This Is a Test

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When the Buddha recounts the story of his quest for awakening, he talks about a lot of different teachings that he attested and ultimately found wanting. He tried to see if just putting the mind into concentration would put it into suffering, and in and of itself it didn’t. He tried to see if tormenting his body, trying to deny himself any kind of physical pleasure, even the point of forcing himself not to breathe, forcing himself to eat only the smallest amount of food, would put it into suffering. But that didn’t work either. It was only after testing and trying things that he found the way. But there’s one issue that he never seemed to question. That was the question of whether your actions are important. Whether your actions make a difference. There were some people at the time who said, “Everything is predetermined. Nothing you do really matters. You’re not really doing it yourself anyhow.” Or, “If you are doing it, that’s under the influence of things that you cannot control.” And he never took those teachings seriously. Years later, when I was studying with John Fung, I’d asked him some questions about different beliefs, what might be necessary for the meditation, what you have to believe in order to meditate. And he said, “There’s only one thing. You have to believe in the principle of action, which means that you are responsible for your actions and they do have consequences.” That’s the one thing you’re asked to believe. It’s not hard to believe. But everything else you test from that point of view. In fact, that’s how you test a teaching when you put it into practice. What results do you get? So as we’re meditating here, we’re testing things. What happens when you strengthen your mindfulness? What happens when you become more alert? What happens as you try to become more and more skillful in your actions? Does this really lead to the end of suffering, or is it just another dead end? This is something we have to test for ourselves. In that way, it’s like a scientific experiment. The first part of the experiment is to set up the question, “What are you trying to test?” And you’re testing that principle. Does human action really lead to the end of suffering? And then you stay at a hypothesis. You say, “Well, let’s assume that it does and then see what happens.” Then you set up your equipment. An important part of setting up your equipment, especially if you’re going to measure something really subtle, is that the equipment has to be very solidly based. If you’re going to measure the effect of, say, one atom on another, you don’t want your equipment set up on a wobbly table. The table wobbles and you have no idea. Did that atom affect another atom? Or was it just the wobble of the table that made the equipment measure a change? So as we’re trying to get the mind still, this is what we’re doing. We’re trying to get the equipment solidly established. A firm table on a firm floor on a firm foundation. It’s only when everything is really firm and solid and still that you can detect subtle movements. So that’s our first priority. How to get the mind to settle down. How to get the mind to stay settled down. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha offered a lot of different meditation topics, because different people’s minds will settle down with different topics. You might find the word bhutto congenial. Other people might find contemplation of death something to really get the mind to settle down. That’s kind of the Kafka approach to your thoughts. He realized that death could come at any time. All your plans, all your hopes for life would just be cut right short and you’d have no way to negotiate and say, “Hey, this is not fair. My life hasn’t been long enough yet. I’m still too young.” When it comes, it comes. And some people find just thinking about that enough to get the mind to settle down and be still. Other people don’t find that congenial at all. The breath tends to be one of the more universal topics for getting the mind to settle down, partly because it’s right here, partly because you can adjust the breathing. And the Buddha encouraged this. That’s a way of testing the mind at the same time that you’re getting it to settle down, making you more and more sensitive. There was one time when he was talking about the benefits of breath meditation, and one of the monks who was prone to brag said, “Well, I already do breath meditation, so I will describe your meditation.” He said, “I try to let go of thoughts of the past, let go of thoughts of the future, and just be very equanimous about the present as I watch the breath come in, watch the breath go out.” The Buddha said, “There is that kind of breath meditation, but that’s not how you get the most out of it.” Then he went on to talk about being sensitive to long breathing, short breathing, being sensitive to the whole body as you breathe in, breathe out, try to develop an awareness that expands to fill the entire body, and then allowing the breath to calm down, allow its effect to calm down, so that it leads to a sense of ease, a sense of fullness and refreshment. That ease and refreshment are important tools in getting the mind to be willing to stay still in one place. Because the mind is still only through the force of your will, it’s going to slip out as soon as it gets a chance. It’s like trying to hold a beach ball under the water. It’s constantly pushing to get out of the water, and as soon as your grip is not perfectly balanced, it slips up and shoots up into the air. It’s the same with the mind. It’s being kept with the breath against its will. So as soon as you focus on the breath, you want to make it comfortable, you want to make it interesting, something you can explore, something you can gain your refreshment from. And that allows the mind to settle down, be more and more inclined to stay settled down. And as you find that it’s staying with the breath, you keep with it, you begin to notice that even in that stillness there are some kinds of disturbance. In some cases, the disturbance is simply the fact that you’re analyzing the breath and keeping reminding yourself to stay with the breath. And there will come a point where the mind is so firmly planted in the breath that these are unnecessary. Once you sense that, you can let them go. Ajaan Fuang once made the comparison with a rocket. The main booster rocket shoots up out of the earth, and when it’s no longer necessary, it detaches. So the next rocket shoots some more, and then it detaches. And then you just have the nose cone. So you need that direct thought and evaluation to work with the breath to get it to settle down. But then there comes a point where you don’t need it anymore. It becomes an obstruction. You drop it. And the mind settles down as even more still. It becomes actually one with a sense of the breath. The awareness and the breath seem to be one. It’s not like you’re here watching the breath there, but you’re in the midst of the breath. It’s all around you, because it is. The breath energy in the back of the neck, the breath energy in the back of the legs and the arms. And where are you while you’re in the midst of all this, bathed in the breath? And as you stay one with the breath like this, there’s a strong sense of rapture that goes even stronger. And for a while that’s refreshing and enjoyable. Then after a while it begins to get unpleasant. It begins to seem too coarse. So you tune into a more refined level of the breath energy that’s more still, where there’s just a sense of ease. And the only disturbance then is still the in-and-out-ness of the breath. So as you sense the different channels of breath energy in the body, you begin to realize that as they get all more and more connected throughout the body, there’s less and less of a need for you to breathe in and breathe out. The energy in the body seems self-sustaining. Whatever oxygen you need is coming in and out of the skin. So the breath gets even more still. So all this is establishing your equipment on a really solid foundation. And there are even more refined levels. The sense of the body begins to dissolve into a sense of mist, and you start focusing on the space between the little droplets of mist, or the sense of awareness that’s part of the space. These states of stillness, in and of themselves, are very refreshing, very light. There’s no sense of the burdens that you have to think about in terms of your ordinary thoughts. But they’re still not the end of suffering. They’re resting spots. And as they grow more still, you begin to use them for your experiments. This is one point where the analogy breaks down a little bit, because you can’t wait until everything is totally still before you try to use your concentration. You’ll notice that as the stillness grows more and more refined, your perception of things, your sensitivity to things going on in the mind, grows more refined as well. So you’re able to detect more and more subtle things. You begin to see the movements of the mind, how it senses things, how it applies labels to things, and what happens as a result of those labels. Some labeling can create a lot of stress, what the Buddha calls objectification. The Pali word is papanca, where you establish an identity for yourself. You say, “I am this. I am the thinker, and the thinker is also this. This, this, and this. And this thinker needs x, x, x, and doesn’t like other things.” And you find yourself in conflict. Just the thoughts get you all stirred up. And as you try to apply those thoughts to other people and things around you, it creates a lot of conflict. You’re sitting here in concentration, and you can step out of those thought worlds. You begin to see those categories as very arbitrary. You notice the times in the mind when the mind is not applying those categories, and then you notice what it is. You notice the difference in stress. When the stress is greater, when the stress is less. The more stillness there is in the mind, the more subtle movements you can see. If you go back to the science analogy, it’s like the progress over the centuries of scientific equipment has gotten more and more refined. Things that they couldn’t detect in the eighteenth century, we can now detect in the twenty-first. But that doesn’t mean that the discoveries of the eighteenth century weren’t useful. For the time, they were useful. But now we know more subtle things. So even in the very beginning stages of meditation, when you can detect that certain ways of thinking are causing you stress, you can go ahead and drop them. That’s your development of discernment. And then as your concentration grows more still, more refined, your discernment grows sharper and more refined as well. This is where you can do experiments to try to figure out what’s causing what in the mind. But it has that ability to see. This particular event causes stress. This particular event actually puts an end to that stress. So you can figure out what sort of things you need to let go of, what things you need to develop. This is what the teaching on the Four Noble Truths is all about. It gives you some guidelines on where you’re going to look for the stress that the mind is causing itself unnecessarily, and which events in the mind are useful to develop. You’re trying to strengthen your mindfulness, strengthen your desire to be skillful. There’s a huge misunderstanding about desire. Somehow the Buddha said, “All desire is bad.” He never said that. Certain desires lead to greater stress. Certain desires are actually part of the end of stress. The desire to let go of unskillful qualities, the desire to develop skillful ones, that’s actually part of the path. So you test these things in your mind to see exactly what the Buddha is talking about. Once you get a sense of what he’s referring to, do these things really work? He says, as you’re doing this all the time, there is an element of faith. You’re not really sure, one hundred percent, that the Buddha was actually right. It’s interesting that he encourages this attitude of, on the one hand, having faith, but at the same time realizing that faith is no substitute for knowledge. Then he asks, “What if we don’t have that faith?” Then he asks, “What do you really believe in? Do you really believe that your actions have no consequences? Do you really believe that the state of your mind is totally irrelevant to whether you’re going to gain suffering or gain happiness?” It’s up to you to choose. But if you believe that your actions do make a difference and the mind, well-trained, is less likely to suffer, then you must stick with this to prove to yourself whether that’s true or not. He says it’s only when you reach that level of something totally unconditioned, beyond cause and effect, beyond space and time, through the practice, that’s when you know. That’s when you’ve confirmed that the Buddha knew what he was talking about. You’ve tested his teaching for yourself. But to make it a fair test, you have to meet the conditions that are demanded. Good, strong concentration. Very precise discernment. Learning how to ask the right questions about your mind. Learning how to step out of a lot of the thought worlds that you’ve believed in firmly. Learning how to see them simply as events. Something arising, something staying for a while, something passing away. Those things you’ve got to question. We’re meditating. We’re testing the Buddha’s teachings. We’re testing the principle that human action does make a difference and that training the mind makes a difference in your actions. And it’s possible to train the mind to the point where it doesn’t suffer anymore. It doesn’t cause any suffering for anyone else, because it finds a happiness inside that doesn’t depend on anything. It doesn’t take anything away from anyone. It doesn’t require that you keep coming back to feed on things to keep yourself going. As you’re sitting or working with the breath, try to get it as still as possible. Try to get the mind as still as possible. Sit down on it. Allow it to come to stillness in a balanced and maintainable way, because that puts you in a better position to test what’s actually going on. And if it’s really true that suffering is unnecessary, suffering is optional, and it’s not just an empty claim. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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