Observation

December 10, 2004

One of the first things that John Foon told me when I went back to Thailand to ordain with him was that if I was going to learn anything as a meditator, I have to learn how to think like a thief. Think for a minute. How do thieves think? If you’re going to rob somebody’s house, what do you do? Do you go up and knock on the door and ask them when they’re going to be away? Do you ask them where their valuables are? You can’t expect any information from them at all. You have to look. It’s in your looking, your being observant. That’s when you get the information. Basically, you stake out the house and watch it, see when they come, see when they go. See if you can look inside the windows and get some sense of where things are. In other words, you have to be observant. You can’t expect things to be handed to you on a platter all the time. This is what John Foon meant. As a meditator, you’ve got to be observant. If you’re not observant, then no matter how much the teacher tells you, you don’t see anything. The teachings just become one more layer of talking, one more layer of ideas that you place on top of your pre-existing layers. Then you don’t get much out of it. It doesn’t help scrub away all your old layers of ignorance. So you’ve got to be watchful when you’re sitting and focusing on the breath. What way of looking at the breath is going to teach you things? If you spend your time anticipating, “Well, it’s going to be like this, it’s going to be like that,” all you end up seeing are your anticipations. You don’t see the breath. You don’t see what happens to the mind when you let it really stay still with the breath for long periods of time. So if you catch yourself anticipating, “Well, this is going to happen, that’s going to happen, it should be like this, it should be like that,” just notice those things and then drop them. Allow the mind to stay with the breath. Then you can play with the breath. It’s not totally passive. If you’re totally passive, there’s no learning. One of the basic things I’ve discovered about the psychology of learning is that you have to have some input. Change this, change that, and see what changes as a result. But once you’ve made your changes, then watch for a while to see what actually happens. You may make a change with a particular idea in mind that you’d say making the breath longer is going to feel good. Well, make it longer. Then watch and see what actually happens. If it doesn’t turn out as you thought it would, chalk that up to experience and try something else. If you don’t have the time to stop and look and watch, what are you doing with your time? How do you expect to learn anything from the meditation? It’s not the sort of thing where you put it through a particular technique and then say the technique is going to do all the work for you. It’s sort of the assembly line approach to meditation. Put your mind on the assembly line, and then this gets added, and that gets added, and this gets done, and that gets done, and then you come out and you didn’t have to do anything at all. You just sit on the conveyor belt. That’s not how you gain discernment, gain insight in your meditation. The discernment and the insight has to come from watching. Watching what you do and watching the results as they actually come. What lies behind the doing? There has to be a question. What should be done here? What’s wrong here? What’s still lacking? If you’re not the sort of person who questions things, again, you’re not going to learn anything. So there’s the questioning, and then there’s the doing based on the question, and then there’s the watching of the results. The watching requires patience. Many times the Buddha says if you want to learn something, you have to be both observant and willing to take time to watch over long periods of time. Otherwise, you just get a little snatch of a little glimpse here and a little glimpse there, like connect the dots. You have a little dot here and a dot there. As for the lines that connect the dots, those are based on your ignorance. As we all know, when people see things, they immediately try to place them inside their already preconceived notions, the structure they have of how they look at reality, how they look at things. The only way you can disrupt that structure is by being very observant and thinking about scientific revolutions. They come about because people start noticing experimental results that don’t fit into the old pattern, and there’s no way they can squeeze them into the old pattern. It stirs things up, and for a while they’re questioning what a new pattern might be, until finally somebody has the ingenuity to come up with the right kind of question to ask of these new data. The same process happens in the mind. We’ve got layers and layers of misconceptions, layers and layers of ignorance, all the chattering that goes on in the mind, some of which we’re conscious of, some of which we’re not. The unconscious stuff is lost in a kind of a background hum. It’s like the hum of New York City. There are so many noises going on that when you lose track of which noise is which, it all becomes a hum. One of the purposes of the meditation is to quiet things down so you can begin to hear individual voices. Your mind will say, “Well, do this. This should be that way. That should be this way. This is this. That’s that.” When you start hearing these voices, sometimes once they become clear, they’re obviously wrong, and you begin to realize how much they’ve been controlling things in your life because you haven’t paid careful attention. Other times they seem right, but you’ve got to check them against what’s actually happening. This reverses a lot of our priorities. Most of our priorities are seeing what confirms what we already believe. So the underlying requisite for meditation is learning how to be observant. When something happens, you can ask yourself, “Well, what should be done here?” Then realize that when you come up with an answer, it’s not an answer, it’s just a hypothesis. You’ve got to test it. Sometimes the testing takes a long time. This is why you want to get the mind concentrated and keep it in concentration as long as you can, so you begin to see the little movements in the mind that you otherwise would miss. Or to test a particular idea about the breath, a particular idea about how the mind reacts with the breath. Test it over time to see if that insight stands up. So what are you watching? What are you questioning? Basically seeing what you’re doing is causing unnecessary suffering. You’ve got to have a very strong sense that it’s no small matter. This is why the Buddha stressed heedfulness as underlying the development of all skillful qualities in the mind. What does heedfulness mean? Well, it means, one, realizing that your actions do make a difference, and two, that the results can either be very good or very bad. So you can’t be careless. You’ve got to pay attention to what you’re doing. If anything good comes up in the meditation, you’ve got to value it. You’ve got to appreciate it. Good qualities, as you develop in the mind, you can’t just scatter them around. When mindfulness gets stronger, you want to keep at it, keep at it, keep at it. As concentration gets stronger, you want to try to maintain it as much as you can. You’ve got to value these things because they are your protection. They are the qualities that enable you to see clearly. So you begin to see certain ideas that you picked up out of ignorance, who knows where, who knows when, really are harmful if you allow them to stay in those layers of chatter that’s going on in your mind. You don’t know what kind of influence they’re going to have. So you’ve got to peel them away, peel them away. The good side of heedfulness is the realization that you can make a difference. If you’re watchful, you can stop creating the suffering that you have been over the past. If your actions didn’t make any difference, there’d be no need to be heedful. So keep track on watching. Where do your actions actually make a difference in the state of your mind? What ways of thinking? What ways of looking? Keep the mind fresh. Keep it clear. Keep it light. Light not in the sense of blowing around easily, but light in the sense of not feeling burdensome, not feeling weighed down by things. It’s a peculiar quality. Keep light and solid. That’s what you’re looking for. The only way you’re going to know these things is by being very, very sensitive. This is why a lot of the training for the monks is not just sitting with your eyes closed, but also being observant. What needs to be done here? What needs to be done there? There was a student one time who had been a monk years back. He’d gotten a lot of degrees in the Pali language. Then he disrobed, worked for the government, retired, and then he wanted to come back to the monastery and start meditating. He was extremely well-read, very knowledgeable. He could discourse for long periods of time on all kinds of topics related to the Dhamma. But Jon Fung’s comment about him was that he used the word “quick” and “crude” in Thailand. Crude in the sense that he wasn’t observant. He didn’t notice things. For him, that was a death knell for any kind of meditation he was going to do. The issue of not being observant wasn’t just things in his own meditation, but just things right around him. He wasn’t paying attention. In that habit of not paying attention, you’re just kind of coasting along, thinking everything is okay, or waiting to be told things. That doesn’t just apply to your outside activities. It shows what’s going to happen in your meditation, unless you decide to make a change. Learn to be more observant. Realize there’s always something to be done. The question is, what? There’s not anybody out there always going to be telling you. You’ve got to notice what needs to be done. So you have to understand these principles of being observant on the underlying issue of heedfulness. Realize that it does make a difference when you pay attention. In particular, you pay attention to what you’re doing and the results that come, and learn to notice when the results are satisfactory and when they’re not satisfactory. Be patient enough to watch, because sometimes things seem satisfactory immediately, but over the long term they’re not, or vice versa. So you have to be both quick to see the immediate results and patient to see the long-term results. Sometimes the meditation doesn’t really go anywhere, or if it does get to a nice state of concentration, then it stops right there. So many meditators, when they reach something new in the meditation, feel, “Ah, this must be it. This is what the Buddha was talking about.” They really aren’t patient enough to sit and watch and see what immediately happens next. When you hit the deathless, you’re not the person who decides if the experience itself decides for you. So watch out for the part of the mind that’s constantly commenting on things, because where do those comments come from? They’re guesses. One ignorant part of the mind sends a message to another ignorant part of the mind, and that just keeps you in your same old ignorance. As Ajahn Sawat would say, it’s the same old make-believe. One part of the mind has an agreement, “This is this, and that’s that. Okay, okay.” Based on what? Little bits and snippets of experience, but not enough to really test things. In the ultimate sense, when reckoning really comes, there’s none of that. So always put a question next to your observations, and then look, look, look. Be heedful of what you’re doing, be heedful of the results, and try to be sensitive to whether the results are satisfactory or not. If they’re not, ask yourself a question, “What can be done next?” Because it’s only when you develop your own sensitivities in this direction that insight can actually happen. Simply following a technique will not do that for you. You have to be watchful all around if you’re going to gain any kind of all-around discernment.

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