Learning How to Learn

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My father went to visit me when I was in Thailand. I arranged for him to sit and meditate with my teacher. The first question my father had before he sat down was, “I’m Christian.” He said, “Is this going to get in the way of the meditation?” My teacher said, “No. What we’re going to focus on is the breath. The breath isn’t Buddha. It isn’t Buddhist. It isn’t Christian. It doesn’t belong to any particular religion. It’s common property all over the world.” So when you focus on the breath, that leads you straight to your mind, your awareness in the present moment. Then any questions that come out of the meditation, we’re talking about the mind. We’re not talking about Buddhism or Christianity or any particular religion. We’re just talking about issues that arise in the mind. That way, he said, we can understand each other. So, focus on the breath. As my teacher said, it’s common property. It’s so common that we hardly even notice it. But it’s a good place to start because, one, the breath is with you all the time. It’s something you can watch at any time at all. Notice how it’s coming in. Notice how it’s going out. Where do you feel the breath? Does it feel comfortable? Would it feel more comfortable if it were longer or shorter? You can try experimenting. For instance, if the end of the in-breath or the end of the out-breath seems squeezed, that’s a sign that it’s too long. On the other hand, if you don’t get a sense of fullness from the breath, that you’re not getting enough breath, maybe you could bring the breath longer. So experiment to see what feels just right. Learn how you can sense where in the process of breathing out you can sense the signs that the breath is just long enough and it’s time to stop the out-breath. Or when you’re breathing in, how you know when it’s just long enough so you can stop the in-breath. And when do you feel a need to start breathing in the opposite direction? Try to sensitize yourself to this as much as possible. I guess this is an area that we’ve pretty much desensitized ourselves to because we’re more interested in things outside, more interested in ideas, what we can read or take in from the senses. And the breath gets ignored. And that might not be such a bad thing. But, after all, the breath is the energy of life. It’s what keeps us going. And it stands to reason that if the breath feels uncomfortable, it’s not going to be good for the body, it’s not going to be good for the mind. If it does feel comfortable, it can help nourish the body. It nourishes the mind. But more than that, if you focus on the breath, you’re in the present moment. And this basically is where life happens. All too often, though, we’re someplace else, not really paying full attention, not only to what’s happening, but also to what we’re doing in response. As that chant said just now, we’re the owners of our actions, and yet we’re hardly aware of our actions. And our motivations for our actions get hidden very easily. Yet these are the things that shape our lives. It stands to reason that if you want to shape your life well, you want to pay careful attention to what you’re doing. And what you’re doing is being done in the present moment. If you want to see your actions clearly, if you want to see your motivations clearly, watch them right here. So we focus on the breath as a way of anchoring ourselves in the present so we can see what’s actually happening, and so we can exert more informed choices, direct our lives in the direction we want them to go. Because otherwise, what happens? There will come a point when your death is in the present moment, and you’re not aware that the life that you’ve taken for granted is suddenly going to end. And you’re going to start looking back on your life and the choices you made. The things that you did will loom large. The things you didn’t do will loom large as well. And if you can look back on choices that were well-made, decisions that you can be proud of, it makes the whole process of going a lot easier. It’s better to look back on a life with a sense of satisfaction than with a sense of regret. So as long as you have a breath coming in and going out, you have the opportunity to make the kind of choices that you can look back on with satisfaction. So being with the breath helps you take advantage of that. At the same time, being with the breath puts you in a better position to learn about your actions. The big issue in life is whether we find happiness or not. And it comes from our actions, from what we do. And yet if you’re not clear about your actions, then you’re not going to be clear about the connection between what you did that’s caused a particular state of mind or a particular situation in which you find yourself. You don’t know what led to where you are because you weren’t really paying attention to what you were doing. But if you have a clear sense of what you’re doing, it’s a lot easier to connect the dots between the cause and the effect. And that’s what enables you to learn. If you see that you made a mistake because it led to unfortunate circumstances, you can resolve not to make that mistake again. It’s basic common sense, but most of us don’t live with common sense. We don’t know how to learn from our mistakes. This is a lot of what the Buddhist teaching is about—how to observe what you’re doing, observe the results of what you’re doing. So if you sense that you’re unskillful, you can make changes. And all the issues he points to are things that are immediately here in our present awareness—what we’re doing, what we’re experiencing, especially in terms of pleasure and pain, happiness and sadness. There’s nothing mysterious or hidden about these things, and yet we make them mysterious and hidden because we’re looking someplace else. Or we may be looking at them, but we’re not asking the right questions. That’s the other part of learning from your mistakes—not only watching your actions and the results, but learning how to ask the right questions. In other words, what’s motivating the action? What kind of quality underlies the action? Is it skillful or not? Is it harmful or not? Look into that. And how do you see the connection between an action and its result? You have to look continually. This is one of the reasons why we meditate—to get that ability to look continually, to perfect that ability, to master it. Because all too often we look at things only in little bits and snatches. We don’t look long enough to see where is the cause and how does it issue a result. Because we’re jumping around. We do too many other things at the same time. One of the main purposes of meditation is to develop insight. Sometimes you read about insight techniques. All you have to do is act in a certain way or make your mind do a certain thing, and it will yield an insight. But the Buddha never taught that way. There’s no technique that guarantees insight. He does, however, recommend places to look, questions to ask. Look at your intentions, look at your actions while you’re doing them, and look at the results after they’re done. Even states in the mind, he says, look at them as actions. Not a state that you are a particular state. Just say, “Okay, there is this particular state in the mind.” Learn to look at mind states in a more impersonal way, without identifying with them. Ask a series of questions. Is this mind state constant? Is it something you can depend on or not? If it’s independable, can you base your happiness on it? If it’s independable and you can’t base your happiness on it, why would you want to identify with it? If you don’t identify with it, what do you do next? Or, at an even more basic level, if you find that you have trouble getting the mind to settle down, either because of sensual desire or ill will for somebody, that’s obsessing your mind. You may be slothful or torpid, restless and anxious, or just uncertain about what you’re doing. How do you learn to observe those states so you can get past them? Well, see if you can watch them coming and going, because they do come and they do go, and there’s a reason for their coming and a reason for their going. The commentaries try to give an exhaustive list of the various reasons, but the Buddha never did that, because it’s better for you to learn how to observe for yourself when, say, sloth comes. What comes along with a sloth? When it goes, why did it go? When you learn to observe for yourself, then you’ve gained genuine insight. It’s not simply a matter of memorizing what’s in the text or trying to impose a system of classification on your mindstates. You want to be able to observe, to learn from what’s actually happening in your mind. Psychologists have shown that we’re very bad at observing our actions and their results. You’d think that would be the one thing we would know really well, because we’re doing these things all the time and it’s right here in the present moment for us to look at, but we don’t. We do something and hope that it’ll bring happiness, even though we’ve done it in the past and it hasn’t brought us any real happiness. But we hope again and again and again that maybe sometime we’ll get it right. It’s one of the main ironies of life, that the issues that should be our main concern are things we don’t really observe. We’ve made a mistake. We don’t really learn from it. So that’s one of the things we’ve got to work on as we meditate, is learning how to learn, learning how to observe. If you don’t do that, no matter how many years you practice an insight technique, it’s not going to yield any genuine insight. It’s your own powers of observation that are going to make all the difference. So we come to the present moment both to get the mind to settle down and have a sense of ease and to gain insight. The ease is important, not only for itself, but also because it puts you in a better position to see. That’s part of learning how to learn as well. It’s learning how to put your mind in a position where it has enough sense of a well-being that it’s willing to admit mistakes, learn from mistakes, and develop the ingenuity to try to figure out some other way of acting. So you start getting the results that you really want, results that are really worth the pain of living. So use the breath as an anchor in the present moment, and use it also as a way of gauging what you’re doing. When you focus on the breath, are you focusing too hard? How can you tell? Or is your focus not strong enough? What are the telltale signs? You’re the only person who can observe this for yourself. Here’s your laboratory right here for seeing cause and effect in the present moment, and for developing the skills that allow you to see cause and effect in other areas as well. Only when you see cause and effect can you begin to master the process, and only when you master the process can you really use it to yield a happiness that’s lasting and worthwhile.

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