Teacher Inside, The

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Stick with the basics. The breath is coming in. You know it’s coming in. It goes out. You know it’s going out. Notice when it feels good. Notice when it doesn’t. If it doesn’t, you can change. You can experiment. The same goes true of the mind. Notice where you’re focusing. Is this a good place to focus? If not, you can move. Be very deliberate in these steps because when things go well in the meditation, you want to be able to remember why you did. If you’re just mucking around in the present moment and happen to hit something good, you can’t remember how you got there. But if you’re deliberate, looking at the breath, looking at the mind, having some clear steps in mind, that’s very important. You can actually make comparisons between different sessions of meditation. Figure out what works in what circumstances and what doesn’t. In this way, the pattern of the meditation becomes ingrained, so that you don’t get careless and complacent. It’s all too often to say, “Well, I know the basics already. I’d like to move on to the higher things.” Well, the higher things depend on the basics. You can’t have the fifty-third story of a building unless you have the first story, and the second and third and the fourth. So don’t be too quick to try to jump over the basic steps, because everything in the meditation is right here. It’s not that you’re going to go someplace else. It’s just that you want steps for knowing how to settle in. This includes not only the right technique, but also the right attitude. Part of the right attitude is just this—being very careful, very meticulous. The second is doing it in a friendly way. The Buddha says it’s important that when you meditate, you do it with any part of the practice at all, that you do it with cordiality. Now, you’re cordial with the people around you, but more important, you’re cordial with yourself, cordial with the breath, on good terms with your meditation, so it doesn’t become too much of a task. I mean, it is a task, but when you learn to do it with a sense of goodwill, a good-natured attitude towards it, so you’re not blown away by mistakes, and you don’t get too puffed up about the times when it goes well. In other words, you’ve got a friend who keeps you down to earth. Breath is still coming in, going out. That’s the kind of friend you want along the path. Someone to talk to, someone to joke with, someone to work with. So be on good terms with the breath. You find the meditation getting dry. Usually the problem is not with the breath; the problem is with the mind, its attitude. It’s either pushing too hard, or it’s getting discouraged, or it’s forgotten the basic steps. So it starts getting dry. So you want to back up a little bit and look at your attitude and do what you can to put yourself in a better mood. The Buddha talks about this in one of his discourses. He says, “Focus on the body in and of itself.” In other words, your sensation of the body right here, right now, not in reference to whether you like it or not, but simply to what it is. If you focus on the body in reference to the world, all sorts of other issues come up. The question of whether it’s as good-looking as you’d like to be, whether it’s as strong and healthy as you’d like to be, whether it’s as young as you’d like it to be. That can set you spinning off in all sorts of other directions. But it’s just the body in and of itself. Breath coming in, breath going out. And he says, “Sometimes when you do that, a fever gets into the mind.” In other words, the mind just does not feel comfortable with this. So he says, “Stop and think of something you find inspiring, something that’s uplifting. Everything about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, whatever you find uplifting about them.” They have specific ways of reflecting on the Buddha. Those chants we have every morning, every evening, ways of reflecting on the Dhamma, the Sangha. But choose what you find most inspiring. Which part of the Buddha’s story you find inspiring. Which aspect of the Dhamma you find inspiring. Which aspect of the Noble Sangha you find inspiring. Which side of yourself you find inspiring in terms of the good you’ve done in the past. Sometimes that will lift the mind up, put you in a better mood, give you a better attitude towards the meditation. Then you can go back to the breath. In other words, part of you is keeping tabs on how things are going. One of the paradoxes of meditation is that not only is your mind the thing being trained, but it’s also the trainer. You get advice from outside, Dhamma talks every night. That expression isn’t high until your ears are all wet with all the Dhamma talks. But still, you filter the Dhamma talks while you’re sitting here, and then especially when you go out and sit under the trees on your own. You’ve got to keep tabs on how things are going and have a sense of what’s just right. So you’re training the mind not only to be a good meditator, but also to be a good teacher of meditation to itself. To be a good coach. And this takes time. Learning how to judge when things are going well, when you’re pushing too hard, when you’re not pushing enough. But fortunately, when things don’t go well, you can step back and start all over again. Just try to learn from your mistakes. It’s amazing how many of our attitudes towards work, towards ourselves, towards our life, get played out just in the way we relate to the breath. This is why it’s such a good meditation topic, because it brings up all kinds of issues. If you can maintain a level head while you’re meditating, you begin to see exactly what triggers these issues and also what works in undoing these issues. So the important thing is that you not get exasperated, not get down on yourself. Learn how to deal with your mistakes. This is a talent that a lot of us have trouble with. One, admitting our mistakes. Two, recognizing them, admitting them, and then learning how to learn from them without getting tied up in all sorts of other issues. One of the problems of our education system here is that it tends to track people from very early on. They look for what you’re good at almost inherently, and then they turn you in that direction to get you to specialize. As a result, very few of us learn how to develop talents in areas where we’re not immediately talented. How to stick with something you find difficult until you really get the hang of it. So it may not have come naturally, but eventually you learn how to be good at it. A large part of that attitude is that skill and learning how to be skillful in things that you’re not immediately talented in. It is your attitude. Learning how to relate to long-term projects. Give yourself pep talks along the way. Recognize when you’re pushing too hard. Recognize when you’re not pushing enough. How are you going to recognize this? By pushing too hard and not pushing enough, but then learning to notice. It’s the ability to step back and notice, to step back and watch. This is an essential part of the meditation. It’s the right attitude towards the meditation. Oftentimes it’s a lot more important than the technique. The technique is there to give you specific steps that you follow so you can remember. First, you did this. This is how you focus on the breath. This is how you make the breath comfortable. Sometimes you consciously work with it. Sometimes you just simply try to make your awareness of the breath as continuous and non-stop as possible. The fact that you’re consistently watching it seems to iron out a lot of the wrinkles. Once you’ve got it comfortable, what’s next? You know the problem when the breath gets comfortable is that you tend to get a little drowsy. You tend to drift off. There are ways of fighting that. John Lee recommends going through the body, section by section, noticing how the breath sensations feel in different parts of the body, and spreading awareness to fill the whole body. The steps are there so you can compare different meditations. Sometimes you approach a step one way. Sometimes you approach it another way. Sometimes you mix up the order a little bit to see what happens there. It gives you something to compare. But underlying all this is the right attitude, the attitude that’s willing to take chances and to learn from mistakes. The attitude that’s willing to back up when things aren’t going well and start over from square one. This training and attitude should then carry out into your life. As I was saying just now, when you focus on the breath, you find all of your attitudes towards tasks suddenly centered on the breath. When you learn how to retrain those attitudes, then you find that you’ve retrained your attitudes not only towards this task but also to other tasks as well. This is one of the ways in which meditation starts to seep into your life. You learn how to approach tasks that used to seem too daunting, too big to handle. You learn to break them down into smaller units so they’re manageable. You can get your mind around the idea that you’re going to do them, and then you stick with it. Remember, as you’re meditating, you’re not only training the mind, you’re also training the part of the mind that’s the teacher, that watches and evaluates. And, of course, the teacher’s going to make mistakes, as in real life. The first couple of classes that a teacher teaches may not come out all that well because the teacher’s still learning the ropes. And if the teacher refuses to notice mistakes, admit mistakes, and learn from them, they’ll continue to have the same mistakes over and over and over again. But if you have the right attitude towards your mistakes, you find that you get better and better and better. Fortunately, with the mind, it keeps coming back, because it keeps having that same problem. It’s still suffering here. It wants to do something about it. And with time, the teacher part of the mind has more and more to offer, because it’s more and more experienced. John Fung used to say that this teacher inside the mind was a very important part of the meditation, wanting to make sure the mind does its work. It’s like having the teacher in the classroom as opposed to the teacher outside of the classroom. When the teacher’s in the classroom, the kids are obedient, they do their work. But the wise teacher also knows how to pace the classroom, how to encourage the lazy students, how to challenge the sharp students, so that everybody in the class benefits. So when you notice the voice in the mind that’s monitoring your meditation, check it against the voices of wise teachers you’ve had in the past. That’s one way you can get an idea of which voices you should be listening to, whose judgments you should be taking seriously. It’s the teacher with the all-around perspective that has the most to offer.

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