Meditation as Skill

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When the Buddha describes concentration practice in the Eightfold Path, he describes it in terms of three factors–right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. And the formula for right effort, which is the first of the three, begins with desire. That’s the desire to achieve to develop skillful mental states, the desire to abandon unskillful ones. As for unskillful ones that haven’t yet arisen, you try to prevent them from arising. And for skillful states that have arisen, you try to develop them further. You develop the desire to do these things. You work at it. You give it all of your mind. The word for mind there also means being intent on something, just giving it your all. So you’ve got three factors there–desire, persistence, and your full intent, bringing your entire mind to bear on this project. And those are qualities that you need to develop a skill. In other words, the project of developing skillful mental states and abandoning unskillful ones, in and of itself, has to be approached as a skill. You bring the same qualities that you would to any skill. The Buddha himself makes this point when he keeps comparing the practice to skills of different people–of a cook, a carpenter, an acrobat, an archer, a musician. So it’s important when you practice that you think about skills you’ve worked on in the past. What qualities of mind did you bring to developing that skill? Then you try to apply those same qualities to the practice, like desire. Desire can get in the way if you’re not careful. But without desire, how are you going to practice? If you didn’t have the desire, you wouldn’t be here. So the important thing is to be upfront about the fact that, yes, you do have desire, and then you learn how to use it properly. Focus on the steps of mastering this practice, like working with the breath. The Buddha lays it out in steps. “Be aware of short breathing,” he says. “Be aware of long breathing.” Train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and out. Allow the breath to grow calm. Be aware of any sensations of pleasure or rapture or refreshment that arise while you practice, and allow those to grow calm. So you can be simply aware of the mind in and of itself. These are all laid out in steps. What’s interesting is that the Buddha doesn’t give more precise recommendations than that. He gives more general outlines. In other words, while you’re focusing on long breathing and short breathing, there are lots of ways you can do that. You can simply allow the breath to come in and out on its own at whatever rate it wants to. Or, when you begin to notice that the breath isn’t doing this on its own, there’s an element of intention there. So you can play with intention. After all, you’ve got the opportunity. You can breathe any way you want. Why not try to breathe in a way that’s comfortable? That feels right just now. And who’s going to define “right” aside from you yourself? This way you can bring those factors of desire and persistence and intent to bear on what you’re doing. In other words, there’s the desire to feel good with the breath. That’s okay. It’s a good desire. Persistence. You stick with it. If you’re really going to learn what kind of breathing feels good, you’ve got to experiment for a while. So that your own sensitivities can develop. That’s the element of intent. So you observe. You watch. When you’re tired, what kind of breathing feels good? When you’re tense, what kind of breathing is right? There’s no one there to tell you about this. You have to find this on your own. And in doing so, you develop these qualities even further. You refine your desire. You take your desire for awakening and you focus it on your breath. Desiring awakening is like desiring something really far, far away. And it’s there. That’s why we’re practicing. But you want to focus it on something nearby, something you can actually observe. It’s like going to a city on the horizon. If you focus on the city, you’ll drive off the road. You’ll run into somebody. If you focus on the road, it’ll take you to the city. The same with persistence. If you think about persistence in the abstract, it seems kind of dry. You stick with something over and over and over again. You do something over and over again. And after a while, it’s going to get boring if you don’t find a way to make it more interesting. This applies to all skills. If you’re doing an exercise, the same exercise, day after day after day, you get bored. You have to find ways to put variety into what you’re doing. This is when you bring persistence and intent together. In other words, you monitor how the mind is doing in the practice and learn ways to adjust things so that you’re happy to keep with the practice. You can maintain that level of persistence without it getting dry. You can maintain that level of persistence without it getting boring, without the mind rebelling. You begin to notice patterns, cycles of ups and downs, plateaus. And you learn to realize that this is going to be a part of the practice. So you work with them instead of against them. What all this does is it really refines those qualities of desire and persistence and intent. So the desire and the persistence together can develop into good powers of concentration, the intent, bringing all your awareness, all your powers of sensitivity to bear on what you’re doing. That’s the seed for insight. And you develop it by approaching the practice of meditation as a skill. If you look around, you find there are two extremes in the approach to meditation. One is the attempt to map everything out, to reduce everything to one technique or to a specific set of steps that everybody has to follow. And all you have to do is follow the instructions and somehow it will produce awakening. But how are you going to gain insight? Unless you develop your own powers of sensitivity. The other extreme is to say, “Well, nothing matters except for the ultimate goal of awakening. Everything else is free form.” Almost to the point where you sit and are waiting for a spiritual accident to happen. And neither extreme is the Buddha’s approach. He approaches it as a skill, where you test things, take steps. You work on incremental steps to begin with, to get a sense of how cause and effect work in your mind. And as you get a better and better sense of how cause and effect work, which approaches work, which approaches don’t work, how to get the mind to settle down, how to work with the breath. This teaches you about the power of meditation. You start exploring. You can push the limits. How far can cause and effect go? Exactly how still can you get your mind? How broad can you get your sense of centered awareness? Can you detect any sense of stress, even in the most quiet states of mind? What happens if you find that stress? What do you do then? How do you locate the cause? You push the envelope, because there’s that promise the Buddha gives in the Third Noble Truth. There is a cessation to suffering, a total end of suffering. And it’s not annihilation, but it does lie outside your normal realm of experience. He mentions that because he wants to capture imagination. If you don’t imagine that such a thing is a possibility, you’ll never get there. It’s like shooting a gun. You never hit any higher than you aim. So that’s the other element of developing a skill, if it captures your imagination. First in mastering the steps, and then in seeing how far you can go with that particular skill. That’s when you really start getting results, and when you develop real mastery in the practice. And he speaks about the cessation of suffering in tantra. It’s a place of no hunger, he says. It’s a place of no need for desire. In other words, you’re using desire as one of the elements of the path, but it takes you to a place where there’s no need for desire anymore. He talks about falling. You’re following this path for yourself, being self-reliant, but as your sense of self gets more and more refined along the path, your strategies for happiness, which make up your sense of self, begin to give way to strategies of no-self. And the desires by which you define yourself get more and more refined to the point, as he says, that you can’t define the person who’s gained awakening. You can’t even describe them as such a person as existing or not existing, both, neither. And that’s the ultimate happiness. All of this is to capture your imagination, to make you interested in how far can this go, this practice we’re doing. Is the Buddha right? Is there a happiness that’s deathless? Work on these skills, and you’ll see for yourself.

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