Learning How to Learn

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When the Buddha taught breath meditation, he taught it in a way that encouraged people to explore. There are sixteen steps altogether. In the first two, he says, simply be aware of the breath when it’s short, be aware of the breath when it’s long. In other words, notice that there are variations in the breath. You don’t have to limit yourself to short or long. There’s deep and there’s shallow, heavy or light, fast or slow, broad and narrow. Those are the two steps in which you simply observe what’s going on. Push it in different directions. If long breathing doesn’t feel good, you can try short, or shorter, or longer, deeper, more shallow. Start exploring how the variations in the breath feel in different parts of the body. Because you’ll find if you’re really sensitive, as you breathe in and breathe out, the entire body is affected by the breath. You want to make sure that the effect is good, and you want to sensitize yourself to what that effect is. The more sensitive you are, the more you’re going to get out of the meditation. In the remaining steps, the Buddha says you train yourself, which means you learn how to do something. For instance, you learn how to breathe in and out. You learn how to be sensitive to the whole body. It doesn’t explain how you do that. That’s something you’ve got to learn on your own. Then you learn how to calm the breath sensations in the body. Again, you learn how to do that in such a way that it’s not a clamping down on the breath. You learn to breathe in such a way that you don’t interfere with the different sensations already in the body. So you’re not squeezing the body or squeezing the breath energy. You’re not forcing it. One way you find of calming the breath is, of course, to calm the mind. A lot of our oxygen use in the body comes through the brain. If the brain is doing less work, you’re going to need less oxygen, and the breath can calm down. So these are the sort of things you want to learn. You can breathe with a sense of ease. You can breathe with a sense of rapture. Start getting more sensitive to the mental element and the breathing, the perception you hold in mind. There are lots of different ways that you could picture the breath in the body, lots of ways you could picture the body breathing. And they do have an impact on how you breathe. Just holding a certain image in your mind will change the way the breath flows, which muscles you expand and contract as you breathe. So you can try holding different perceptions. Think of the breath coming in in different unusual parts of the body. Think of the breath coming in the small of your back, the breath coming in and out your tailbone, the breath coming in and out your legs. If you hold that image in mind, you’ll find that the body will respond in various ways, and you can decide which one you like, which one seems to be most pleasant and refreshing at the moment. These are all things that you learn as you practice. Even though the Buddha did provide a map for breath meditation, he left a lot of the spaces blank so that you can learn. And this is an important part of the meditation, having the willingness to learn and actually exploring. Because you’re not putting the mind in a straitjacket. You’re not putting it into an assembly line, where you do this step and that step and the third step, and then you come out with a guaranteed awakening at the end of the assembly line. Assembly lines are good for creating processed material things, but they’re not good for the mind. As you’ll find if you spend any time meditating, if you have just one approach, your defined mind is going to sneak around behind that approach and start pushing it themselves. It’s like being a warrior going into battle. If you have only one way of throwing your spear, that’s all you do. You’re just a spear thrower and there’s nobody else in the army to help you. The enemy is going to get behind you, and that’ll be the end of you. It’s like those cannons they set up in Singapore prior to World War II. The British thought the Japanese would be coming from the ocean, so they put their cannons in cement, all pointed out toward the ocean. Then the Japanese came. They came down the Malayan Peninsula, and the cannons were useless. So keep that in mind as you meditate. If you just have one technique that you follow mindlessly, it’s like those cannons set in cement. You’ve got to have an all-around repertoire. And as any good warrior, you’ll have your set range of skills. But it’s also to have experience with how to learn new skills, so you can come up with new approaches as necessary. If you’ve read much into John Lee, you know that in his basic guide to breath meditation, he has certain ways of describing the breath. But then you look at his Dhamma talks, and he has lots of other ways of describing ways that you can play with the breath and manipulate the breath. And you can try on his different ways. But after a while, you begin to realize that maybe you can start exploring the breath energy on your own and find ways of dealing with it that are new to you. And then you test them. That’s a lot of what learning is about—noticing a problem. Trying to think it through. Apply whatever you’ve already learned. And if it works, fine. If it doesn’t work, how do you use your ingenuity to come up with new solutions? This experimental quality of mind is something that’s essential in the meditation, which is why the Buddha didn’t fill in all the details. Or as Ajahn Mahāprabhu said of Ajahn Manh, when he explained the Dhamma, he would give you the basic trunk of the tree. And as for the branches, you had to figure those out on your own. But once you had the trunk, you could grow the branches on the trunk. So think of this as a process of developing your skills in how to learn. You may say, “Well, you can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” But we’re not old dogs. We’re human beings. And part of being a human being is that curiosity, the desire to expand your range. So even though as we meditate we’re focusing down on one topic, the purpose of that is to expand your range. To heighten your sensitivity, to heighten your powers of analysis, to heighten your ingenuity. There’s a lot to learn here. Sometimes people settle down in the present moment and say, “Gee, nothing’s going on. It’s just very still.” Well, to maintain that stillness, the mind has to be very alert and very clear. Otherwise, it’s going to blur out. There’s actually an awful lot going on in the present moment. If you don’t see anything, it’s because you’re not looking carefully. So the whole purpose of getting the mind to settle down is to get you more and more observant. Some people find it’s easy to settle down. Those are the ones you really have to kick into. But for most of us, it’s hard, especially if you’ve had a modern education, bombarded by all the bombardments of the media. It’s very difficult to get the mind to settle down and be still. So in the process of getting it to settle down, you’re going to learn a lot about the mind. The ones who didn’t think enough and those who thought too much, there’s nobody in between. Those are the ones whose minds got very still very quickly, but then they just stayed there. Those are the ones you really have to kick in order to get them to start thinking about things. As for those who thought too much, there’s nobody in between. Those who thought too much, the emphasis was on trying to figure out how to get the mind to settle down. That’s where the main emphasis should be—working on the concentration, working on the mindfulness. And he said each type had faced different dangers. Those who found it easier for the mind to settle down generally would have kicked in occasionally fine times when it was hard for the mind to settle down, in which case they were totally lost. What had come automatic and easily to them suddenly was not automatic, was not easy, and they had no idea about how to do anything about it. The ones who had trouble getting the mind to settle down, those are the ones that Jon Freud said he was really worried about, in the sense that they would get discouraged. They’d see their friends settling down quickly and see that their own minds were not settling down quickly, or that it was erratic. They’d get discouraged in the practice and give up. He said if they would stick with it, they would get to the point where when they finally did get the mind to settle down, they’d be in a much better position than the other types, because in getting it to settle down, they had learned a lot about the mind. They had explored, they had tested things. They had figured out what worked, what didn’t work, how to read the mind to notice what needs. Does it need to be gladdened? Does it need to be steadied? Does it need to be chastened? And so the concentration already contains some discernment. That’s the kind of concentration that’s really ripe for becoming a basis for the transcendent. So if you’re having trouble getting the mind to settle down, just remind yourself that it’s going to take time. There have been a lot of other people in the past who’ve had trouble getting their minds to settle down, but they stuck with it. And in the end, they really benefited. So if you’re the type that thinks too much, learn how to use your thinking to get the mind still. And to appreciate what a good thing it is to have the mind still for long periods of time, you’ll have to encourage yourself, you’ll have to talk to yourself. Because it’s not just technique in the meditation, it’s your attitude. And if you can maintain the right attitude, that’s a lot of the meditation right there. And if you didn’t meditate, where would you be? Like the chant we had just now, the eye is burning, your ear is burning, your nose is burning, your tongue is burning, your body is burning, your mind is burning. And there are lots of different burnings. There’s the burning of passion, aversion, and delusion. There’s the burning of aging, illness, and death. That’s ordinary. You can take a little medicine, you can exercise to delay the process a bit, but the process is inevitable. The mind is burning, the body is burning, all your senses are burning. But it can be a good burn. There’s the burning of passion, aversion, and delusion. That’s a bad burning. It’s like the difference between the candle burning here at the front of the room and the chaparral burning over there on the other side of the valley. The candle burning in front of the room gives light. If there are enough candles, you can read by them. As for the chaparral burning on the other side of the valley, it would give a lot of light, but you can’t read by it, you’ve got to run away. It isn’t going to burn you up, it’s going to destroy things. So as your body ages and burns up with the fire of aging, illness, and death, ask yourself what kind of light would you like to give off with your life? If you can clear away the passion, aversion, and delusion, you become a candle, you become a beacon, giving light to yourself and to the people around you. And if you train your mind, that’s what happens. You become a candle. You stop being a burning brush fire. And even though the burning is going to burn up the body at some point, at least it will have served a purpose.

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