Learning by Experiment

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Chan Phuoc once said that to catch hold of the mind, to catch hold of your attention, you’ve got to give the mind something that it likes. The analogy he gave wasn’t a pretty one, but it was memorable. He said it’s like when you want to catch eels. You take a dead dog, put it in a jar, one of those big earthenware jars, stick that down in the mud. The eels will come into the jar. Then it’s easy to close off the mouth of the jar and there you go, you’ve got your eels. He said if you just jump down into the mud and try to catch them with your hands, they go slithering off every which way. So it is with the mind. If you just try to catch it and make it stay in the present moment without giving it something that it likes to stay with, it’s not going to stay. It’s going to go slithering off. It’s going to go in all kinds of other directions. So you’ve got to give it something that it likes. What it’s going to like from day to day has a tendency to change. This is why the breath is such an effective meditation object, because you can approach it from lots of different angles. If the mind wants simply a comfortable place to stay, you work with the breath to make it comfortable and then get that sense of comfort to fill the whole body. Think of it filling up all the cracks in your awareness of the body, all the empty spaces, so that your arms, your hands, your body, your head, everything is surrounded by very comfortable breath energy and it’s easy to settle in. Other days the mind is not in the mood to settle in with something comfortable. It wants somebody to think about, something to analyze. We can do that with the breath as well. Analyze how you think of the breath. What is your mental picture of the breathing process? How does an in-breath come in? How does an out-breath go out? What do different rhythms of breathing do to the mind? What do they do to your sense of the body? When you do get something comfortable going in the breath energy, exactly how thoroughly can you work it into the different parts of the body? Be as systematic as you can in getting the breath to come in and out the back of the neck, the ears, the eyes, the top of the head. Look at the way you relate to the body. Many times we think of the body, our primary awareness of the body, as of the solid parts, but it’s not. It’s of the energy. We’ve placed the label of solid parts onto the breath energy, so it turns into solid, which means it’s blocked. If you’re allowed to think of your primary awareness of the body as being energy, notice where that sense of solidity is blocking off a good, healthy energy flow, where the chi could circulate if you just let it, if you weren’t trying to impose preconceived notions of solidity or shape on the body. We don’t know what those preconceived notions are unless we experiment with them. So there’s plenty to experiment with here in the present moment. Many times we have the misinformed notion that in order to see things happening in the present, you have to be totally equanimous, totally still, not doing anything, all be totally passive. You don’t find that in the Buddhist teachings. For example, in the Factors of Awakening, the discernment factor analysis of qualities means seeing skillful and unskillful mental states in the mind. You don’t just see them. You work to develop the skillful ones and undercut the unskillful ones. There’s a duty involved here. To understand what’s skillful and unskillful requires experimentation. The Buddha himself said that he got on the right track in his practice when he simply decided to divide his thoughts into two types, harmful and harmless. How did he know which were harmful and harmless? By watching them to see what they did to the mind. You can apply the same principle to your breathing. There’s harmful breathing and there’s helpful breathing. How do you find out? Well, you experiment. You shift this way of thinking of the breath, or you shift that way of breathing. Make the breath longer, make it shorter. Think of it going down to every little capillary, every little nerve ending. Think of your body as a big sponge with lots of holes on all the surfaces and the breath coming in and going out from any direction at all. Then see what that does to how the breathing feels. See if you can develop a way of approaching the breath that makes it really riveting and really does get fascinating if you start exploring cause and effect. That’s what discernment is all about. Look at the Four Noble Truths, cause and effect. Unskillful causes, craving and ignorance. The result of unskillful causes, stress, pain, suffering. Skillful causes are the path, and the results of skillful causes are the cessation of suffering, the cessation of stress and pain. Cause and effect is built into the whole teaching. The Buddha once condensed his insight of awakening to one simple causal pattern. When this is, that is. From the rising of this comes the arising of that. When this isn’t, that isn’t. From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that. It’s a fairly abstract principle, but the important point is that things are connected. What’s connected? Your intentions are connected to the results. You can change your intentions, and that will affect the results you have. That’s the important principle here. The effects are felt not often, but they’re felt only in the future, right here, right now. Sometimes you change something right here, right now, and you suddenly see the results coming right here, right now. That makes causality complex. It also makes it something that we can explore right here, right now. That’s what the insight is all about—seeing what you’re doing, seeing the results of what you’ve done and what you’re doing right now. If you don’t like the results, you can change them. If you don’t like the news, go out and make some news of your own. Although here the news is not what other people are doing, it’s what you’re doing right here. The news of the world tells us that what’s important is what somebody else is doing some other place, some other time. You watch history in the making when you’re sitting in your TV. The underlying assumption being that the person sitting there watching the TV is not making any history that’s of any interest at all. When you’re meditating, don’t accept that assumption. The important things in your life are what you’re doing right here, right now. And there’s a lot more going on right here, right now, than you might assume. So what you learn to do is question your assumptions, starting with your simple assumptions on what’s happening as you breathe. How much of it is intention? How much of it is not? The only way you can find out is by changing your intentions. Your intention to breathe long, your intention to breathe short, deep, shallow, your intention to be sensitive to the results, your intention to investigate exactly what is this breath energy you’ve got in your body. The Buddha says there are altogether six levels. There’s the in-and-out breathing, there’s what he calls the up-going breathing, which is the energy that seems to rise in the body, the down-going breathing, the energy that seems to go down, the breath in the intestines, the energy that keeps your digestive fires going, and then the breath that fills every organ of the body, the breath that goes through all the blood vessels, down to the capillaries, all the nerves, down to the little nerve ends, out to every pore. These different types of breath energy are all connected. So there’s a lot to explore here. The important thing is that you don’t believe that message that our society keeps seeming to hammer into our heads, that the important things in life are being done by somebody else some other time. And all the choices you need are as to which channel to watch on your TV, which thing to pick up when you go down to the store. Actually, the important thing in your life is the choices you’re making right here, right now, just on how you breathe. And there’s a lot more choice going on there than you might assume. So you learn to make different choices, have different intentions, experiment. And if the mind doesn’t want to experiment, if it wants to just rest, the breath will give it a place to rest. But if it’s not ready to rest, well, it gives you a place where you can work, experiment, learn to understand. The different types of energy that make up your experience of the present. So either way, the breath provides you with a place to rest and a place to learn, a place to grow still and a place to investigate, to see things clearly. So you develop both those qualities that you need in the meditation, tranquility and insight. And you can also bring them together right here as well. It’s when they get brought together that the insight gets really penetrating and the tranquility gets really tranquil. So there’s a lot to learn right here. If you learn how to question, if you learn how to experiment, allow yourself to question, allow yourself to experiment, then you find that you will allow yourself also to learn a lot more than you might suspect.

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