Flexibility

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When we come to meditation, we come with a lot of presuppositions about what we want out of it, what it’s going to do, how it’s going to work. Some of those presuppositions are helpful and some of them are not. So look at the meditation as a way of testing. Finding your presuppositions to figure out which ones are working and which ones aren’t, and also to know that some of them will work sometimes and not at other times. There’s a time and place for everything, just about everything. For instance, your breath. What is the breath? You can think of it as the air coming in and out of the lungs. You can think of it as energy flowing through the body. You can think of it as energy, period. There are places where John Lee, for instance, talks about still breath. It’s energetic, but it’s still. We’re going to test and see which of these conceptions is helpful. This is helpful for you at a particular time, a particular place, a particular stage in the meditation. This principle applies all across the board. Access to the breath, your concept of self. Sometimes it’s useful, sometimes it’s not. Often we’re taught that the Buddha had just a lot of bad things to say about ideas of self or “me” or “mine.” If you look in his instructions on meditating, you’ll have descriptions of the meditator’s internal dialogue, breathing meditations. “I will breathe in and out short. I’ll breathe in and out long.” There’s an “I” there. Notice when hindrances arise. “A hindrance has arisen within me. A hindrance has passed away within me.” There’s the “me” there. That points to, of course, that you’re the one responsible for what you’re doing, and you’re looking inside yourself. Those are useful concepts when you need them. You also need to know when to let them go. John Cho tells a story about four people going into the forest. They hear a rooster crow. One of them, just for the fun of it, says, “Is that a rooster or is that a hen?” Three of them put their heads together, again, for the fun of it, and say, “Oh, it’s a hen.” The other one says, “No, it’s a rooster.” And they go back and forth like this. “How could a hen crow like that?” “Well, it has a mouth,” the others say. John Cho says, “Even though the one person was right, he ends up crying. He’s the one who’s crying.” So being right to the point of crying doesn’t help anything at all. You have to learn when to use your ideas, when to use your suppositions, and when to put them aside. If you use them this way, then they really serve a purpose. If you learn how to test them, get a sense of time and place, that’s how you become skilled in the meditation. In Thai, they have the word ditthi. It’s taken from the Pali word for “view,” “opinion.” But as it’s developed in Thai, it also means “pride,” “conceit.” That’s where we have to learn how to put aside, the idea that our ideas must be right and that you’re going to hold on to their rightness no matter what, even in the face of when it’s not right to hold on. John Fung used to say, “You can be right, but as soon as you start clinging to your rightness, you’ve gone wrong.” Now, this doesn’t mean that you hold on to these things and use them when they’re useful. It simply means that you’ve got to learn when is the time to hold on, when is the time to let go, when is a concept helpful, when is it not. So we’re meditating to test these things. Think of the meditation not as an effort to clone something. You may have heard that an enlightened person is like this, so you try to clone your idea of enlightenment. Or a true meditator has to act like this. No personality, no nothing. So you clone that. Then it gets in the way. You can’t clone awakening. The Buddha never tried to teach it in that way. Right cloning is not a factor in the path. It gives you things to do, tools to use toward awakening. Then you learn which tool to use at which time. He’s got some instructions on that. Other times, you have to learn for yourself. But learning for yourself is also an important part of the path. Otherwise, you don’t develop discernment. So as you meditate, be willing to make mistakes and be willing to learn from them. There are things you do that will lead you to the end of the path. It’s like the road to the Grand Canyon. The road to the Grand Canyon doesn’t look like the Grand Canyon. It’s not red. It’s not deep. But it gets you there. Again, the road itself doesn’t get you there. You follow the road and you find yourself at the Grand Canyon. If you try to make the road look like the Grand Canyon, you actually prevent yourself from getting there. You dig a big trench in the road, paint it red, and you never get to the Grand Canyon. So our road here is virtue, concentration, and discernment. Release comes at the end. It’s the result. You focus on the causes and the result will have to come. It’s like the sense of ease that you can gain in the meditation, a sense of fullness, rapture, refreshment. As long as you focus on the cause, you’re okay. If you leave the cause and just try to hold on to the rapture, it’s like trying to grab hold of a cloud. But if you understand that keeping the mind focused on the breath in a particular way, the continuity of which you do it, the right amount of pressure, and the breath not too heavily, not too light, focus on doing that properly, and the rapture just keeps coming and coming and coming. So you’ve had enough, and then you can focus in a different way, and the rapture will… What happens is that you go under the radar, and you find yourself tuning in to a more refined level, a different way of conceiving the breath, a different way of focusing. Just a slight change, but it’s enough to get a more refreshed, calm, loving, light sense of ease. So there are lots of different levels in the meditation, lots of different ways of comprehending the breath, perceiving the breath. Jon Fuehring would often talk of the different levels of concentration, not in terms of this Jon or that Jon, but he’d say, “Focus on the breath and feel it this way, and then think of the breath that way, and then experience the breath this way.” And you’d find yourself going through different levels of concentration. Sometimes, he would have you give words to the way you’re experiencing it, and then he would use those words with you. Now, we can sidestep the whole issue of, “Which Jon do you have? Is it the fourth or the fifth or whatever?” Or, “My Jon is better than your Jon,” which happens a lot. We’re not here in a Jon-a contest. We’re here trying to explore what’s going on in the mind. Which presuppositions we’re bringing to the practice are going to be helpful, and which ones get in the way. Sometimes issues come up in the meditation. They’re not the ones you anticipated. They’re not the ones you planned, but they may be the issues that the mind needs to deal with right now. Okay, accept that. Put aside your plans. I found that living in the monastery really reinforces that lesson over and over again. Sometimes you want to sit and meditate. Something else comes up. A freeze comes up, and you have to get out the smudge pots. One of the smudge pots sets things on fire, just as you’re getting into a bath. Okay, you get out of the bath, and you go down, and you put out the fire. Being with a Jon Fu, he’d give me a translation project to work on, and then he would get sick, and I’d have to put the project aside and go work with him. I realized that as long as I was stuck on the idea that I really wanted to get that translation project done, I was going to suffer. But if you realize, okay, now is not the time to work on that, put it aside and do what needs to be done right now. Whether it’s a job you feel confident in doing, or whether it’s one that you’re still kind of awkward, or if it’s something totally out of left field. Still, if it’s the issue that’s coming up right now, you deal with it. Learn how to handle whatever problems arise, whether they’re the ones you want to deal with right now or not. Deal with the ones you have to. And that develops a lot of good qualities in the mind. That willingness, that ability to put aside a preconceived notion and deal with an actual problem. Because, again, what are your preconceived notions based on? Well, there’s an element of ignorance in all of them. Some of them have worked in the past, so there’s an element of knowledge, but that element of knowledge has ignorance in its shadow. In other words, the situation right now may seem like something you’ve encountered before, and so you drag out what you encountered before. Of course, many times it turns out, well, it’s not quite the same situation. There’s a twist. This is why people have to go into psychotherapy. Lessons they learned in childhood, when they weren’t really observing carefully, they tend to hold on to, even on into adult life, reacting the same way. But meditation is a willingness to say, “Is that presupposition right for right now? What is right for right now?” Learn to be flexible in that way. And you find that your skills as a meditator will develop. Your sensitivity to what’s the actual situation is, your ingenuity in coming up with new ways of thinking, will develop. You’ll be developing more presuppositions as you do it. But the hope is that you get more sensitive to when a particular idea or conception is helpful and when it gets in the way, and learning how to read the situation to see what’s needed. That’s how your meditation grows. After all, what is the meditation about? It’s not about just doing something that you’ve read in a book or heard instructions. It’s learning how to handle your own mind. All the issues in meditation are your issues. Some people come to meditation hoping to run away from their issues, but you can’t run away from them. You bring them with you. What the meditation does is to teach you how to handle them. As I say in Thai, there’s the word patipat, which means to practice, but it also means to look after somebody. If you patipat your parents, you’re taking care of them, you’re looking after their needs. As many of the Ajahns will say, we’re not here to patipat the religion, we’re here to patipat ourselves. We’re here to look after our own minds, to take care of the specific issues that we have. They will tend to fall into large categories, like the hindrances or the categories of greed, anger, and delusion. But you also begin to see that they have their own particular features. Whether you like their particular features, those are the ones you’ve got. So you learn how to deal with them. As you face the particulars, you start getting to the bigger issues. They may be what you expected them to be, and they may not. But you’re developing the ability to handle whatever comes up. That’s how the meditation is really useful. You’re not trying to clone awakening. You’re trying to explore the possibility. After all, awakening is going to be something very different from what you expect. Always keep this principle of flexibility in mind. you

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