Teaching Yourself

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One of the important skills you want to develop as you focus on the breath is learning how to evaluate it. Because it’s in the evaluation that you start developing discernment, so that your concentration It’s not a forced focus of the mind, but it involves some intelligence. It develops your powers of judgment. Because you’re going to need your powers of judgment all the way down the line, and you want to develop them in a way that’s skillful. You hear so much fear of judgment in Buddhist circles, largely because people don’t like to be judged, or because they find that when they judge themselves they get harsh and it ties them all up. So to get away from that, they just ban judgment, which, of course, you can’t do. Everybody has to judge one way or another in the course of the day. You judge what you’re going to say, what you’re not going to say. You’re making judgment calls as to what should and should not be said, or thought, or done. And if you pretend you’re not judging, then it just all goes underground, which is not a good place for it to be. You want it to be out in the open. Because only when it’s out in the open can you really train it. So you start by judging your breath. And if you notice a particular breath is not comfortable, it’s not good, you don’t have to go berating it. Just drop it and go on to the next breath. You say, “Well, let’s see if we can make this one better.” John Lee’s analogy is learning how to weave a bad breath out of a basket. You work on your basket, you do your best, and then you take a good look at it. Where can you improve it? Is it too long, too short, too heavy, too light? Then you weave another one. And as you’re weaving the other one, you may want to refer back to the first one to see where you made mistakes. But your attitude towards that first one is now different. You’re ready to put it aside and do a better one, and then a better one, then a better one. As he says, when you’ve finally got one that’s really good, you can throw the rest of them away. You’ve got your standard. Otherwise you’ll find, as you work with the breath, that a way of breathing that feels good right now may not feel so good five minutes down the line. But then five minutes down the line you can use your powers of judgment to work on a new breath, a new way of breathing. Do you see what works then? What’s good for the body? What’s good for the mind? This is helpful in a lot of ways. On the one hand, you get interested in the meditation so it’s not just a boring exercise of sticking with some thing. It’s not mind-numbing. You’re actually sharpening your mind, sharpening your powers of awareness. And in providing you with more and more comfortable breathing, it makes it easier to stay here. And as you get more and more sensitive to the breath, you find you’re also getting more and more sensitive to your mind in the present moment. This becomes especially clear as the breath gets more and more refined and the movements of the mind aren’t so obscured by the movements of the breath. You can see them more clearly. And here again, it’s the same principle. You learn how to judge them fairly. And if something’s unskillful, you let it go. If something’s more skillful, you stick with it. This ability to stick with the breath is really important. As the Buddha said, when he first got on the path, it was when he was able to simply divide his thoughts into two sorts, thoughts that were worth pursuing and thoughts that were not worth pursuing. In other words, just because a thought came into his mind didn’t mean that he was stuck with it. And if an unskillful thought came in and he didn’t berate himself, he didn’t get tied up in knots about it. He just said, “This is not going in a good place. Drop it.” You saw his thoughts as processes, as actions. And this is one way of learning how to pull out his sense of identity with the thinking. You simply saw it as a training exercise. Here comes a thought. Where does it lead? He had a sense of heedfulness as he was doing this, because, as he said, whatever way your thoughts incline, that begins to incline your mind. It’s like a rut in the road. You keep going through the same rut over and over again. It gets deeper and deeper, and it gets harder and harder to get out. So as soon as you catch yourself going in an unskillful direction, you hold the mind in check. You turn it in another direction. If it’s going in a good direction, you allow it to go there. And you develop a craftsman’s attitude towards your thinking. The craftsman works on a piece, say a carving or whatever, and if it’s not going well, the craftsman will make changes. If it turns out that there’s no way you can change it to make it good, just toss it away and work on a new one. You don’t get tied up with the fact that you’ve had some unskillful ones in the past. You’re learning. This is how discernment gets developed in the meditation. It’s not the case that as the mind gets still, these amazing insights will suddenly pop in automatically because you wish them to be there, or the simple silence of the mind will bring them in. Even if things do pop up in the mind, you’ve got to test them. You can’t believe everything that comes into your mind, otherwise you go crazy. You hear about meditators who go off the deep end. It’s because they believe everything that comes up in their meditation. You read about Ajahn Mahana in the forest. How did he train himself? He trained himself by stepping back from whatever came up in his mind and learning to evaluate it. “Where will this go? If I follow this type of thinking, if I follow this belief, if I follow this idea, where will it lead me?” And over time he learned how to evaluate things more and more skillfully. This is a process of training we’re in. So, of course, in the beginning you’re going to make mistakes. If you didn’t make mistakes, you wouldn’t need training. The assumption is we all have things to learn. And what keeps us going is that realization that if we don’t learn these skills, we’re going to suffer. We’re going to regret it down the line. The Buddha talks about five kinds of horses, the horse that is responsible even if you just say “whip” to it. It doesn’t even have to see the whip. It doesn’t have to feel the whip. All you have to say is “whip” and it does what it’s supposed to do. There’s another one that actually has to see the whip. Another one has to feel the whip on its skin. Another has to feel the whip going into its flesh a little bit. And then the really hard case is the one that has to feel the whip going down to the bone before it’s willing to do what it’s told. In the same way, there are people who, as soon as they’re born into this world, just hear about aging, illness, and death, and they realize something’s got to be done. This is going to be a lot of suffering down the line if the mind hasn’t been trained. Others actually have to see it, others actually have to feel it. And the really hard case is that some people have to suffer an awful lot, have to hit rock bottom before they’re willing to do something about the problem of aging, illness, and death. And it’s really up to us as to which kind of horse we’re going to be. It’s that understanding of suffering, the fact that it’s your actions that contribute to your suffering. It’s not inevitable that you have to suffer when aging, illness, and death come. It’s going to be your contribution, your ignorance and your craving, that’s what’s going to make you suffer. And that’s something you can actually do something about. Most people think you can’t do anything about aging, illness, and death, so don’t even think about them. Of course, that leaves them totally unprepared. And other people say, “Well, let me have a lot of fun first before I think about this.” Again, how much time do you have? Nobody really knows. That makes more sense. As long as you know aging, illness, and death are going to come, get those problems taken care of first, and then you’re going to have time to play. But because it’s your actions that are going to be the big problem, that’s why you want to develop this sense of the observer. You can step back and evaluate things. Evaluate events in the mind as they come. You can have a sense of where they’re going. Evaluate the breath. The breath gives you a lot to play with. So you get more and more sensitive to your intentions, more and more sensitive to the power of your perception. Simply the way you visualize the breath to yourself will change the way you breathe. The concepts you have about how the breath happens, that will change the way you breathe. So you can test the concepts, you can test the perceptions, you can test your intentions around the breath, and this sensitizes you to the power of your perception. The power of intention, the power of your thoughts. And it allows you to watch yourself as you think. Watch yourself as you move on your thoughts. It’s interesting looking at the Buddha’s life, his quest for awakening. There are lots of different things he questioned. He tried the path of just going into the formless states. That turned out that was not the solution. He tried self-torture. That was not the solution. But there was one issue he never really questioned, and that was the power of human action. He said the idea of having a path, a practice, assumes that action makes a difference. And if you simply give up on the idea that action makes a difference, you’re never going to get anywhere. So if there’s any way out, you have to assume that human action does make a difference. He held to that assumption all the way through, and it worked out. But it was all a matter of learning how to evaluate his action. He would notice that he was doing something, basically hitting his head against the wall, and ask himself, “Why am I doing this? After all, the wall is not doing anything. I’m the one who’s hitting my head.” He had the wisdom to see that. Most of us think that the wall is coming over and banging us on the head, which is why we get upset about the wall, whatever the wall may be in our lives. But he had the wisdom to see that. He had the imagination to realize that there are other possibilities of action. And he was willing to master them, willing to give them a try. That’s how he learned how to teach himself. And even though we have the news of his practice, the news of his teachings, still when you come right down to it, each of us has to be his or her own teacher. You have to develop this inner ability to observe, because that’s your inner teacher. The ability to evaluate, the ability to judge fairly in a way that’s actually helpful. There’s a judge sitting on her bench handing down sentences of guilty life, life sentences of guilt and imprisonment, more like the craftsman sitting on his bench, evaluating the work that he’s doing, the carving that he’s working on, judging a work in progress. And if you find that this particular carving doesn’t work out, you just toss it away. Or work on another one, developing your powers of evaluation so that they actually help the meditation and don’t get in the way. They strengthen you and don’t defeat you. This is how you become your own teacher. And it’s an absolutely essential element in the path.

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