge the results, that’s when your insights really become genuine. You’ve seen for yourself. Certain things are skillful, certain things are unskillful. So the Buddha’s tactic in training us is not to spoon-feed us the truth. It’s to teach us how to learn, how to experiment, how to evaluate the results of our experiments, how to try new approaches when things don’t work, and how to develop the good things when they do work. It’s the meditation equivalent of teaching someone how to fish instead of just giving them a fish. What was that line? “You give somebody a beer and you’ve got them drunk once, but if you teach them how to brew, you’ve got them drunk for their whole lives.” Well, this is the good side of that. Teach people how to judge the results of their breathing, judge the results of their thinking. And you’ve got independent meditators. Meditators who can learn how to rely on themselves. This is a lot of the teaching technique in the Thai forest tradition. I remember many times I was with the Chan Fong, and one of my duties was to look after his hut, clean up, boil the water for his tea, wash his robes. And if I was doing anything wrong, he’d let me know, in no uncertain terms. But then he wouldn’t tell me how to do things right. That was for me to observe. And then I read in a John Lee’s autobiography that was precisely the way a Chan Mon had taught him. The purpose of all this is to teach you to be observant. If you don’t know, well, make an experiment. Try something out. If it doesn’t work out, you know, okay, you’ve learned. If you try to go through life always being right already, then you never learn anything. The type of people who can’t take criticism, who are not willing to have their mistakes pointed out to them, they never learn. The type of people who want everything explained beforehand, they never learn either. It’s the people who are willing to take risks, learn from their mistakes, learn from the one they don’t make mistakes. That’s when you develop the talents that you really need as a meditator. Because when things come up in the meditation, there’s not always going to be somebody there holding your hand. But if you’ve learned how to learn—learned how to observe, learned how to experiment, learned how to evaluate the results of your actions—then you’ve got what you need. Then you’ve opened up all kinds of possibilities for yourself that are not limited simply by what you’ve heard or what you’ve read. You can explore the process of action as it’s playing itself out in your life right here, right now. As the Buddha said, there are four kinds of actions in the world. Those that give pleasing results on the conventional level, those that give unpleasant results on the conventional level, those that give mixed, and those that take you out and lead to the end of action. He found that fourth type by experimenting. We have the eight types. We have the advantage of knowing that there was someone who ran the experiment and found the way. But in order to find it for ourselves, we have to be willing to follow his experimental method. We start by a very simple process, like what we’re doing right here, right now, working with the breath, evaluating the breath, seeing what works, seeing what doesn’t. Then everything else builds from here.

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