Watch What You’re Doing

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When you meditate, you’re both the teacher and the student. In other words, you tell yourself to focus on the breath in a certain way, to work with the breath a certain way, and then you have to evaluate the results. You want to make sure that you actually are doing things the way you tell yourself to do. When the results don’t come out, you have to figure out why. Sometimes it’s an issue in the mind, sometimes it’s an issue in the body, and you’ve got to figure that one out as well. What this means is you have to be very observant, getting a clear sense of cause and effect of what’s happening. After all, the Buddha summarized his awakening in a causal principle. When this is, that is. When this isn’t, that isn’t. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that. Learning means seeing connections between what you do and the results that you get. Sometimes the results are immediate, but by mistake you slam a hammer down on your hand. It’s going to hurt right away. Other times the results take a longer time, and it takes heightened powers of observation to see these long-term effects and to sort out which is the cause of the many possibilities. Chan Phuong, my teacher, once said that the one thing you have to believe in when you meditate is the principle of karma. In other words, that your intentions do have effects, and they’re commensurate with one another. As we’re getting the mind still here, it’s not just a question of stress reduction or just being calm. It’s trying to understand something, the something you’re trying to understand is what you’re doing and what the results of what you’re doing are. Because the mind is doing things on a lot of levels. It’s like a big switchboard in there. All kinds of signals are coming in from all the different nerves. It’s like there are several different people at the switchboard, deciding which calls to answer and which ones just to leave. Lots of decisions are being made all the time. Simply as you sit here, you may think you’re just sitting here just being still. There’s a lot of doing that’s going on in the being still. The reason we get the mind still is so you can see more and more clearly exactly what’s going on in the mind, what ideas are in charge, and then learning to watch to see what the effects are. Learning to make the connections. Some of the lessons come very early on in the meditation. You make up your mind to stay with the breath and it wanders right off. You learn how to catch it. The next time it wanders off, you may be able to catch it a little bit more quickly. Ultimately, you want to be able to see it as it’s about to go. As you see the stages, as the mind pries itself loose from its intention to stay with the breath and is off someplace else, we have a tendency to hide that from ourselves. It’s almost like you turn off the lights inside the mind. And when you turn them on, all the furniture has been rearranged. It’s someplace in there. There’ll be the memory that you were supposed to be someplace else, back with the breath. One of the skills of meditation is learning how to get back to the breath right away, how to extricate yourself as quickly as possible. No matter how fascinating or entangling that particular distraction was, you have to be able to just stop and get out. A friend of mine was telling me one time there’s a question you can ask different people. The question is this. You’re dreaming that you’re in a boat. There are just a few people there. They’re your parents and your friends. There’s no food in the boat and you’re out in the middle of the ocean. The question is, what are you going to do? How are you going to choose which person has to die? How are you going to extricate yourself from the situation? My friend said if you ask this question of an adult, they give all kinds of answers. There are rationalizations for why you would choose, say, one parent over the other, or yourself over everybody else. You ask the question of a child, and the child will say, “Well, wake up. After all, it’s just a dream.” Somehow, we tend to lose that quality, that ability, just to pull ourselves out immediately and realize, “Well, this is just a mental state. You can drop it. You have no responsibilities to it.” Then get back to the breath and then watch more and more carefully for the next time the mind is about to slip off and watch for the steps so you can see exactly where mindfulness lapses and immediately stitch it all back together again. You begin to see that the wandering off the mind does have an intentional aspect. You find similar lessons even as the mind gets more and more still. You get it to a good state of concentration. You begin to see, after you’ve been there for quite a while, that this concentration, which seems so still and so basic and so elemental, really did have lots of different decisions being made to keep it going. Again, it’s learning what you’re doing, what the results of what you’re doing are. So this is the lesson that’s always in the background. There are times when you put that lesson aside so you can focus more and more just on staying with a particular state, to check it out and to see how useful it might be. But there are also times when you want to take the whole thing apart in the sense of seeing exactly what element of intention is there and what element of stress goes along with the intention. Because it’s seeing through this that awakening can happen. There’s a very clear connection between what you’re doing, what you’re dropping, the element of intention, and how that functions as you finally let go of the very last intention. Many times, one intention simply drops because another one takes its place. Even the intention to drop something, that is an intention. There comes a moment in the meditation when you realize any intention in any direction is going to create suffering. And the only alternative is not to intend, which is something we’re not very good at. But if you get very sensitive to what happens in the mind, what actions are going on, what intentions are constantly being relayed back and forth, then you’re more and more likely to see where the possibility for no intention lies. And that’s how you get out of the system, the system of conditionality, the system of suffering and stress. So what that requires is a very clear ability to see what you’re doing. When the Buddha talks about ignorance, it’s precisely this kind of ignorance. We do things, but we don’t see what we’re doing, and that’s why we suffer. So at the very least, when you’re meditating, if things don’t settle down the way you’d like them to, just keep watch of what you’re doing and learn from that. The Buddhist instructions, basically, are simple. They are instructions on how to learn, how to be your own teacher and your own student all at once, as you watch what you’re doing. It’s something you really should be expert in, but because we haven’t learned how to learn, we don’t notice. This is the opportunity to learn that lesson and to reap the benefits that come from learning it.

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