Different Minds, Different Bodies

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Each time you meditate, remember you’re bringing a different mind to the session. It may not be the same mind you brought to your last session. And you’re bringing a different body. In other words, the state of the mind, the state of the body, can change over time. Sometimes quite radically in the course of a few hours. An important part of the skill in meditation is learning to read where you are when you sit down. What kind of issues are you carrying with you, both physically and mentally? You can be bringing a tired body, a tense body, a sick body. A healthy body. And the way you work with the breath depends on where you are, what you need in order to, say, give a sense of relaxation when you feel tense in different parts of the body, or to energize yourself when you’re feeling tired, or to work with a pain that may be caused by poor blood flow in some part of the body, or if there’s just a general feeling of malaise, just don’t feel right. How can you work with the breath to deal with that, to overcome it, to compensate for it? These are important skills in the meditation. You can’t sit down and hope that each time you meditate, you do the same steps the same way, and you’re going to get the same results, because you’re coming with different raw materials. Even more so when you’re dealing with the mind. Sometimes you bring a really hyper mind to practice, and you’ve got to do what you can to calm it down. At other times, the mind is sluggish. Or you’ve got a particular issue you’re dealing with, carrying over something somebody said in the course of the day, or something you did in the course of the day. All of these are things you’ve got to learn how to compensate for. That’s part of the skill of the meditation. Sometimes when the mind is really antsy, and the more you try to tie it down, the more it rebels, in which case you’ve got to say, “Okay, now the mind wants to think about it. Give it something to think about.” Go through all the really subtle aspects of the breath energy in the body. Make a catalog. How is everything starting from the end joint of your little finger and going to the body very minutely, very precisely? Or you can switch over to the bones. Where are your bones right now? That’s a good thing to think about. We’ve got a skeleton sitting right here inside our flesh. Where are the different parts of the skeleton? Go through and make a catalog. Visualize all the little bones that you can remember from biology class or anatomy class. Ask yourself, “Where is that toe bone right now?” Locate it. Try to relax all the muscles around that bone, and then move on through the various bones in your feet, up your legs, up through the pelvis, up the back, the ribcage, the neck, the skull. Do your arms. In other words, if the mind has a lot of energy, give it work to do if it’s not willing to settle down. After a while, after it’s done its work, it’ll feel tired and want to settle down. Then you can work with the breath in one spot. Other times when the mind is sluggish, you’ve got to learn how to wake it up. And again, going through that catalog of the different parts of the body, that’s a useful way. Or you can move your attention around. Once, when Ajahn Fuan was really sick, he had to set up a schedule for the monks to look after him. The other monks in the monastery were very quick to find other duties they had to do, and I ended up being left with a 2 a.m. to 8 p.m. shift. I usually find around 3 a.m. I’d be getting really sleepy, and I didn’t want to fall asleep. Ajahn Fuan had once commented on some monks who were looking after him when he was really sick. One night he woke up in the middle of the night, and all the monks who were supposed to be looking after him were all asleep, but he was the only one awake. The question popped into his mind, “Well, who’s looking after whom here?” So I wanted to be very careful that he didn’t tell that story about me. So I tried to sit and meditate and find myself dozing off, until I found that one way of keeping myself awake was to move my attention around. Two breaths here, then move your focus of the awareness to another spot in the body. Two breaths there, and then just keep moving it around, top to bottom, top to bottom, here to there. After I got over that phase of sleepiness, then you get the mind to settle down and just stay in one spot. That’s another way of dealing with sleepiness or a drowsy, sluggish mind. Do something to wake it up. As for specific issues that you’re bringing into the meditation, sometimes you have to put the breath aside if the mind is not willing to stay with the breath. Actually focus on what is it that’s got the mind all stirred up. Is it lust? Is it anger? Is it greed? Is it regret? Is it discouragement? There are lots of different emotions that can be coming in and getting in the way. Then use whatever antidote there is for that particular emotion, that particular defilement in the mind. We have that chant on the thirty-two parts of the body to help deal with lust, the chant on goodwill to deal with anger. Actually, there are lots of tools to use for anger. Sometimes you have trouble feeling goodwill of the other person, but at the very least have some goodwill for yourself. In the Canon, the Buddha says, “If you give in to your anger and start acting on your anger, you’re going to do precisely the sort of things that an enemy would be happy to see you do.” You look ugly when you’re angry. You destroy your property. You destroy your friendships. You get all confused as to what’s going to be to your advantage and what’s not going to be to your advantage. You have trouble sleeping at night. If you had any goodwill for yourself, you wouldn’t do these things. That’s where you start—goodwill for yourself. Then, after you’ve settled down and dealt with that issue, you can start thinking of goodwill for other people. When you’re feeling lazy and sluggish, you can contemplate death. Death could come at any time. Are you ready to go? If not, what have you got to do? You’ve got to get your mind in good shape. That’s the first priority, so focus on that. When you’re thinking this way, it helps stir you up to be willing to meditate. In other words, learn how to read your mind. See where it’s off balance and then do what you can to bring it back into balance. Sometimes the breath can do that for you. Other times you have to drop the breath for the time being and work on other things. That’ll finally get you to the point where you’re willing to take on the breath. Even when the mind settles down with the breath, it’s going to settle down in different ways. The descriptions of jhana make it sound like you lock into a particular state that’s always going to be the same every time you hit it. But that’s not always the case. Sometimes there’ll be a great sense of bliss, a great sense of rapture, and other times it’s much milder. Sometimes the sense of ease is very compelling and sometimes not so compelling. The important thing is that you stay with your meditation. Realize that the concentrated mind has its variations as well. As long as you’re with your object, you can stay absorbed with the breath. Stick with your original intention, and you’re doing what’s required. Whether it’s a great feeling of ease or just a slight feeling of ease, that’s going to depend on your physical condition, on the condition of the mind, and also how that sense of ease relates to the really sensitive parts of the body and the mind. You’ll find as you get more and more used to the territory of your body that there are some parts of the body that are really sensitive. They really have an impact on the mind. And there are others that are more peripheral. Sometimes it’s a lot easier to get the peripheral areas relaxed. That central part may still be tight, closed, in which case you focus on all the areas around it. You don’t attack it directly. You work on loosening up all the other areas around it. And then maybe once everything else gets loosened up and eased, easeful, then it’ll start seeping into the more sensitive parts of the body, especially the ones in the central core of your torso, around the heart, in the chest, in the throat, in your gut, in the middle of the head. And you can get those parts to open up and develop a sense of fullness, and it becomes a lot more compelling. So remember, there are variations in the raw material you’re bringing to the meditation each time you sit down. That’s going to require variations in the techniques, variations in your approach. But this is a basic principle in any skill. Sometimes you get the broccoli out of the refrigerator, and it’s nice and fresh. Other times it’s not so fresh. Okay, what do you do with fresh broccoli that’s different from not-so-fresh broccoli? If you’re a good cook, you learn. You learn to deal with whatever variations there are. That means your skill is more all-around. Because ultimately we want to learn the skill so that it’s something we don’t just do while we’re sitting here with our eyes closed, under very quiet conditions. You want to take it out into all sorts of conditions so you can keep the mind centered no matter what. That means even more variations in the environment, more variations in what you have to learn to deal with. So learn to get good at the variations of your own mind, how to read the mind, how to counteract any unskillful thoughts that are coming up, how to bring it into balance no matter where it’s getting tipped—forward or back, left or right, whatever. Take that in stride as part of learning the skill of meditation. That means you’ll learn how to translate your skill into all sorts of situations so you can do it whenever you need it. And you realize that the different states of concentration that you’re going to gain all have their different uses. So whether it’s the type of concentration you’d like to get or not, that’s not the issue, or shouldn’t be the issue. The issue should be, “Okay, once you’ve got the mind concentrated in this way, what can you do with it? What’s it good for?” That’s when the skill of meditation shows its real importance. As you gain a greater sense of its range.

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