Science of Meditation, The

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Once I read an essay by a famous physicist who complained about the way science is taught in grade school and high school. You open up a typical text, and it starts with definitions. This is what energy is. This is what mass is. As if learning the words was teaching the science. He said it would be a lot more useful to start out by teaching kids how to observe, how to run experiments. One, how to take notice of what was going on around them, and then two, how to manipulate it to learn the underlying principles of how things interact, how cause and effect work, in a way that you can get some use out of them. In the course of doing that, you may find that you need certain terms to explain things or to make notes for yourself. But the actual science lies in the method and in the uses you get out of the method. The same principle applies to meditation. It’s what we get out of the meditation that’s important, not what we can label things as. You can learn all the vocabulary of the Dhamma. It doesn’t take all that long. You look through a couple of lexicons, a couple of dictionaries, and you know the terms. And you can try applying them to different experiences you’re having in meditation. But that’s not the practice of the Dhamma. The practice of the Dhamma is learning the principle of cause and effect and learning how to use it to your advantage. Because the meditation is worthwhile insofar as it makes changes in the way you act, in the way you speak, and in the way you think. It should make changes in the level of stress and suffering you’re causing for yourself and other people. Ideally, it should put an end to all that unnecessary stress and suffering. Then you know that the practice is working, that you’re actually practicing the Dhamma. When you see the level of stress and suffering caused by your own mind, by your own attitudes, your ignorance and your craving, it’s lessening in your life. John Fuehrman once said there are three basic steps to meditation. One is learning how to do it, the second is learning how to maintain it, and the third is learning how to put it to use. So if you’re focusing on the breath, the first step is learning how to focus on the breath, which, at first blush, will help you get into the state you’re in. The breath is right there. It’s coming in, it’s going out. Simply learn how to be on friendly terms with it. After all, it’s keeping you alive. So you want to learn how to focus on the breath in such a way that you can stay with it. That’s the second one. It’s learning how to maintain the states you get from the meditation. In other words, the mind begins to calm down. Can you maintain that? The image they give in the text is of a person carrying a bowl filled with oil on top of his head. It’s filled to the brim. He has to walk between a show. On one side, the beauty queen is dancing and singing. On the other side, there’s the crowd that’s exclaiming over her. He’s got to walk between them with someone following behind him. He’s got a sword drawn ready to cut off his head if he allows a drop of oil to spill. This is what it’s like trying to carry the meditation into your life. It requires extreme balance and a lot of attention, that little spot that you can get. That’s one of the easiest ways to carry the sense of ease, the sense of well-being that comes from a state of concentration into your life. It’s to be able to maintain one spot in your body as a comfortable spot. Breathing, whatever rhythm of breathing, whatever amount of pressure you apply with your attention, watch which spot you choose. But have one spot that’s your spot that you carry out into the world. If you find yourself slipping off, you know precisely where to come back. Then just try to maintain that sense of well-being. In the midst of everything else, you find you’ve got to let go of a lot of other things just in order to do that. But it’s an important part of the meditation. If you simply expect that the fact that you have a good meditation is going to immediately have good effect on the rest of your life, that may in part be true, but you get a much better result if you take the skills you learn in meditation and you carry them out. So that when you’re talking to other people, when you’re interacting with other people, you’re coming from a still center. You’re coming from a position of strength. If you leave those skills on the cushion, if you leave that sense of ease on the cushion, you will be able to experience some ease as it carries over into the rest of your life. Meditation is not a magical ritual that you do that’s going to smooth out the rest of your life. It’s an opportunity to learn some skills, skills in mindfulness, skills in alertness, skills in concentration and discernment. Then you take those skills with you. In this way, the Dharma does start to have an effect on your life. Because you’re actually applying it to whatever level of calm you attain in the meditation. First, learn how to get there. Second, learn how to maintain it while you’re sitting here. Try to maintain it as you’re getting up, walking around. Then notice what effect the skills you learned in that process have an effect on your life. Different levels of concentration have different types of uses. They also have their different dangers. As we’re saying today, if you hit a particular level and you think, “Well, this must be it. This is as far as you can go,” then you look at the territory around you, look at the perspective from that point, and you can come to all kinds of conclusions about life, reality, the world, yourself. But if you take the attitude that whatever comes up in the meditation, whatever state you achieve, is a means to an end, then you examine to see, “Okay, what end is it a means to?” Everything operates under the principle of cause and effect. That’s the teaching that permeates everything the Buddha taught. You find some states of concentration you can carry out with you. They’re good for you to take with you. Others are more difficult to take with you. Some types of concentration turn out to be wrong concentration. They seem nice to begin with, but after a while you begin to realize that they’re not having a good effect on you. They’re not helping your mindfulness. They’re not helping your alertness. Chalk that up to experience. They might have other uses. There’s a state of wrong concentration called non-perception where you pretty much blank out. It’s a very strong concentration. It requires a lot of willpower to get in there. It’s not like the dreamy blanking out that a lot of people experience. It’s a much more directed and willful blanking out. You can get in there and you can time yourself. If you want to stay in there for two hours, three hours, you’ll automatically come out at the end of that time. It’s not right concentration because you can’t know anything in there. As Ajahn Fuon once pointed out, if you’re going into an operation, it might be a good state to put yourself in in case the anesthesiologist messes things up. In fact, that’s what he actually did one time. So what you want as a meditator is not only to learn how to get yourself into particular states of mind, but also to have the powers of judgment you need in order to figure out what they’re useful for, what they’re not useful for, what their advantages are, what their disadvantages are. In other words, you need some quality control. That’s what the Four Noble Truths are about. Looking for whatever stress may be in those states, first learning how to get there, learning how to stay there so you can get to know them well, and then look. Is there any craving? Is there any ignorance still there? Sometimes you can’t see the craving and ignorance. After all, ignorance by definition is hard to see. But you can see the effects of stress, a sense of burdensomeness. If you look for that, if you can detect it, then figure out, okay, what are you doing that’s causing it? Those are the basic principles you use to check everything out in the meditation. We’re so prone to come to snap judgments about where we are and how good it is, or whatever. You have to be a little bit more wary, because that’s what protects you. After all, we’re conscious beings. We’re coming at the practice from ignorance. So we use the Four Noble Truths as our protection from our own ignorance and as our quality control. And it turns out that the quality control is precisely the element of the practice that ultimately will make the big difference between staying in one or other worlds of the mind or getting out beyond worlds entirely. The Buddha has that challenge. There is the cessation of the six senses. He says it’s something that should be known. Now, he defines the world as our six senses plus their objects, so it sounds kind of scary. But he says, “Give it a try.” It’s the ultimate happiness. One of the things we’re doing in our meditation is to take up his challenge and see if he’s right. And again, in order to test his teaching, it’s the same principles. Learning how to do them, how to maintain them, and learning how to put them to use. Learning how to evaluate them as you put them to use. So the principles that we need in the practice to test ourselves are the principles we also use to test the Dhamma in the practice. And he’s not asking us to accept anything foreign. After all, none of us likes to suffer. He says, “Look, apply that desire not to suffer to the issues of your life. Do it systematically and see what happens.” And if you do it systematically, you find that both you and the Dhamma pass the test. It’s not a test that anyone outside is imposing on you. It’s your own desire not to suffer. It’s your own sincerity, your own honesty. And those are the members of the Minds Committee that you really want to side with.

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