Physicist’s Approach, A

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A famous physicist was once asked how he went about solving problems in physics. And his response is very relevant to what we’re doing as we meditate. He says part of it involved attitude. First, he had to convince himself that the problem was important, that it really was worth his time. And then, secondly, that he was capable of solving it. You might call it faith in the problem and faith in yourself. And that’s necessary in the meditation. You have to be convinced that sitting or focusing on your breath really does accomplish something. It’s not an idle exercise. It’s not running away from reality or running away from your problems. It’s actually finding the solution to your problems and encountering reality right where reality is formed. Because where else is it? The reality of our lives is right here in the present moment, and yet we know it so little. We know so many other things about our lives, chasing down the tail ends of the decisions that are made here. What we see are the tail ends. We don’t see the decisions, and we don’t take full responsibility for the decisions we’re making in the present moment. As a result, those tail ends are never really satisfactory. So keep reminding yourself that the important things in life are being done right here, being decided right here. Not in Washington, not in London, not in Hollywood. They’re being decided right here, each time you choose to act, to speak, to think. So it’s important that you really are very clear about the present moment. This is what working with the breath enables you to do, and it develops the qualities of mindfulness and alertness, concentration, and discernment that you need. In order to be clear about what is the most skillful thing to do at any one time, what’s the most skillful way to shape time and space, what’s the most skillful way to deconstruct them when the time comes, those are all decisions that are made here. So that’s faith in the problem, faith in the practice. Faith in yourself means realizing that you have all you need. Because what does it take? It takes basic qualities of mind. Again, mindfulness and alertness. Our mindfulness and alertness may not be strong, but we’ve got them to at least some extent. They’re things we know, they’re things we’ve used in our lives. It’s simply a matter of learning how to strengthen them by exercising them. It’s like physical exercise. If you want a strong body but you look in the mirror and your body is weak, what do you do? Go out and buy a new body? No, you take the body you’ve got and you exercise it. You give it the right food, the right nourishment, the right system of exercise, and it’s going to change. It’s going to get strong. It’s the same with the mind. All you need is right here. After all, the insight that leads to ultimate happiness involves the process of fabrication—verbal, mental, physical. Physical fabrication is the breath. Verbal is the direct thought and evaluation. Mental is perceptions and feelings. They’re all right here. You’ve got them already. It’s simply a matter of getting to know them better and getting to develop the qualities you need to look into them. Those are right here, too. So you’ve got what it takes. As a John Munn used to tell his students, you’ve got the starting capital for the practice already. You’ve got this body, you’ve got this mind. That’s all that’s needed. So those are the issues of attitude—faith in the practice, faith in yourself. And then the physicists went on to say, in addition to attitude, there’s a quality of single-mindedness. You just focus everything you have on that one problem. That means looking at it from different angles, turning it around as if it was an object in your hand, seeing it from all sides. No matter where your thoughts go, they’re connected to this one problem. That’s how you accomplish it, a breakthrough. That’s how all the great discoveries or the great realizations in physics have been made. It’s interesting to note that most of them have been made by young physicists just getting started out in the field. They take a problem and they give it their all. Einstein once said, “The problem with trying to make great discoveries in your old age is that it’s hard to grab onto one problem and stick with it long enough.” So you have to be single-minded. As a John Fuhringwein said, you have to be crazy about the meditation in order to do it well. You have to really be fascinated by the breath. It has to capture imagination. So learn to look at the breath, not just as in and out here, but as the energy flow in your body, which is bound to have an important impact on your physical health, your mental health. It’s the way you dwell in the present moment. So explore all of those things as you have the time. But always make sure that everything is connected to the breath, because this is the basis of our skill. This is the basis of all the knowledge you’re going to gain. John Lee has passages in his Dharma talks where he relates all the 37 wings to awakening, to ways of relating to the breath. All the teachings that the Buddhists said are important, the crucial teachings to maintain. All the other teachings got lost, he said, or he implied. As long as these 37 wings to awakening were remembered, practiced, passed on, the Dharma would thrive. And all of them are related to ways you relate to the breath, mental attitudes, different ways of looking, different ways of relating to the breath. Do this one thing, the breath coming in, the breath going out, the breath energy in the body, throughout the body, throughout the nervous system. Learn to look at it from different angles, but keep this as your basis. Keep holding on to this. There’s a red ant in Thailand, a big red ant, that tends to stand guard over mango trees. It builds its nests in mango trees. And if you try to climb up a mango tree and get the mangoes, it’ll bite you. And it’s a determined biter. If you try to pull it off, it’ll hang on with its pincers, even to the point that you can pull the body and detach it from the head and the pincers will still be holding on. It’s that determined. That’s the kind of determination you want to have in the meditation, the kind of single-mindedness. Even if your body gets separated from your head, keep holding on to the breath. This is where all the really important issues are, and this is where all your raw material as a meditator can be found. And once you straighten out this very inner sort of relationship inside yourself, the effects will have to spread to the way you relate to things that are less intimate, less close to yourself. Because how can your relationship to the breath help but affect your relationship to everything else? This is the thing that’s closest to you in the physical world. And if this relationship is skewed, it’s going to skew everything else. So hang on right here. You’ll find yourself, as with a physicist, testing different hypotheses about the breath. When the breath comes in, where does it go in? Where does it seem to go in? How do you comprehend the breath? What does it mean to know the breath? All kinds of questions you can ask about the breath. And as long as they’re breath-related questions, you’re on the right track. If you seem to run to a dead end, step back and look at the breath. You’ll find the issues again. And if you bring these attitudes, you bring these qualities to the issue of the breath, to the issue of why is there suffering here in the present moment? How is it related to the breath? How is it related to things that are even more inner inside the mind? When you focus on these issues, you find that they reach a solution. When a physicist tries to tackle a problem, he has no way of knowing whether the problem can be solved or not. But this is an issue that people have solved in the past. It’s simply a question that each person has to solve, for him or herself. It’s not an intellectual problem, the way problems in physics are. Or when someone has solved a problem, he’s solved it for all humanity. Each of us has to solve this problem inside. Why are we causing ourselves stress and suffering? Do you think that if people love themselves, they don’t want to cause themselves stress and suffering? But they do, over and over again. It’s because they’re ignorant. What we’re trying to do here is work through that ignorance, turn knowledge onto the process, turn our inquiry into the process, turn our awareness onto this question. We’re pursuing it with conviction in the importance of the problem, conviction in our own ability to solve the problem, and a single-minded determination to see it all the way through.

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