Unexpected Insights

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It’s important when you meditate that you feel comfortable with your object. That’s your unfriendly terms. If you’re locked in a struggle with your object, it’s a sign it’s going to be a difficult place to settle down, a difficult place to stay. So you have to step back and look at your attitude. If you’re focusing on the breath, try to have an appreciation for the breath. After all, it’s what keeps you alive. And if you give it the chance, it can do a lot more for you than just keeping you alive. There are ways of breathing that can balance out any imbalance in the body. When the breath has adjusted your sense of the body in the present moment, it gives a good place for the mind to settle down as well. So take some time to work with the breath. Experiment with different kinds of breathing. If nothing seems to be satisfactory, then it’s time just to stop your efforts and just tell the breath, “Okay, go ahead and do what you want. I’m just going to sit here and watch.” Because that’s an approach, too. Just watching, just being aware in the present moment, that’s a doing. Sometimes we hear that there’s a difference between being and doing, but all of our being in time and space involves a doing. It’s simply learning to see how much doing is appropriate at any particular time. So you can experiment with long breathing, short breathing, deep breathing, shallow breathing. If nothing seems to work, just say, “Okay, just watch the breath and see what it’s going to do on its own,” until you’ve noticed which approach gets the best results right now. It’s important that you have many approaches up your sleeve, because the breath, the body, the mind change from time to time, from day to day. Some days, patience and equanimity are called for. Other days, a more proactive stance is called for. Whatever is called for at any particular time, the basic principles are the same. You want to be able to settle down and have a sense of ease with the breathing. At the same time, the process of settling down develops some important qualities. To begin with, mind fulness and alertness. Mindfulness means keeping something in mind, as when you keep the breath in mind. Alertness means watching what you’re doing and watching the results. So again, it’s not just being in the present moment. It’s being mindful and being alert in the present moment. These qualities, which are basic to mindfulness practice, when they develop, turn into the essential qualities for good, strong concentration practice. Strong mindfulness, steady mindfulness, consistent mindfulness, turns into directed thought, vittaka. It’s a technical term. Just really keeping the breath in mind, keeping all your thoughts focused on the breath. Alertness turns into evaluation, vicara, as you evaluate what you’re doing, what the results are in the breath. Once the results feel good, you’ve got a sense of ease. With ease, there’s less of a need to push and pull. If you look carefully at how you deal with the breathing, you’ll find that oftentimes we create sensations to go along with the breath, as a way of signaling to ourselves, “Now the breath is coming in. Now the breath is going out.” It can form to a point where we have preconceived notions of how that should feel. A lot of times that has to do with the way we subconsciously move the blood around in the body, turning off the blood flow in one section, turning it on in another section. But as you sense that, just let it go. You don’t have to create any extra sensations. Just allow the breath sensation to work on its own. You can do this with a lot less pushing and pulling than the different parts of the body develop a sense of fullness. You’re not pulling the breath from this part of the body to stuff it over there. Each part has its own sense of fullness. The breath comes in, goes out, without interfering with that sense of fullness. That’s rapture. The Pali word bhitti literally means refreshment. You’re not overworking the body. As a result, there’s a sense of ease and fullness, ease and refreshment. Then you take that sense of ease and refreshment and allow it to spread throughout the whole body. Again, you don’t have to push it or pull it. Just think of it. It can spread on its own if you let it. This is where mindfulness practice turns into good, strong concentration. Because all the descriptions of concentration in the Canon, where they get descriptive enough to give a real sense of what’s going on, talk about an awareness that fills the body, a sense of ease and rapture that fill the body as well. The mind gets enlarged. The sense of well-being saturates the body. This is what they mean by singleness of preoccupation. Sometimes it’s called one-pointedness, but it doesn’t really mean one point. It means all your awareness is filled with one single preoccupation, which in this case is the breath. The sense of ease and fullness that go along with the breath. When they fill your present awareness, then you’re less and less likely to want to go wandering off because it feels really good to be right here. It feels really gratifying. It feels really nourishing just to be right here. You drink in that sense of well-being. This is another meaning of the word related to bhitti or rapture, a sense of drinking in and being refreshed. Without this, the meditation gets dry. It begins to seize up like a motor without any lubricant. My teacher, John Fung, once said this is what kept him going those years he was up in the forest. It was a period during World War II where he was cut off from his teacher. He was alone up in the forest, and being able to tune in to that sense of refreshment kept him going. Day after day after day, and there’s nothing much else there to keep him going. The meditation requires this sense of fullness. In the Canon, where they talk about the different aspects of the practice, like being provisions for a fortress, jhana, or a strong concentration, is compared to the stores of food. This is what keeps you nourished. This is what keeps you going, keeps your strength up. Without this, if the meditation gets dry, you become less and less inclined to want to do it. All you can think of is, “What can I do to gain the insights and get out of here?” With a sense of fullness and well-being right here, you’re more content to stay and just really look and see what there is to see. You have more patience to watch things. You have more patience to see things as they begin to unfold. And you end up with a lot of insights that you might not have expected. That’s the whole point. If you’re here just getting the insights you expect, then there’s always the possibility that you’ve shaped things subconsciously and that you haven’t really seen anything, that you’ve simply programmed your mind. You’ve programmed your mind to agree with a set of propositions you started out with, or that you expect. It’s the unexpected insights that are most important. If you have the time to stay here and watch, can you gain that kind of insight, gain that kind of understanding? We need maps in the meditation to give us a sense of what to do, where to go. Basically, they’re there to get you to the right place where you can really see. It’s like the instructions telling you how to get to the Grand Canyon. You take this route and then you stop at that viewpoint. What you actually see is going to depend on you. And a lot of times it’s the unexpected things that, when you get to the viewpoint, those are the ones that really strike you, are the most meaningful. You know that when you go to the Grand Canyon, you’re going to see layers of rock and you’re going to see this butte and that butte and they have this name and that name. There’s the Vishnu temple, there’s the Buddha temple, Isis and Orisis. You know the names. But what will they actually look like? What will the play of the sun be on those features? What will the weather do? The passing of the clouds? The passing of a snowstorm? Those are the things that you remember for life, once you see them. So we give instructions to put the mind in the right place where it can see what it sees when it’s right there. You can’t anticipate it. You have some general idea, but the actual specifics of what you see, the unexpected specifics, that’s what’s going to make a big difference. So the work we do as you meditate is putting the mind in the right place. With a sense of ease and well-being, fullness and refreshment in the present moment, so that we can stay here. We feel grounded. We’re not knocked over by things. This requires patience, it requires equanimity, but it also requires using your intelligence and seeing what the mind needs. The Buddha once made a comparison with a cook. The intelligent cook notices what the mind wants, what the master likes, and then will change his offerings to please the master. If you notice that today he took the salty curry, well, tomorrow you want to put some more salty curry out there. If today he takes the sour curry, well, you might want to take the sour. If he completely ignores the sweet curry, forget about making sweet curry tomorrow. Really notice what he reaches for. I mean, if he reaches for one thing, it may not mean that he’s going to like precisely the same thing tomorrow, but you get a general idea of what works. You use your intelligence, you use your powers of observation, and you make adjustments so the mind will be happy to stay here. And on days when it doesn’t work, stop and watch and notice again. It’s this ability to notice that’s going to make all the difference. If you simply try to gain some little wise thoughts from your meditation, they actually get in the way of your noticing. It’s the quality of noticing that’s going to make all the difference. If the mind is open and noticing all the time, it’s going to be gaining insights all the time. It’s going to see things all the time. But if you clog it up with preconceived notions of what you’re going to be seeing, there’s no chance for you to see. So this quality of alertness is very important. Being alert to what you’re doing, being alert to the results, and seeing what gets you in a position where you can see even better. See more. See more deeply. See more subtle things going on in the mind. In particular, you begin to see where you’re causing stress and suffering for yourself and where you don’t have to. Again, these are unexpected insights. What you can expect is how to get the mind to settle down, where you should be, where you should look. Those are things that can be taught. What you’re actually going to see in terms of how you are causing stress and suffering right here, right now, that’s a very individual thing. That’s why we say “paccattang” in the Pali chanting. The Dhamma is there for the wise to see for themselves, not simply parroting what you’ve heard about no-self, not-self, stress, suffering, inconstancy, impermanence. It’s actually seeing the doing of the mind and the results of that doing. And the only place you can see that is right here, right now. So you bring the mind right here, right now, in such a way that it can stay right here, right now. And then keep watching. When you see something interesting, keep watching again. This impulse we have, once we gain a little insight, to go running off and telling somebody or even just telling ourselves, “Hey, that’s a great insight.” Often that gets in the way of seeing what happens right after that insight, which was many times more interesting, more useful, more important. So you watch and you see, and then you watch again. And keep watching. That way, the unexpected insights, the ones that really can make a difference, have a chance.

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