Introduction-Meditation as Skill

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The purpose of meditation is to develop the skillful qualities of the mind. It takes the same principles that we would apply to any skill—being mindful, being alert. Evaluating the results of your actions and being ingenious about figuring out new ways to solve mistakes. It takes those mental qualities and applies them directly to the mind. Think about any skill that you’ve mastered. If you’d learned to weave, what did the very first cloth do? It looked pretty messy. You had the basic principles down. You knew there was a warp and there was a woof. But as you move from that cloth to a cloth that really looked nice—whatever the skill—first you’ve got to give it a try. Keep in mind the instructions, what the teacher tells you. What the teacher tells you is based on what worked for them. But the teacher can’t tell you how to make it really beautiful or how to be skillful at it. They give the basic principles, and then you start teaching yourself. Noticing when the weave comes out well and when it doesn’t come out well. Then figuring out, “What did you do? What was the difference?” This means you have to be observant. Then you have to be more mindful and more alert the next time you do it to see if you can do it better and better and better each time. The same principle applies here. Focus on your breath. Make up your mind you’re going to stay with the breath. When it comes in, know it’s coming in. When it goes out, know it’s going out. Try to be as consistent as possible in staying with the breath. This means you have to develop mindfulness to remember to stay with the breath each time it comes in, each time it goes out. And alertness. Notice what’s actually going on with the breath. Notice whether the mind is actually staying with the breath or moving off. If you catch it moving off, then bring it back. Each time it moves off, each time you find it wandering, as soon as you catch it, bring it back. This is a way of strengthening your mindfulness and strengthening your original intention that you really do mean business. You really want to learn how to do this skillfully. It’s like an exercise. As you do this, it strengthens your mindfulness. It strengthens your alertness. Then try to notice what kind of breathing is easy to stay with and which is not. Usually the more comfortable the breath, the easier it is to stay with. So think of breathing in a way that feels really refreshing. Don’t make this a grim task, because this is an important element in any skill is that you learn to enjoy doing it. So just pose the question, “What kind of breathing would feel good now?” Notice which parts of the body you sense the in-breath or the out-breath, and how those feelings feel. Are they pleasant or not? If they’re not pleasant, ask yourself, “What would be a different way of breathing that would be pleasant?” This is where you start using your ingenuity. Be very frank with yourself about the results. There have been studies about people who’ve made important advances in the medical profession, what works and what doesn’t work in dealing with a particular disease. They found that certain qualities apply across the board. The first is moral integrity. In other words, you don’t fudge the results of your experience. If you make a mistake, you admit you made the mistake. That’s the second part. Recognize your mistakes. That, of course, requires a third quality, which is that you monitor what you’ve done and the results of what you’ve done. And the final quality is ingenuity. If something’s not working out, try to think of new ways. You’ve got moral integrity, the willingness to gauge the results of your actions, the willingness to admit mistakes, and the willingness to try something new. The ability to think up something, to a new approach, when you’ve tested all the alternatives and none of them work. These are precisely the qualities you want to bring to the meditation. The quality of honesty is especially important. If you’re not honest with yourself, you really can’t judge what you’re doing, judge the results. That way, you don’t learn. Honesty lies at the basis of any learning experience. Approach this as a skill, and it’s a skill with many ramifications. Once you’ve strengthened your mindfulness, strengthened your alertness, powers of discernment this way, you find that you can use them in many different situations, whatever the task is. For example, in Thailand, I was watching a monk throw a pot. He was telling me that the most important thing was to keep his mind, as he said, “still” as he threw the pot. He said all the other skills grew out of that. And you find the same thing applies here. If you see thoughts moving out, you don’t have to move out with them. The word he used, actually, was not so much “still,” it was “upright.” Not moving left or right, just staying right there. So it’s important you realize that when thoughts go out, it’s not that your mind goes out. It’s that your attention follows the thoughts and the thoughts seem to direct someplace else. They’re actually pointers. They’re like little arrows here in the present moment. They point in different directions. But the thoughts themselves occur in the present moment. Even if they’re thoughts about the past, thoughts about the future, think of them as little arrows here in the present. And you stay right here. See them as arrows rather than trying to get into them and go off in the direction where they point. That way, the thought will go off a little ways and then just drop. It won’t amount to anything. If you get involved in the thought center, you can spin out all kinds of narratives. But then you’ve lost the breath. You’ve abandoned your original intention. So you come back. The next time that similar sort of process happens, remind yourself, “This is what mindfulness is for. You don’t have to follow the thoughts. Just stay here with the sensation of the breath.” Because your basic awareness doesn’t leave the present moment. It’s always here. It’s not that you actually go back into the past or go into the future. You’re always right here. It’s just that the thoughts refer you to the past, refer you to the future. But they happen right here. So no matter where they’re spinning, all you have to do is just step out of them. Don’t follow them. Stay with the breath. If they’re going to chatter in the back of your mind, okay, we’ll let them chatter. But you don’t have to get involved in the conversation. Just try to immerse your awareness as much as possible in the sensation of the body sitting here, breathing in, breathing out right now. So much of the mind’s ability to find happiness depends just on this. Your ability to be mindful, to be really observant about what’s going on in the mind. Because the mind has this ability to shape so much of your experience. And if it’s not trained, it’s like the person who weaves a cloth once and it comes out pretty bad and then gives up on weaving cloth and then tries to make a pot and throws a pot or two. They don’t come out well while you give up on being a potter. In other words, you remain an amateur all your life. You remain clumsy all your life in how you’re shaping your experience. It’s no wonder that we suffer. We don’t give any attention to the artistry or the skill that we bring to meditation. The way we react to sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations, and ideas. Some of our experience comes from outside, but a lot of it depends on how we shape it. That’s what really determines whether we’re going to experience happiness or sorrow, pleasure or pain. So as we’re meditating, we’re learning to develop the skills that teach us how to shape our experience from moment to moment. This is why it’s such a basic skill. Regardless of what your background or your beliefs, we all know that we do shape our experience to at least some extent. And the way we shape our experience doesn’t affect only us. It affects the people around us as well. So it behooves us to try to do this as skillfully as possible, to develop these qualities of mindfulness, alertness, persistence, discernment, concentration. So we’ve got an hour to work directly on these skills. Try to make the most of it.

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