Meditate Because You Have To

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Your attitude to meditation should be the same as your attitude toward eating, in the sense that it’s something you do every day. When you eat, you don’t ask yourself, “How much longer is it going to be that I have to keep on eating? Why isn’t my body getting better and better all the time because I eat?” You have to eat regardless, because the body needs it. As for how long the body is going to live and how healthy it’s going to get, part of it has to do with the eating, and part of it has to do with other factors that lie beyond your control. So you keep on eating. You try to eat well, in the sense of eating in whatever way is best for your body. It doesn’t matter whether you feel like eating or don’t feel like eating. When the body is hungry, you feed it. In the same way, your mind is hungry. It needs training. It needs to be fed with good food—the food we provide it with the breath, with mindfulness, with alertness. All the qualities that count as causes in the meditation. This is one of the principles you hear again and again and again from the Ajahns. You meditate when you feel like it, and you meditate when you don’t feel like it. You can’t let your feeling like it or not feeling like it get in the way. It’s just something you do. It’s something that the mind needs. As for how fast the progress is coming along or whether it seems to go up and down, that’s just a natural part of the mind. So when frustration comes up, you sit with it. When enthusiasm comes up, you sit with it. Whatever comes up, you sit with it. You watch it. You learn from it. There’s a sutta where a prince comes to see a monk and asks him, “Is it really true that you can get anywhere with your meditation? Because it seems that whether you want results or don’t want results, I don’t think that’s going to get anywhere. You establish a wish, you don’t establish a wish, you’re not going to get anywhere.” And the monk responded, “The wishing or not wishing is irrelevant. What matters is that you take care of the causes, and the causes will take care of themselves, take care of the rest, take care of the results.” The same goes for hoping. The same goes for whether you expect the meditation to go well or to go poorly. You’ve probably had this experience many times, when you think, “It’s great. I’ve got an opportunity to meditate. I’ve got all this time, and yet it doesn’t go well.” Other times you think, “Oh, this can’t be good.” But for some reason you actually do sit down and meditate, and you find that it goes well. So you can’t let your expectations be the measure. You can’t let your hopes or lack of hopes be the measure. The measure is that you sit down and you do what you know are good causes. You stick with each breath. And as for the question of how quickly the results are going to come, you say, “Don’t ask.” Why aren’t we getting there right now? Don’t ask. How soon are we going to arrive? Are we there yet? Are we there yet? And you don’t get there faster by asking, “Are we there yet?” You just keep driving, and ultimately you arrive. And as for whether you’re feeling patient or impatient, you just keep driving. Abha has a passage where he talks about how his meditation would go through cycles. It would go well for a couple of days, and then, as he said, it would crash. Defilements would take over his mind. And then he’d be able to gather his forces again, and it would start going well again. And then it would crash again. And he could anticipate it. There was a certain time period that seemed to go in cycles. And so he finally realized that the only way to get out of these cycles was not to anticipate anything. He said, “Just do what you know is what you’re supposed to do.” In this case, he would stay with his meditation word. Here we’re staying with the breath, or whatever your topic of concentration is. Instead of trying to keep one eye on what landmarks you’re passing, or how soon the goal seems to be getting into sight, or if it seems to be receding away, you just focus on what you’re doing. This is the best way to interpret that statement, that the goal is in the path. In other words, you don’t keep one eye on the path and one eye out scanning for the goal. You just keep focused on the path. When the goal is going to come, it’s going to come without any forewarning. But it’s going to appear right at this point where you’re paying full attention to the path, where you’re putting together all the right causes, being mindful to stay with the breath, being alert to how the breath feels all the way in, all the way out, this breath, and then this breath, and then this breath. Each breath. Treat each breath as worthy of your full attention, not just as something you have to get past to get someplace else, to get to the end of the hour or get to the end of the path. It’s that alertness to each breath that’s where things are going to appear. Because as you’re alert to the breath, you start getting more and more alert to the mind. Because otherwise, all you see are your anticipations, all you see are expectations. Without seeing the movements of the mind in the present moment, the more you’re focused on the breath, the more you can guarantee yourself, “Okay, you’re right here in the present moment.” And you can begin to see the movements of the mind around the breath. And you’re not going to find it anywhere else. As the Buddha said, we’re here to learn about sankara, the process of fabrication. And what fabrications do you need to know? Well, there’s bodily fabrication, which is the in-and-out breath. That’s right here. There’s verbal fabrication. There’s directing thoughts and evaluation. That’s right here as well. You’re directing your thoughts to the breath and you’re evaluating the breath, each breath. If you had a breath that didn’t feel all that satisfactory, ask yourself, “Well, what kind of breath would feel more satisfactory?” And then see how the body responds, one at a time, one at a time. And then there’s metal fabrication, feeling and perception. The perception here is the perception you hold in mind. Stay with the breath and your image of what the breathing is like when you breathe in, where the breath energy comes in, where it doesn’t come in. You can play with that to see how the perception of the breath alters the way you breathe. And then you notice the feelings that arise. Feelings of pleasure, feelings of discomfort, even the slightest little bit of stress you don’t want. Keep holding that “I am.” Keep that ideal in mind, that you want a really smooth breath all the way in, smooth all the way out, breathing with a sense that there’s no obstacle at all. The breath energy just wants to come into the body. All you have to do is let it come in. You don’t have to force it. You don’t have to pull it in, squeeze it out, allow it to do its stuff. And there you are. You’ve got all these forms of fabrication. They’re all happening right here. This is all you really need to know. And as for where all this is going to go, you don’t have to anticipate it. Notice that it’s not a nine-fold path with right anticipation someplace in there. It’s got right mindfulness, right effort, right concentration. Those are the factors that you’re working on right now. And they’re building on all the other factors of the path, starting with right view. The purpose of which is to keep you focused right here, right now. That’s all you have to worry about. And then you do it again, and then you do it again. Stay right here, continuously. If you find yourself slipping off, just bring yourself back. And as for all that chatter that goes on in the mind, that’s saying, “Are we there yet? Are we there yet?” Just let it go. Let it go. Your only duty is to get the factors, to get the causes right. And you just keep on doing it, just like you keep on eating. Because it’s something you have to do. When the causes are right, when they’re really right, then they start giving results that you wouldn’t expect. You can paint pictures for yourself as to what the results might be like when things finally come together, but the pictures have very little to do with the actual results. This is why the Buddha talks so little in the Canon about the causes. But Nirvana talks an awful lot about the path. He talks about Nirvana just enough to give you encouragement, and he warns you about the things that will come up if you wander off the path. His main emphasis is getting those factors right. These are causes leading to the cessation of suffering. And it’s a funny thing about causes. When you get them right, they give you the results. Whether you anticipate the results or not.

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