Wisdom through Training

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Focus on your breath. Know when it’s coming in, when it’s going out. And keep watch over your mind at the same time, noticing whether it’s staying with the breath or not. And if you catch it slipping off, bring it back. If it slips off again, bring it back again. If it slips off ten times, a hundred times, bring it back. You’re training the mind, trying to develop its powers of mindfulness, its powers of alertness, its ability to stick with one thing over time, so the practice can begin to have an effect. If you stay for a little while, then wander off, think about this, that, and the other thing, come back and check up a little bit later, and wander off again, you’re going to miss a lot. In particular, you’re going to miss the chance to get the mind trained, to strengthen these qualities of mind. The Buddha once said that the difference between a fool and a wise person is that the wise person understands that the mind needs to be trained. It’s important. The basis for all your happiness comes from training the mind. The fool doesn’t understand that. Why is it wise to train the mind? Because so much of your happiness depends on the mind’s being well-trained. Even if things are going well in life, if your mind isn’t well-trained, you can create suffering, even though circumstances outside are perfectly fine. When the mind is trained, then even though things may be going poorly, it doesn’t have to suffer. It’s the mind that makes all the difference in the world. So this is how you start. Actually, you start with very simple things like generosity and virtue. The act of being generous develops good qualities in the mind. The idea of realizing what principles of action you want to follow because they’re harmless, and things you want to avoid because they’re harmful, and then sticking with that, that develops good qualities in the mind as well. Then sensitivity to the power of your actions. It starts you out with those qualities of mindfulness and alertness because you have to keep your principles of behavior in mind, and you have to be alert to make sure your behavior doesn’t overstep them. That’s the beginning of meditation right there. Then as you sit down and say, “I’m going to stay with the breath continually for the hour,” that really requires mindfulness and alertness. It’s in the practice that you understand what mindfulness and alertness are. You can read about them in the texts and gain a certain amount of understanding about them. But it’s only by putting them into practice and trying to develop them that you really get a sense of the range of their powers. They talk about three levels of understanding. There’s the understanding that comes from memorizing and reading the texts, or listening to talks like this. Then the next step is to think about it. Get an idea of how all these elements of the path fit together and how they get applied to the whole purpose of the path, which is to find an end to suffering. Understanding that suffering is something the mind creates for itself, even though there may be pleasant and unpleasant things outside, the mind suffers from its own misunderstanding, from its own cravings. So here we have a path of practice that helps cut through those misunderstandings and develops an inner sense of well-being that helps to weaken the craving that causes you to go out and look for suffering. So this is what study is about. You listen and you think, but you don’t really know the truth of these things until you put them into practice and see the results actually coming. The Buddha makes this point in one of his discourses. He talks of a man going into the elephant wood. Now, if he’s an experienced elephant hunter and he starts seeing footprints in the elephant wood, he doesn’t immediately jump to the conclusion that he’s found the big bull elephant he’s looking for. Even though the footprints may be big, he says, “There are dwarf females with big feet. It might be their prints.” But he goes on. He sees something that looks likely, so he follows the big footprints and he finds scratch marks up on the trees. Again, he doesn’t immediately come to the conclusion that it’s a big bull elephant, because there are tall females with tusks and they can leave scratch marks, too. It’s only when he actually gets to a clearing where he actually sees the big bull elephant standing there, that’s when he knows he’s found his elephant. In the same way, when you’re practicing, even as you begin to get preliminary results in the practice, you follow the path of virtue and generosity and you find it gets good results. Still, that’s not proof that the Buddha was awakened. You start meditating and develop strong states of concentration. You can even develop psychic powers from the meditation. But that, too, isn’t proof. As the Buddha said, these are just footprints and scratch marks. The real proof is when you begin to see that there is something inside the mind that is free from suffering. There’s a dimension in the mind that’s not touched by time and space. You reach that dimension through your own actions, through training the mind. Once you’ve reached that dimension, that’s when you know for sure that the Buddha knew what he was talking about. So the proof of these teachings is in the results you gain from them. But to gain the results, you have to give them a fair test. That requires putting a lot of time and energy into the training of your own mind. Unfortunately, this is not a risky gamble because, after all, the more mindful you are, the more alert you are. You’ve got good qualities of mind to carry over into any area of your life that you want to apply them to. It’s not automatic that simply by meditating you’re going to be able to deal with life better. You also have to concentrate. Consciously bring the qualities you’ve been practicing, that you’ve been developing in your meditation, and start applying them to your life. I know of some meditators who will sit very quietly for a while, and then as soon as they get up from their meditation, they’ve dropped it entirely and go back to their old ways. It’s like someone who goes down to the gym, exercises, but then comes back home and doesn’t help around the house at all, even though they’re a lot stronger and they can lift things, but they don’t help. You want to make the practice continuous. After all, the training of the mind is not just an issue of sitting here with your eyes closed. And your need for these qualities of mind doesn’t occur only while you’re sitting here with your eyes closed. You need these qualities of mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment, at all times. Because the possibility for the mind to create suffering is there at all times as well. Over the course of the day, someone may say something or do something that can set you off. If you’re not careful, you can create a lot of harm simply by giving in to your old ways. You’ve got to realize that you’ve been practicing restraint here as you meditate. In other words, often there’s a temptation to wander off and think about this, that, and the other thing. You’ve got a whole hour left, nothing else to do. You can think about your plans for tomorrow or the next day. You can think about work. You can think about all kinds of stuff. But you realize that that doesn’t really accomplish anything. It doesn’t make any big changes in the mind. It’s easy to spend your time thinking for hours about something you’re going to do and then change your mind in the flash of an eye. But if you spend the time restraining the mind from wandering off like that and really putting it to work here, you come out and you realize you’ve strengthened something in the mind. You’ve developed something in the mind. You’ve trained the mind so it can be more self-reliant, can depend on itself more. We talk about taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, but what that means is taking them as examples so that we can develop their qualities in the mind. And those qualities that we develop in the mind, those are your real refuge. There’s that other statement in the Canon. The self is its own mainstay. You can be your own mainstay only when you train yourself, when you train the mind. In other words, once you make up your mind that you’re not going to do something, it’s only when you’ve trained the mind that you can really abstain from it. Especially if it’s something that you like doing. It’s only when the mind is well-trained that you can convince yourself that you don’t want to do that. Even though you like doing it, it’s going to give harmful results. And you have not only the willpower, but also the understanding, the strategies to help keep you from doing things that you know are going to be harmful, even though you like them. That requires training, but it’s only then that you can really rely on yourself. The same for things that you don’t like doing but give good results. It takes not only willpower to do them, but also the intelligence of a good strategy, knowing how to cajole yourself, how to talk to yourself, so that you can talk yourself into doing the things that you don’t like to do, but you know that over the long term they’re going to give good results. These are all very basic principles, but in practice it requires a fair amount of training. This is why the training, why the development of these qualities in the mind, is where real discernment, where real wisdom comes in. Anybody can read, anybody can think, but it doesn’t necessarily lead to knowledge. It’s when you take what you’ve learned and you put it into practice. You learn from the practice, as with any skill. John Lee has the analogy of a basket maker. The teacher can tell you, “Look, these are the various weaving patterns. These are some of the tricks of the trade.” But then you sit down and your first basket is not going to look like your teacher’s basket. So you can go to the teacher for some advice, but you’ve got to learn how to use your own powers of observation. Watch yourself while you’re weaving the basket and see how you can make your fingers move the way they should, and how you can move your fingers in such a way that they start looking better. The weave is more even, the basket has a nicer shape. You learn a lot from your own actions. This is a lot of where the real learning comes in the practice. Look at the Ajahns in the forest tradition. They didn’t study that much. Some of them were actually barely able to read. They took what they had learned and then they were really serious about putting it into practice and learning by watching themselves in action, to see what worked, what didn’t work, to catch any subterfuges in the mind, any ways the mind was being dishonest with itself. This way, in developing their powers of observation, they found an inner refuge that no amount of reading, no amount of study, can bring. So this is how you become your own refuge, how you become reliable. You learn how to watch what you’re doing, watch the results, and then figure out ways of doing it better. That’s how the mind can train itself. Sometimes you hear that the human mind is so defiled that it can’t possibly lift itself out of its defilements. Actually, you’ve got lots of minds in here. You’ve got lots of selves in here. Your various senses of identity are more than many, and the mind states you have are more than many. Fortunately, they can observe each other. Some are not especially observant, but some can be observant. It’s because you’re multiple like this that one part of the mind can train another part of the mind. You help each other along. It’s like there’s a committee in here. You’re learning to get the committee to work together so that one member of the committee notices that another member of the committee is causing suffering, and you’re all agreed that you want to put an end to suffering. You can talk to each other. That’s how the mind observes itself. That’s how the mind trains itself, learns to be its own refuge. So we get some help from outside. But a lot of the learning comes from your ability just to look at yourself in action. You can use your powers of observation to become more and more skillful in what you do. It’s a very simple principle when you talk about it, but it takes a lot of time and patience and very careful powers of observation to really put it into practice and to master these skills—how to speak, how to think, how to act in such a way that you’re not causing suffering. That’s what the Buddhist teachings are all about.

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